

THE SINGAPORE STORY

Transcript from ACSP Conference 2017



I bring you greeting from Singapore and I have the privilege of speaking with you about the Singapore story. For some time now, Singapore has been in the limelight because of its results in international league tables, however, I think that is not the main point. For us, in Singapore, we are much more concerned about the education of our children. So when many people come to Singapore nowadays to visit hoping to see some spectacular magic, there isn't any. Education is not about a race on league tables.

Education is about hope, the future for our children and bringing up our next generation, so that they are people with morality, with honour and with life skills for their future and the empathy to take care of one another. The Singapore story is not about the glory of international test results. It really is about the hard work, tenacity, and sacrifice of a few generations of educators to achieve success for all.

Singapore is a very new country. We only have 50 years of independence. So all the time, we are encountering new horizons. And in going through these changes, there were always paradoxes. Some of these paradoxes may sound something like "Singapore is a place where we have drill and practice" or "Singapore is a place where there are the best problem-solvers on earth?" If you'll read the OECD report, Singapore is supposed to be number one in problem solving, but Singapore seems to have a reputation for drill and practice as well.

Is Singapore a centralised system or decentralised system? Singapore is highly centralised because actually 95% of our schools belong to only one system which is the government system. But we are very high on professional agency. Principals

and teachers have a lot that they can do on the ground, to tailor education to suit our students.

The Power of Paradoxes

The power paradoxes lies in the unitedness of our people in the purpose to serve in education that helps us. There is a lot more to education than what is the facade as reported internationally. So we kind of looked good internationally, but the truth of the matter is our education system will never be perfect. We are trying to catch up in various areas still: early childhood, special needs. One thing good about us is we plan long term and we carry it out systematically one step at a time. Singapore is a very small country. It might

not have occurred to you how small it is. Now if you are in Australia, and if you drive in a straight line at a modest 100 kilometres an hour where will you be? Nowhere!

In Singapore, if you could actually drive in a straight line 100 kilometres per hour for just an hour, I guarantee you, no matter which part of the island you start, you will drop into the sea. Our whole island is like a diamond shape and the longest access is just 50 kilometres across and the short access is 40 kilometres. So on an island, 50 by 40, we squeeze in 5,000,000 people.

Do you understand the challenges and why education is so important, so that people respect one another? It's not just about mathematics and science. It's about people loving one another, respecting one another. It's not just about tolerance, as in "I hate you but I tolerate you." It's about, "I love you and I respect you." Now, that is different and that is about nation building and that is about people coming together, 5,000,000 people on a rock. And that's why in Singapore we do not understand the concept of domestic flight.

Our system is just under 400 schools, and because of that, we have only one university institute, called the National Institute of Education where all teachers, all principals, are trained and developed. A principal is not merely a job it is a calling. It is about faith, it is about giving and it is about sacrifice. So I say to you Singapore is therefore about hard work, tenacity and sacrifice, that's the real story. It's not about the glory of international test results.

What we are trying to do today is to change. We have to change because today there are a lot of changes taking place in the world. If education does not change, we'll be left behind and we are

not helping kids because they are going to grow up into an era that's so different from where we are now. One of the things that we say to ourselves, education has to change with the time, that is true. But one challenge in Singapore, and actually that is a similar challenge for you in the Catholic network, is that actually you're not weak, you're strong. Things are going not too badly despite certain challenges. Actually things are going pretty well. So don't underestimate. You're actually doing pretty well. At least that's my opinion. Why do we change when we are strong, why do we change when we are successful? Because if we don't change when we are strong and successful and, therefore, able to change in a reflective mindful manner we may be forced to change out of desperation.

Values

But the paradox is this: the more that we change, the more we must emphasise on timely change and timeless constant. "If change is the only constant then the real challenge is to find the constant that we should not change." These are our values that keep us and help us navigate the turbulent waters of change without losing ourselves in those turbulent waters.

In Singapore, therefore, our curriculum is values-centric and this is a national policy and this is what all principals want. That is to say the most important thing is to help our children and concentrate on some timeless values, values of love, values of respect, values of wanting to contribute, values of not always asking for something but rather willing to contribute something. We are actually moving from quantity to quality, by which we mean we are no longer as interested in key performance indicators. I mean they are still important, test scores examination results.

Our fear is that we are too obsessed with some of these things, and our kids and parents, they too are so obsessed with these things. What we are trying to do is to move them away from only looking at these. The focus on quality education by which we mean understanding, thinking, creativity, engagement and leveraging up for every student, our way of equity

I think as people, what is important for us is the soul searching and in the understanding of why are we doing what we are doing. Singapore is not an affluent country. We don't have resources. It's just the small island with a lot of people. We have no oil, no timber, no agriculture, no cows, no lamb, nothing. We have nothing,

except people on a small rock. So we started as a very poor country, social unrest, unemployment, poor education, mostly illiterate people and that's in 1965, and we build an education system. It's never a policy for the next three years. It is a policy for the next 50 years.

So today we are pumping resources right to those children who need it the most. And so if you visit Singapore and visit one of the top schools, you will see some great things. But our mantra is, "Good schools, elite schools, do great things for students, but the average school does spectacular thing for children who may otherwise not have hope in life,"

Singapore doesn't try to develop just simply individual schools. Our aim is a good school system for all, not a system with good schools for some. Every school is important to us. Our mantra, "No child held back." We don't have a policy on, "No child left behind," like the United States. We simply leave no children behind. That's what we do. One of the very important reasons why we cannot afford to leave children behind is because our growth rate has dropped to one point something, and there are not that many children left. Everyone is precious.

Teach Less, Teach Better

Our main thing that we are recognising for ourselves is if we want students to be truly engaged, then we must teach less but teach better. Then students will learn more and learn better. So our training for teachers include this particular question for them to soul search and reflect.

We use this metaphor of radar. Our students are actually people with radar. When they switch on their radar they are all searching the horizon for something to focus on. If they sit on the radar and scan the horizon of the classroom and it goes, "Interesting, interesting," then like a missile, a homing missile, they go straight into the teacher, focusing on the teacher and whatever the learning task, or the point that the teacher is trying to deliver.

On the other hand many children in our classrooms, they switch on their radar and scan the horizon and it goes, "Nothing, nothing, nothing, can't find anything!" When that happens, because they are young and energetic, they will create something of their own, much to the displeasure of the teacher. Then the teacher will say, "I have classroom management problems." No, you don't. You have pedagogical problems. You have to hone your craft. More teaching, more of the same teaching, that did not work is not exactly the way to inspire better learning. The main thing is to switch the question from, "How do I teach?" to "How do I help students to learn?"

So in Singapore one of our key success factors is that the whole society believe in education, and that includes the government, and therefore there is strong government investment. Our tagline has always been this, "Education is investment, not expenditure." Even when times are hard. We have got economic recessions all the time because we are such an open economy, trading with the rest of the world. So when the United States go into recession, Singapore goes into recession. When China goes into recession, Singapore goes into a recession. When Australia goes into recession, Singapore goes into a recession. Everywhere in the world that goes in a recession, Singapore goes into a recession. But throughout our history, we have maintained we shall not cut education funding. It also does not mean that actually Singapore education system is flushed with cash. No, that's not true. If you look at OECD statistics, Singapore in terms of percentage GDP, is merely average. However, our school leaders and teachers have always been trained to be very prudent, very wise, and judicious in spending that dollar, so that we get good value, good return on the dollar investment.

Lead with a teacher's heart-beat

In Singapore education is a respectable profession and we support educators strongly to grow and to care. We take our profession very seriously. We take the training of principles very, very seriously. To become a school principal, you'll come into the National Institute of Education but not because you applied, no, you don't.

You're systematically identified. So the best vice-principals are identified and come each year as a cohort. And when they come, it's half a year full-time. You are out of your school. Half of your full-time tuition fees fully paid by the government, you get your last drawn salary paid to you every month while you're on course. You're no longer vice-principal in a school. That becomes a vacancy. Somebody else will take over. After the program for half a year full-time, we'll give you a new school to head. This is our system. And the half a year full-time program comes with two weeks of international visits, fully sponsored by the government. We work very closely with our parents because they need to be supportive partners. The most important thing is about having a positive narrative. In