Infusion of pastoral care into the teaching of language arts

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Introduction

By the end of 1993, Pastoral Care and Career Guidance (PCCG) will have been implemented in all secondary schools in Singapore, and gradual extension of PCCG to all primary schools will have begun. Implementation is occurring in varying degrees and forms in different schools. However, the Ministry of Education has encouraged the adoption of a developmental, whole school approach to PCCG. This is a preventive, holistic approach which is intended to involve all school staff in planning and delivery, and to affect all students so that their development across domains, and not just in the intellectual sphere, is facilitated (Best, 1989; D'Rozario & Chia, 1988).

One of the most important avenues for realizing the goals of the whole school, PCCG approach is through the infusion of content and activities guided by PCCG into the academic curriculum. Integration of PCCG into academic subject areas is challenging for several reasons. First, it will nearly always require modifications of curriculum content and traditional, teacher directed didacticism. Second, each school must fill in the details of how integration can be achieved, given the opportunities and constraints inherent in each school's particular circumstances (e.g., aspects of how the school day is structured, make-up of the staff, resources, parent involvement and receptivity, etc.). But perhaps most importantly, teachers and principals approach the issue of integrating PCCG into the academic curriculum with trepidation because of a certain mystical aura surrounding the PCCG initiative. Precisely what kinds of programme modifications need to be explored, or what activities would actually contribute to realizing the objectives of PCCG, often seem elusive.
Indeed, many Singaporean teachers charged with responsibility for implementing PCCG in their respective schools have expressed uncertainty about how to integrate PCCG into academic classes. Similarly, educators in Britain have struggled with problems of translating traditional pedagogical practices and academic curricula into educational experiences that foster pupils' all-round development in the manner hoped for in the pastoral care paradigm (Best, 1989; Chia, 1987; Donovan, 1989). This report offers some suggestions for heightening the visibility of classroom activities and course content that are in line with PCCG objectives as I see them, and in so doing help to de-mystify the implications of PCCG for subject teaching.

Re-Envisioning Curriculum

Curriculum organization, course content, and teaching strategies are likely to need revision in order to meet the apparent new, holistic and developmental thrust in Singaporean educational goals. We know that, in most cases, it is best to undertake curriculum reconstruction incrementally, with evidence of small but important successes providing reassurance and support for subsequent, and more far-reaching change (Kelly, 1982). With this process in mind, it would seem most favourable to begin the process of infusing PCCG into academic curricula within the context of language arts.

Both PCCG and the language arts aim to develop pupils' creative and critical thinking capacities, self-expression, communication, and social understanding. Within both the PCCG and integrated language arts frameworks, literacy is viewed as both an individual and social phenomena, and as a process rather than as a product. Considering these basic aims and premises, there is an essential correspondence between PCCG and language arts, when both of these are well-conceived and delivered. Thus, it would seem that much could be gained by planning their delivery synthetically, rather than as unrelated aspects of the school programme.
Teaching Strategies

Providing opportunities for personal expression and facilitating development of social understanding are two of the most important means to achieving the developmental goals of PCCG. Many of the activities appropriate to language arts classes can contribute to these aims. For example, pupils develop their capacities for self-reflection, creative and critical thinking, and self-expression through writing, speaking, teamwork, and other kinds of productive activities. Their self-understanding, social understanding, and access to knowledge beyond their direct experience is developed through reading, listening, observing, and team work.

The following are just a few examples of activities common to many language classes aimed at the development of reading skills, showing how they can be conceived and used to further the communicative aims of PCCG.

(1) **Listening to stories:** Learning to listen actively and make meaning out of what others have to say, and relating this to one's own experiences.

(2) **Telling stories:** Learning to organize one's thinking so that ideas can be shared orally or in writing in a clear and interesting manner.

(3) **Sharing personal experiences:** Developing confidence and skill in telling about or illustrating something on a purely personal basis.

(4) **Discussion:** Learning social skills in general, and specifically developing the ability to interact with what other people say and write.

A range of flexible teaching strategies should be used that involve pupils actively in their learning process, and that will enable them to develop the kinds of life skills and confidence they will need to take with them from school into the rest of their lives. Following are some suggested characteristics of this kind of pedagogy, informed by PCCG.
(1) A preponderance of **discovery or enquiry-based activities**, rather than a primarily teacher-dominated didacticism.

(2) Incorporation of **social skills objectives**, as well as academic objectives, in planning and delivering every lesson (e.g., active listening, giving positive feedback to classmates, turn-taking during group work, etc.).

(3) Many kinds of **peer interactions**, such as collaborative writing projects, small group discussions, peer review, and so on, involving heterogeneous pupil groupings.

(4) Instructional **accommodation of differences among pupils** in interests, preparedness, pacing, self-esteem, and accomplishment.

(5) **Teacher feedback that is constructively informative**, rather than primarily evaluative; that is, teachers' responses are not used primarily to correct mistakes or to evaluate pupil contributions in terms of "right" or "wrong", but rather to reward active participation, build confidence, encourage reflective thinking, and ask follow-up questions that lead pupils on to the next possibility.

(6) **Pupil profiling**, involving individualized assessment on a continuous, internal (i.e., in-house) basis by the teacher and the student, based not only on acquisition of language skills but also on the development of other personal and social capacities.

(7) **Pupil assessment** of their own progress, and pupil evaluation of what they are learning (e.g., through frequent conferences with the teacher with reference to their individual pupil profile, keeping a journal, compiling chronological samples of their written work in portfolios).

(8) **Peer review**, in which students work in pairs and small groups and learn to respond holistically and constructively to the written and oral expressions of their peers. (This kind of peer evaluation is much more developmentally supportive and motivating than
the increasingly common use of "peer editing", in which classmates are asked to find and/or correct each other's spelling and grammatical errors.)

The texts by Moore (1989) and Tiedt (1983; 1989) are excellent repositories of practical approaches to language arts education that incorporate these kinds of interactive, holistic, and developmental emphases.

Content

A synthesis of teaching in the language arts with the PCCG approach requires thoughtful selection of literature, comprehension passages, vocabulary lists, worksheet sentences, and writing and discussion topics. This content must be:

1. developmentally appropriate

2. calibrated to the ability level of the pupil with respect to task demands

3. culturally relevant and unbiased

4. non-sexist

5. responsive to the expressed needs and interests of the particular pupils for whom the selections are made.

6. presented within a meaningful substantive context

7. presented with a rationale that makes sense to pupils in terms of their own aims.

The Thematic Approach

The thematic approach is one structure for making the most of the essential complementarity between language arts and PCCG. In this approach, skill-building activities such as reading, composition,
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listening, and speaking all revolve around one topic or theme. A major advantage of using this approach is that pupils experience language arts, not as a "subject" for its own sake, or as an array of unconnected classroom activities (e.g., spelling, composition, literature), but as a process of using communication to extend their grasp of issues that are personally meaningful and important. For example, issues that are relevant within the framework of PCCG that could be developed into thematic units include: Friendship, Gender, Conflict, Work, Community. Themes can be as simple as "My Family," or as complex as "Responsibility" or "Pride". Work on themes could extend over as little as one week (e.g., Expressing Sadness; Sportspersonship), or over an entire school year (e.g., Other People and Me; Environment).

Theme selection must be based on a consideration of developmental tasks and issues that nearly all pupils at a given level will be confronting. In addition, themes must be grounded in, or directly related to, the particular cultural, socio-economic, familial, and educational context of the pupils who are expected to benefit from exploration of the theme.

The selection of themes can be done by individual classroom teachers, on the basis of his or her assessment of expressed needs, concerns, and goals of the pupils in his or her class each year. Alternatively, relevant themes could be identified on the basis of information gathered by the school's PCCG planning committee, whose task is to conduct regular needs assessments of the student population in order to prioritize areas that should be the target of PCCG activities in the school.

Thematic units can also be created to provide in-depth coverage of topics that are presented in existing language arts syllabi. Thus, for example, the unit in the current Primary 4 English syllabus on "Good and Bad Behaviours" could be slightly recast and elaborated. Students could be actively involved in reflection upon their own and others' behaviours with reference to these dimensions, through poems, stories, pictures, group discussions, presentations on "good and bad behaviours", and written and oral debates about the implications of the theme for understanding pupils' interactions in and out of class.
Yet another approach to theme development is for a team of teachers to work together to plan a series of thematic units, or a single umbrella theme for the whole year (e.g., Pring, 1984). Some agreement should be reached by all the language arts teachers in a school about what themes will be used at each level. This coordination will help to ensure continuity and avoid repetition of materials as pupils move from level to level.

Once relevant themes have been identified, planning the activities and materials for the unit can be simplified and made more enjoyable if several teachers working at the same level pool their ideas, information, and resources. Teachers can also adapt some of the many "packaged" thematic curriculum guides that are available, or extract ideas and sample units from resource books for creating thematic units (e.g., Coody, 1983; Gamberg, Kwak, Hutchings, & Altheim, 1988).

At the present time, there is insufficient research-based understanding about the particular psychosocial needs and strengths of Singaporean pupils at various developmental stages to warrant proposal of a structured programme of thematic units that could be offered for teachers of all language classes. However, teachers can begin to work out some of the priorities for thematic development based on their knowledge of normative child development, the aims of PCCG, and a needs assessment of pupils carried out in their respective schools.

Conclusion

Through the use of teaching strategies and thematic content based on a serious effort to put into practice the holistic, developmental intent of PCCG, we can provide a meaningful, motivating framework within which pupils can acquire and extend their language skills. Language arts can then become an important vehicle for exploring social issues, personal experiences, interpersonal interactions, and the nature of the learning process itself. The infusion of PCCG into academic subject areas is a potentially fruitful conception that could help to advance new, holistic objectives, pupil-centred teaching practices, and criteria for selection of content that support and extend the all-round development of pupils.
References


