
Title	Curriculum change in Singapore
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Source	<i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 3(1)5-8
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

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CURRICULUM CHANGE IN SINGAPORE

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The Singapore school curriculum is undergoing considerable change. The recent publicity, given to one such change, is a good example of future curriculum trends.

On the 16th of October 1981, two Primary English projects were launched by the CDIS. Principals and teachers were, for the first time, faced with a choice between competing curriculum innovations.

Choice is a double-edged sword. Whilst it can create welcome opportunities it also imposes responsibilities. Principals and teachers have for a long time selected their textbooks and materials from lists approved by the Ministry of Education. The addition of two Primary English curriculum packages, set in a competitive framework, increased the opportunity for teachers to make decisions about their own classroom practice and the learning activities of their pupils. At the same time, it increased the responsibility of teachers to make wise and informed decisions on the basis of carefully thought-out criteria.

Ill-considered judgements made in haste are worse than making no judgements at all. Teachers know their school and their pupils; they are therefore in the best position to make the kind of judgements that the Ministry of Education is asking of them, but these decisions *must* be taken only after careful consideration of all the factors involved.

In order to help principals and teachers gather the evidence they required in making their choice a small group of lecturers at the Institute of Education offered a "decision-framework" for the consideration of schools.

It was hoped that the framework would also be helpful to teachers who might be required in the future to make similar choices in other areas of the school curriculum. The framework covered questions relating to the pupils, the teachers and the materials. The questions did not attempt to advise the teachers to

decide on one package or the other; it merely served as a guide to the factors that should be taken into account in arriving at the decision of which package to use.

Once the choice between curriculum packages has been made the school has merely taken the first of a series of steps in adopting curriculum innovation. In order to adopt and sustain a curriculum change, rather than adopt and drift, a school should have a well thought-out strategy for change. Any one curriculum change usually has implications for change in other areas of the school. A change in the style of teaching, for example one which expects more pupil involvement, not only affects pupil-teacher relationships but may also affect spatial arrangements in the classrooms, methods of assessment and teacher-teacher interactions. Any school should be aware of the need for organised strategies to manage the processes of innovation and change which necessarily generate interaction, even conflict and stress, among teachers and pupils. The strategies, which ought to be devised by the schools themselves, should stimulate consultation, cooperation and harness creative energy.

The school principal has a crucial role in creating appropriate conditions for curriculum change; intelligent, perceptive and sensitive leadership is called for. It is the principal's task to arouse positive and constructively critical attitudes towards change and combat the apathy which can easily grow from heavy demands placed on those teachers who implement the innovation whatever it be.

Strategies for coping with change, particularly in large schools, need to avoid complicated communication channels which can absorb much time and energy which should be devoted to creative development. But strategies are necessary if innovations are to be successfully adopted and sustained in the school.

In most of the literature on curriculum change, frequent mention is made of the stress experienced by classroom teachers who are involved in curriculum development. Innovations and change require more time than established patterns of teaching. Teachers need time and help to become familiar with new philosophies, content and materials. Adequate time for reflection should be available and adequate provision for teacher in-service training is required if effective curriculum change is to take place.

All schools have been issued a challenge to cope with curriculum change. How they respond is over to the school. Some may choose to drift, that is, adjust to the demands, seemingly unaffected by the conscious efforts of their members. Others may choose to meet the challenge with a plan for change. In such a school the change takes place as a result of conscious and rational efforts by those individuals who exercise executive authority in the school.

The following headings and questions are offered to help principals, subject coordinators and teachers prepare for the long-term effects of curriculum change at the school level. Teachers should be prepared to ask themselves these questions and more, based on their particular situation.

The Principal

What style of leadership?

What sort of communication channels within the school?

What style of school management?

Who needs in-service training to cope with change?

The Subject Coordinator

How familiar am I with innovation?

What resources does the school have?

How does the innovation match the style of teaching of those likely to implement it?

How can I provide the support to teachers during the implementation stage?

What types of support will they need? eg. time, resources, meeting and sharing experiences.

How familiar am I with similar innovations going on in other schools?

How can I arrange to share our experiences with those in other schools?

From whom can I obtain help when problems arise?

Teachers

How familiar am I with the objectives, content, methodology and materials of the innovation?

What do I need which I now lack, in order to implement the change?

What are the effects on my pupils?
How is the innovation affecting my teaching, my morale, my relationships with others?
How am I to evaluate my implementation of the innovation?
What do I do with the feedback I obtain from my evaluations?
How successful am I in sharing my successes and failures, my problems and ideas with others — both within my school and with teachers from other schools?
What will I need in the future to further improve my implementation of the innovation?

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