
Thriving in the Future Educational Landscape

Reflecting on the
River Valley High
experience

Ong Choon Cheng, Cindy

The Educational Landscape of Singapore in the Future

“It is today we must create the world of the future.”

- Eleanor Roosevelt

The global education landscape is evolving rapidly; experimentation and innovation drives education into new phases of creativity and engagement. The introduction of consultants to review and refine school systems across the world, in countries such as the United States of America, United Arab Emirates and Namibia in the South African continent, contributes to this change. As Singapore readies itself to deal with the global changes impacting its local education landscape, it is necessary for Singapore to distinguish the core from the peripheral, and that which is timeless from that which is time-bound and thus temporal. Singapore educators need to be mindful of passing trends and fads while ensuring a rigorous and relevant education system.

Globalization, rise of India and China, emergence of an innovation-based society, emphasis on the individual, technological change, technological singularity, ageing population and so forth have been listed as key trends that forces a rethinking of education. The impact and implications of these trends on Singapore educational landscape are as follows:

1. Shift from imparting knowledge and information to developing literacies

Globalization and rapid technological advancements have changed the face and pace of the world. Educators need to recognize that students attending school today would be competing for jobs in the future that do not exist now. As such traditional approaches to education, in particular those that centre on knowledge and information would not adequately prepare students for their roles in the future. The evolving definition of literacy serves also to further complicate the situation as new literacies emerge too rapidly for education systems to respond. This thus suggests a demand for a pre-emptive rather than a reactive approach to education, i.e. (re-)designing a forward looking education system. This is of particular importance to Singapore whose only resource is its people and prides itself for being able to offer a world-class workforce.

Schools will increasingly find themselves in the position where they need to rethink what to teach and how to teach what they want to teach. As Perkins (2008) advocates, it is critical for educators to teach for understanding and consider ways that make learning whole and meaningful for students. No longer can schools and educational practitioners ignore educational research if they desire to engage students; nor can academics and researchers ignore what is happening on the ground should they intend to conduct meaningful and

purposeful educational research. For schools to effectively develop literacies in students and imbue in them the capacity to continue to learn and develop themselves even after they have left school, practitioners and researchers would need to come together and devise ways to contextualize learning in a meaningful manner to engage the increasingly distracted student.

2. Student-directed learning processes: focus on the individual

Technology advancements have changed how information is being disseminated, how people interact with each other, as well as how learning takes place. Youths are increasingly distracted by offerings on the World Wide Web. Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter and Wikipedia are but a few of the tools youths today use to obtain and share knowledge as well as information. Each day, students devote a large amount of their free time to the Internet where they face an onslaught of information. Schools acutely need to reclaim the students' time and attention. This would translate into a need to engage students personally and has in recent years given rise to the notion of personalized learning. However, such an approach to education begs the question of optimality and relevance: does such a system optimize its use of resources and whether it is appropriate and relevant to the purpose of education. Ultimately, there exists the challenge of balancing the need to engage at a personal level while ensuring that the system can continue to cater to societal needs of parity.

The focus on the individual suggests a greater control invested in students over their learning, i.e. students can choose what to learn and how to learn what they want to learn. In fact, this is already taking place in the world today. Students interested in what some teachers would not discuss in traditional classrooms e.g. racism, pre-marital sex etc. can pursue their interests via the Internet. Searching for 'racism' on Google generates 21,100,000 results. However, the danger of web-based learning lies in the huge amount of unreliable information found in the World Wide Web, which many students are not discerning or equipped with the requisite skills to distil. In time to come, students will demand and expect their learning experience to be personalized to suit their interests and strengths; while the schools balance this with the need to equip students with the relevant skills and literacies e.g. information literacy etc. to empower them to be independent learners.

Readiness of River Valley High to Thrive in the Future Educational Landscape

“For it is our response to change – and not change itself – that determines our future.”

- John P. Kotter

To consider whether or not River Valley High School is able to thrive in such a complex educational landscape, there is a need to revisit the school history. Founded in 1956, the school was the first Chinese secondary school set up by the government. Since then it has undergone a series of changes, as summarized in the table below.

Year	Change undergone by River Valley High
1979	Selected to be a Special Assistance Plan school to develop bilingual talents for Singapore. This required a change in the medium of instruction from Mandarin to English.
1994	Awarded autonomous status, a mark of recognition for the school's numerous outstanding achievements. Greater autonomy also meant more responsibility shouldered by the school for its programmes.
2005	Given approval to offer the Integrated Programme. This translated to mean a re-envisioning of existing curriculum, processes and structures as the school transit into a 6-year school.

These changes are noteworthy as they reflected the school's capacity to cope with changes. Even though the pace of change in the 1970s through to 1990s was not as rapid as the pace of change in the world today, the school's experiences have made change an integral part of the school culture. This is important as school culture is one of the key determiners on how a school responds to change. This is most evident as the school transits from a secondary school to an IP school while preparing itself to cope with the increasingly fluid educational landscape.

Some strategies adopted by the school are outlined briefly here.

Building a Learning Organization

The school seeks to be a learning organization that focuses on enhancing its systems (including people) to continually increase the organization's capacity for performance. To do that, the school focuses firstly on developing the capacity of its teaching staff to cope with the changing curriculum demands, as we move from traditional teaching approaches to new approaches that focus on developing multiple literacies in our students. Professional development is a conscious and systematic effort, where all teachers are given basic training in an area, e.g. making thinking visible etc. and then given opportunities (as well as time and

space) to further develop themselves in that area through constant dialogue with fellow colleagues, i.e. peer learning, as well as through refresher workshops held by senior members of staff during Staff Seminar etc.

The investment made on the part of the school to develop its staff is most evident during the early phases of transition. When the school adopted the Teaching for Understanding framework to guide curriculum design for the IP, existing staff were sent for training on the use of the TfU framework. A core team of teachers was also sent to Project Zero Summer Institute, Harvard Graduate School of Education to develop deeper understanding of the TfU framework, so that they can spearhead and drive the implementation of the TfU framework in school. At present, all teachers have completed the TfU Online I course offered by WIDE WORLD, Harvard Graduate School of Education. With the intent of empowering teachers to continue to deepen their understanding of the TfU framework, teachers are put to work in Learning Circles and are given pockets of time during curriculum hours to discuss their use of the TfU framework in class. This also allows senior and experienced members of staff to guide and mentor newer members in their use of the TfU framework, which not only leads to teachers' capacity being enhanced, but also encouraging collaboration and camaraderie.

Building a learning organization is integral. Teachers need to continue learning to keep up-to-date with new content knowledge, teaching approaches or current affairs. To develop students into lifelong learners, the school first needs to have teachers who are lifelong learners. Furthermore, at the rate the world is evolving, the educational landscape is bound to continue to shift and evolve. Teachers need to be able to accept and thrive in such a fluid environment and continue to bring out the best in each student.

Emphasising Holistic Development of Students

As an educational institution, nurturing the whole child has always been the school's core business. The school approached this by ensuring wide variety of choice for students. With regard to curriculum, interdisciplinary project work is introduced at Year 1 to develop in students good Habits of Mind (HOM) while exposing them to different modes of inquiry. This in-house programme is sustained Year 1 through 4 before culminating into Project Work at Year 5. This allows students to pursue their academic interests as part of their learning within the confines of formal curriculum. In a way, this places students at the centre of learning where what they want to learn and how to go about learning it is determined by the students. They also go through the process of problem identification before proceeding to problem solving where life skills e.g. creative and critical thinking etc. that are critical for success in the 21st century are honed. Despite having a smaller GCE 'A' level cohort than junior colleges, the school offers almost the full range of A level subjects

available and is also one of the pioneer schools (alongside, ACJC, CJC, HCI and RJC) to offer H2 English Language & Linguistics (ELL) introduced in 2009. In the co-curricular domain, students are also given equal opportunities to develop hobbies and interests. There is an array of co-curricular activities that students can commit to, as well as ad-hoc programmes that develop students' social emotional intelligence as well as leadership capabilities.

All these examples illustrate the celebration of diversity in the school, catering to the diverse learning needs and interests of our students (despite the homogenous student profile that will be discussed in the next section). Such an environment also encourages students to be more open to alternatives and new possibilities, to move out of their comfort zone and try new activities or take on new projects. The sheer plethora of learning opportunities whether it is in the academic or co-curricular domain serves to sustain students' zest and passion for learning whilst developing them to be independent learners, responsible citizens and forward-looking leaders for the future.

Possible Challenges and Obstacles

“No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it.

We need to see the world anew.”

- Albert Einstein

While the school is poised and ready to move into a new phase in its history, it is necessary to also take stock of the challenges that can potentially derail the school’s journey to the future. This would allow us to pre-empt possible setbacks and obstacles and address them even before they arise.

One of the major challenges faced by the school is the homogeneity of its student population. As a result of its SAP status, the school accepts predominantly Chinese students, with an exceedingly small percentage of Malay, Indian and foreigner (e.g. Korean etc.) students. Their similar educational experience (as reflected by their sterling academic performance) coupled with the fact that most of our students belong to the same socio-economic category, reflected thus an almost homogenous student profile. Under such conditions, there lies the potential for stereotypes and prejudices to fester and spread, should the school be anything less than vigilant. This can work against the school’s intent to develop students holistically, preparing them to thrive on the heterogeneous global stage. An awareness of this potential danger has led to the school proactively exposing students to different cultures through workshops, community involvement programmes and learning journeys. One of its strategies has been to make it mandatory for all students to learn the Malay language and culture. The Global Perspective Programme (GPP) was also consolidated in 2008 as part of the school’s systemic effort to expose students to foreign cultures by organising exchange and immersion programmes to Australia, China, New Zealand and the United States of America.

Another challenge that the school needs to grapple with is the need to balance school culture and traditions in the face of a rapidly evolving world. While the rich traditions inherited provide the school with a distinct culture and outlook, the school needs to be mindful not to be too rigid in adhering to traditions. Neither should the school be too quick to discard traditions to cope with the fast evolving global and local landscape. There thus arise questions of what traditions to keep and what to discard, questions which are never easy to answer. For example, the school will need to reconcile student successes in the pursuits of Science and Mathematics with the school’s identity as an SAP school. As the school forge ahead as an IP school, how should the school redefine its identity or branding such that continues to be both rooted in tradition and be relevant and ready for the future.

Role of the English Department in building River Valley High School for the Future

8

"Education must provide the opportunities for self-fulfilment; it can at best provide a rich and challenging environment for the individual to explore, in his own way."

- Noam Chomsky

The English department supports school's strategic objective of academic excellence and quality education through the various academic programmes offered e.g. English Language Arts, English Literature, General Paper and the aforementioned English Language & Linguistics. The underlying philosophy is that language is the window to the world, the primary means of understanding and being understood. The study of these subjects exposes students to a wide variety of information and information sources. Through the study of how texts are being constructed, students are empowered to reason and critically evaluate and assess information to create new information. Through a discussion of real-world issues, students are given opportunities to tap into their natural curiosity and creativity and develop in them a compassionate and balanced world views. At the end of their learning experience with the school, students should be able to celebrate human successes and achievements, while recognizing real world constraints and imperfections, and empathize with human suffering. All these support the school's intent to develop students holistically, empowering them to view the world through different lenses. Furthermore, it also satisfies the need to engage students personally as students are given time and space during formal curriculum to work on tasks that appeal to them.

Mindful of its role to develop bilingual talents within the school, the English department seeks to develop an 'English-friendly' environment (bearing in mind its SAP heritage). This is achieved through a series of enrichment programmes and events to support national initiatives such as the Speak Good English Movement. The enrichment programmes offered focuses on developing 21st century skills e.g. critical thinking and problem solving skills, information literacy etc. in students. At present the department offers a tiered creative writing programme (Year 1 to 3) for students who exhibited interest and flair for the English language. A debates enrichment programme has also been started to provide students with the platform to hone their critical thinking and public speaking skills. By 2010, the department will offer the drama enrichment programme to offer students more opportunities to pursue their interest in English language and literature, aligning to the school's intent to develop students holistically. The department also runs a two-week Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) to support the national initiative of the same name. A diverse range of activities e.g. podcasts, mass borrowing, book talks, language quizzes,

literary competitions etc. raises students awareness on the importance of using standard English. This is critical as communication and collaboration are two skills that separate students who are prepared for the increasingly complex life and work environments in the 21st century and those who are not.

In closing, it is necessary to point out that while there is no way of ascertaining whether the school's strategies will indeed be successful, there are reasons to be optimistic. Strong leadership who provides clear direction, positive staff who demonstrates initiative, availability of resources (infrastructure and funding) are but some indicators that allow the school to continue to feel hopeful about its future.

Bibliography

1. Perkins, D. (2008). *Making Learning Whole: How Seven Principles of Teaching Can Transform Education*. United States of America: Jossey-Bass.
2. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills – Framework for 21st Century Learning
http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=254&Itemid=120
(Downloaded 20 August 2009)
3. Top Ten Global Trends that Force Us to Rethink Education
<http://www.educationfutures.com/2007/06/18/top-ten-global-trends-that-force-us-to-rethink-education/>
(Downloaded 17 August 2009)
4. Virtual Information Inquiry: The Evolving Definition of Literacy
<http://virtualinquiry.com/inquiry/literacy.htm>
(Downloaded 17 August 2009)