

# Reflection on the Visit to Primary Schools in Singapore

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## 前言

本文記錄 2009 年 1 月 10 日 ~ 15 日台北縣教育團體參訪新加坡的國際交流活動，包括觀摩新加坡教育體制與語言政策、當前新加坡小學語言計畫課程方案和其他特色課程，參訪對象包括卮慈、崇福、光華和聖巴旺等四所小學。文章中作者提出對本次參訪活動的省思，以及對台灣教育的幾點建議。

## Abstract

Thanks to Taipei County Government, I was grateful to have the chance to observe and experience the real Singapore style of primary education in person. Visits to four primary schools were arranged in the Singapore Primary school agenda during Jan 10 to Jan 15 in 2009, which were Red Swastika, Chong Fu, Kong Hwa and Sambawang primary schools. In this report, primary education system, language programs and policy, and other programs will be discussed. A summary and suggestions will be provided at the end.

## INTRODUCTION

“Singapore is a miracle. It is indeed a tidy and tiny country. Yes! There are many impressive moments in this Singapore journey and there are also some combinations and contradictions during the visit.

Singapore is a multi-cultural, multilingual community. The population of four million people is ethnically heterogeneous with about 77% Chinese, 15% of Malays, 6% of Indian origin and 2% of other races. I was lucky to be one of the forty members of the Taipei County delegates to visit the fabulous Singapore— The Garden City. I am very grateful that I had the

chance to observe the primary education system and experience the real Singapore style education in person. Visits to four primary schools, Red Swastika, Chong Fu, Kong Hwa and Sambawang, were planned in the agenda during Jan 10 to Jan 15, 2009. In this report, primary education system, language programs and policy and other programs will be discussed. A summary and suggestions will be provided at the end.

## **PRIMARY EDUCATION SYSTEM**

Singapore, like the British “quarter system,” and has four semesters during a year. A child is in the elementary school for six years and this time can be divided into two stages: Primary 1 to 4 makes up the first fundamental stage, and the following two years are called the orientation stage.

At the foundation stage, the core curriculum comprises English and the Mother tongue as well as mathematics which is taught with supplementary subjects such as music, art, craft, physical education and social studies. Science is included in primary 3. To maximize their potential, students are streamed according to their learning ability before advancing to the orientation stage. Before completing primary 6, students have to take the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). The Singapore primary school curriculum has been an international model, especially for its teaching method in mathematics.

In Taiwan, primary education is compulsory for 6 years. The main curriculum comprises of Chinese, mathematics, English, science and social studies with the supplementary subjects such as dialects, computer, physical education, art and music. While the Taiwan Constitution regulates that the junior high school is compulsory education as well, the pressure in studying is not so heavy for each can attend to junior high school.

### **Streamed Education**

From above, the evident difference lies in the *streamed education* policy in Singapore. Follow up is the heavy school work pressures due to the streamed test that students have to pass to be the 4<sup>th</sup> graders, and later the PSLE test before children can graduate from primary schools in Singapore.

There are two tests that stream students into three levels - EM1, EM2, and EM3. The first test is in the primary 4 and the second is in the primary 6. EM1 is the collection of 20% of the students that has better academic achievements, 70% of the students enroll in the EM2 class, and the last 10% students enter the EM3 class. Later, students will be adjusted to another class according to their SA1 and SA2 score each year. For example, the EM1 student with bad performance might go down to EM2 class, and the EM3 students with improved good performance might go up to EM2 class.

No wonder the scores of the SA1 and SA2 tests during the second and fourth semester, which last for one month and contain the listening, composition, oral communication both in

Chinese and English as well as paper tests on the subjects of Chinese, English, math and science, are crucial points for children. Nowadays, we cannot easily tell which level of class that children entered into; however, Singapore’s primary schools still follows this streamed education policy.

Since all the primary principals make every effort to hand out high Grade –Point Average (GPA) to show the efficiency and keep good fame for the schools, the teachers ought to adopt some remedial programs. Before the SA test, the home teacher might keep the students in class after school to assist them review subjects. Likewise, if the pupils fail, he or she might be asked to come to school during vacation to attend free remedial classes which last one week.

We can easily find the characteristics of the Singapore education is the elite education, thus competition is relatively intense. If one pupil in EM2 successfully enters the EM1, it also means one pupil in EM1 should down grade to EM2. Only the best 25% elites can enter colleges to accept higher education after SA1 and SA2 test. The others are cultivated to be the bourgeoisie in society unless they join the streamed test and back to the upper level.

The policy in Taiwan emphasizes more for the remedial curriculum and disadvantaged students. Actually, we should stop a while and think about what we do to the highly talented child. Should we create more space for them to advance their performance and pursuit of excellence? Compared with Singapore, of course, we neglect them. Now we face the double-curve tendency of English ability in elementary English education. What should we do to solve this? Only remedial classes for the slow learners are not enough, how about those fast learners? Our governors should try to figure out the way.

**The Modern Management**

Figure 1 is an example from Chong Fu Primary School which shows that their academic and administration affairs are running and responsible for two different paths.

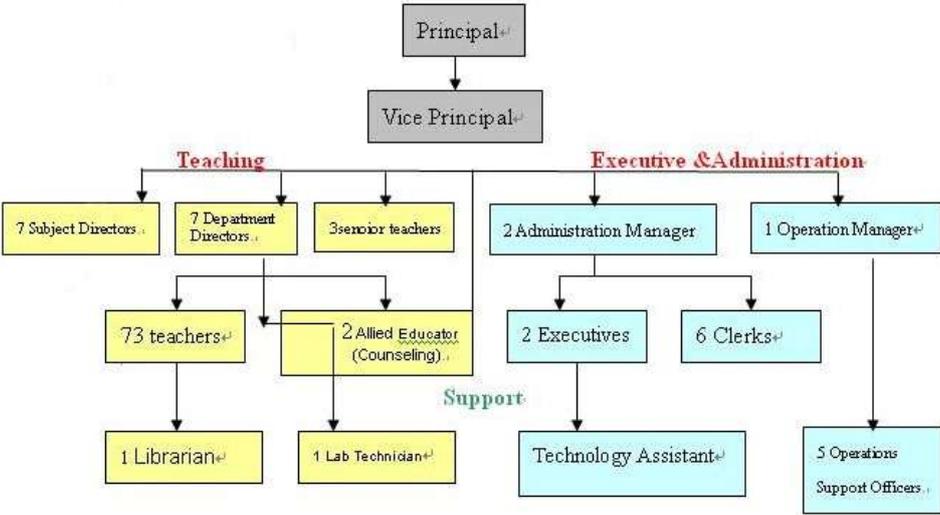
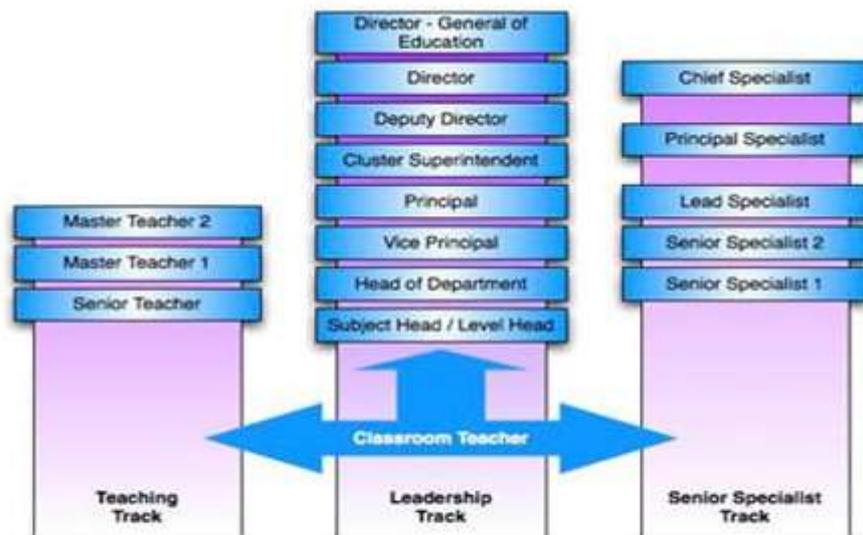


Figure 1. Organization chart of Chong Fu primary school

In this management organization, the teaching and administration each can be more focused on dealing the affairs. This is the reason that the management of school in Singapore could show the modern management features. In Chong Fu, there are two Administration Managers and one Operation Manager to be responsible for the executive and administration jobs. Besides, the teaching affairs divide the teachers into three scales (or categories): senior teachers, subject directors, and department directors. The career structures all aim to nurture and motivate all teachers to achieve superior performance according to their interests.



**Figure 2.** Career Tracks for Teachers

### Teacher Career Tracks

Figure 2 shows the three different career tracks and the system. The Ministry of education in Singapore regards “Teachers are the key to everything that is being done in Education” and different teachers have different aspirations as well so that develops the “Education Service Professional Development And Career Plan” for teachers to develop utmost potential.

The three professional tracks are teaching, leadership and senior specialist tracks. In the first teaching track, the one whose strength is in teaching can advance to master teacher as the same level as a school’s principal. In the second leadership track, one may get the chance to take on leadership positions in schools and the Ministry’s headquarters. The third Senior Specialist Track is offered for the one who is inclined towards more specialized areas in which adequate knowledge and skills are essential for breaking new ground in educational developments.

There are also in-service courses such as Diplomas, Advanced Diplomas and Advanced Postgraduate Diplomas that continually challenge and develop teachers

to upgrade their professional knowledge. As a trained teacher, there will be a wide range of training and upgrading opportunities, including in-service, training course, study leave, scholarships and study loans.

Thus, the Minister of Singapore said that teaching, like any other profession, now is even more challenging, enriching and satisfying that anyone can fulfill his or her own potential and dreams in this field.

### **Vision, Mission and Core value of the Schools**

Among the four schools, each one has clear school visions and missions as shown in Table 1. You may find that each school is well organized by modern management and education marketing. There are professional full-time staffs doing the administrative jobs. They have a sound brochure about the educational programs, introduction of school history, marketing about their core product, and the central product students after graduated from primary school. It occurs to me that all these linked to the great efforts in cultural exchange with other countries either speaking Chinese or English such as China, Taiwan and Australia, etc. No wonder they are more global-viewed and always ready to connect to the world.

Each school declares distinct missions. Among the four schools, Sembawang Primary School is a different one for it's a community school, which means that the students come from the neighborhood with different backgrounds and mother tongues, while the other three are much more academic achievement-oriented and mostly speak Chinese and English. Thus, as the Principal of Sembawang Primary School Mr. Albert Alcantara said, "Our mission is to prepare all the students for life for service to nation and humanity. The goal of our school is to provide a caring, family school environment for pupils to develop into self-disciplined, responsible and respectful citizens who understand their role in the society, and will find their own way to contribute to the family, community and country."

**Table 1** Vision, Mission and Core value of the four schools

Primary School	Vision	Mission	Core value
Red Swastika	A Holistic Education that Brings Out The Best In Every Child.	To develop our pupils to be independent learners, creative thinkers and effective communicators with a strong sense of social responsibility.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respect</li> <li>• Magnanimity</li> <li>• Trustworthiness</li> <li>• Alertness</li> </ul> Responsibility & Success 恭寬信敏
Chong Fu	A community of thinkers who are patriotic, gracious and global in outlook	With vision and drive, Chongfu will commit itself to developing its students in five core areas, namely moral, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetics and thereby preparing them for the 21st century.	(Graciously) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generous</li> <li>• Responsible</li> <li>• Achieving</li> <li>• Caring</li> <li>• Innovative</li> <li>• Observant</li> <li>• United</li> <li>• Sincere</li> <li>• Loyal</li> <li>• Youthful</li> </ul>
Kong Hwa	Learning With Perseverance, Serving with Sincerity 誠、毅	To bring out the best in every Kong Hwaian and to inculcate in him sound moral values with the passion to learn and serve.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibility</li> <li>• Cooperation</li> <li>• Honesty</li> <li>• Humility</li> <li>• Integrity</li> <li>• Tolerance</li> <li>• Respect</li> <li>• Filial Piety</li> </ul>
Sembawang	Every Child A Winner	Preparing our children for life, for service to Nation and Humanity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Care</li> <li>• Achievement</li> <li>• Responsibility</li> <li>• Self-efficacy</li> </ul>

## **LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY**

Looking into the language education in Singapore, we know that Singapore adopts the pragmatic sustainability policies. The first one is in 1960's; it generates the multilingualism to quo through the equal emphasis of 4 existing official languages, English, Chinese, Tamil and Malay. In the 1970's, they emphasized bilingualism which meant a global language and a mother tongue. Now, Singapore people are aware that the unique Singlish is harmful to the financial city, as Prime Minister Goh said that "the investors will not come if their supervisors and managers can only guess what their workers are saying," and in 2000 started the campaign, *Speak Good English Movement* (SEGM). Therefore, experts in various areas assist Singapore in many activities and programs at schools, libraries and community. The Ministry of Education, through its ENTHUSE (Encouraging the use of Standard English) committee, has also come up with many creative and challenging activities, "Speak Good English quizzes", "Rap on speak Good English", and other kinds of competitions. At the same time, the mass media has cut down the use of Singlish, especially in popular television sitcoms. (Chew, 2007)

## **LANGUAGE PROGRAMS**

What impressed me the most is the pedagogy programs they are running now. There are Strategies for Effective Engagement Development (SEED), Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading (STEELLAR), Learning Center (LC), Oral Communication Program (OCP), Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR), and Engaging, Activating Reporting Sustaining (EARS), etc. These are the programs trying to improve the basic ability of students, e.g. one of the hottest programs is STEELLAR, the goals are to develop students' interest in reading and build solid language fundamental as well.

I am amazed by Singapore's great efforts not only because of the acrostics it hides inside these well developed programs, but also because all schools do try to change from the student-centered pedagogy. We all know the simple theory of education administration. That input something through process then manipulates it to produce the product. What we do in Taiwan now is trying hard to get a different outcome but always ignoring and neglecting the fact that the method should be changed first, just digging hard the same way but fantastically imagining that something different might be born.

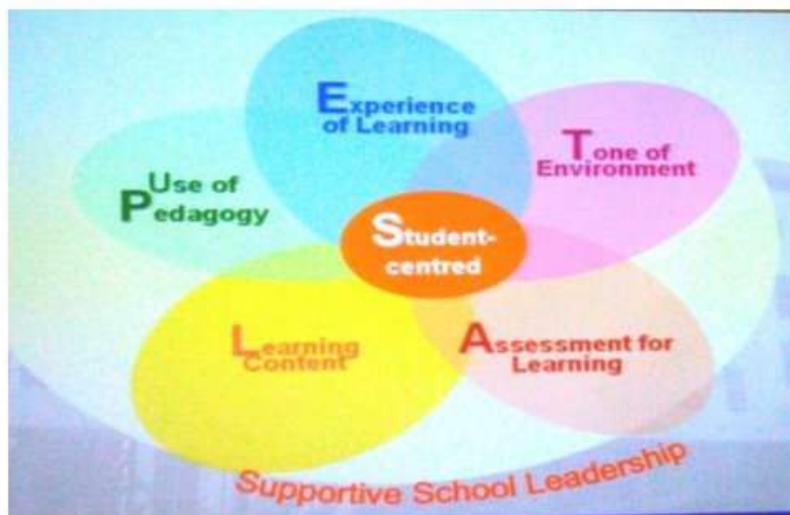
### **Engaged Learning**

SEED reinforces the concept of engaged learning, the transformation in the ideas of learners and teacher position, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** The position transformation of teacher and student

The essence of TLLM is Engaged Learning in every classroom by every teacher for every child. TLLM means Teach Less and Learn More. A senior teacher who has been teaching for 15 years in Sembawang School explained to us that “More opportunities are being created for holistic learning so that the students can go beyond academic excellence to develop the attributes, mindsets, characters and values that would be critical to successful living.” What does Engaged Learning mean to children? Why is it so important? Engaged learning can make it meaningful, understanding, in-depth, quality, connected, and reflective and involved for students. This may strengthen both languages and reading skills and promote positive attitude toward reading in the fundamental years through the use of student-centered method. Figure 4 :



**Figure 4.** Student-centered Supportive School Leadership

## STELLAR

STELLAR, the strategies for English language learning and reading is a new curriculum program from New Zealand in 2009 designed for 61 lower primary schools, primary 1 and primary 2 students with the goal to facilitate students' foundation in English. Its vision aims to change children to become the ones who love reading and have a strong foundation in the English Language. The differences characterize teaching and learning of English as using more speaking and listening activities. Besides, children learn to read and write through interesting books with discussions led by the teachers. As primary 1 and primary 2 students upgrade to higher primary levels, speech, drama, media, poem and debates are all the ways they used to cultivate the children become fluent and confident speakers.

Hence, the STELLAR is different because English language learning is achieved through learning vocabulary learned in books and expression of thoughts in oral and written forms, through discussions with other children, teacher and informal peer interaction.

What is a STELLAR lesson like? The following figure shows the curriculum unit outline. The main material is a big book to enrich the children's interests and motivations and hope lower primary children reading for enjoyment and knowledge. It also includes the purpose to train children to become independent readers, development of social skills to work with other children, turn-taking and respect for others during class discussions.

They have made efforts to relieve students' school work pressures. The curriculum designer chose the big books with great efforts keeping in mind many factors; on one hand, they hope to motivate students' interests with the book but avoid the books were often seen, on the other hand, they only offer teacher big books and ask 6 children to read together with one book to decrease the fears in reading. To prevent the parents buying books and preview in advance, the books are neither available in the bookstores nor used for test purpose. To set the Sembawang school as an example, the English department picked 16 books for primary 1 and 22 books for primary 2. The four broad themes are people, places, animals and celebrations.

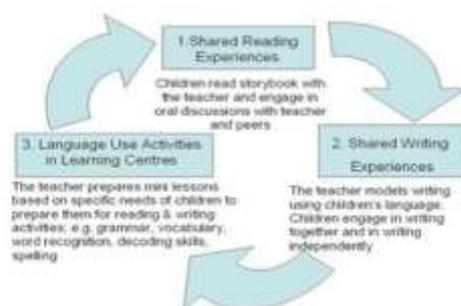
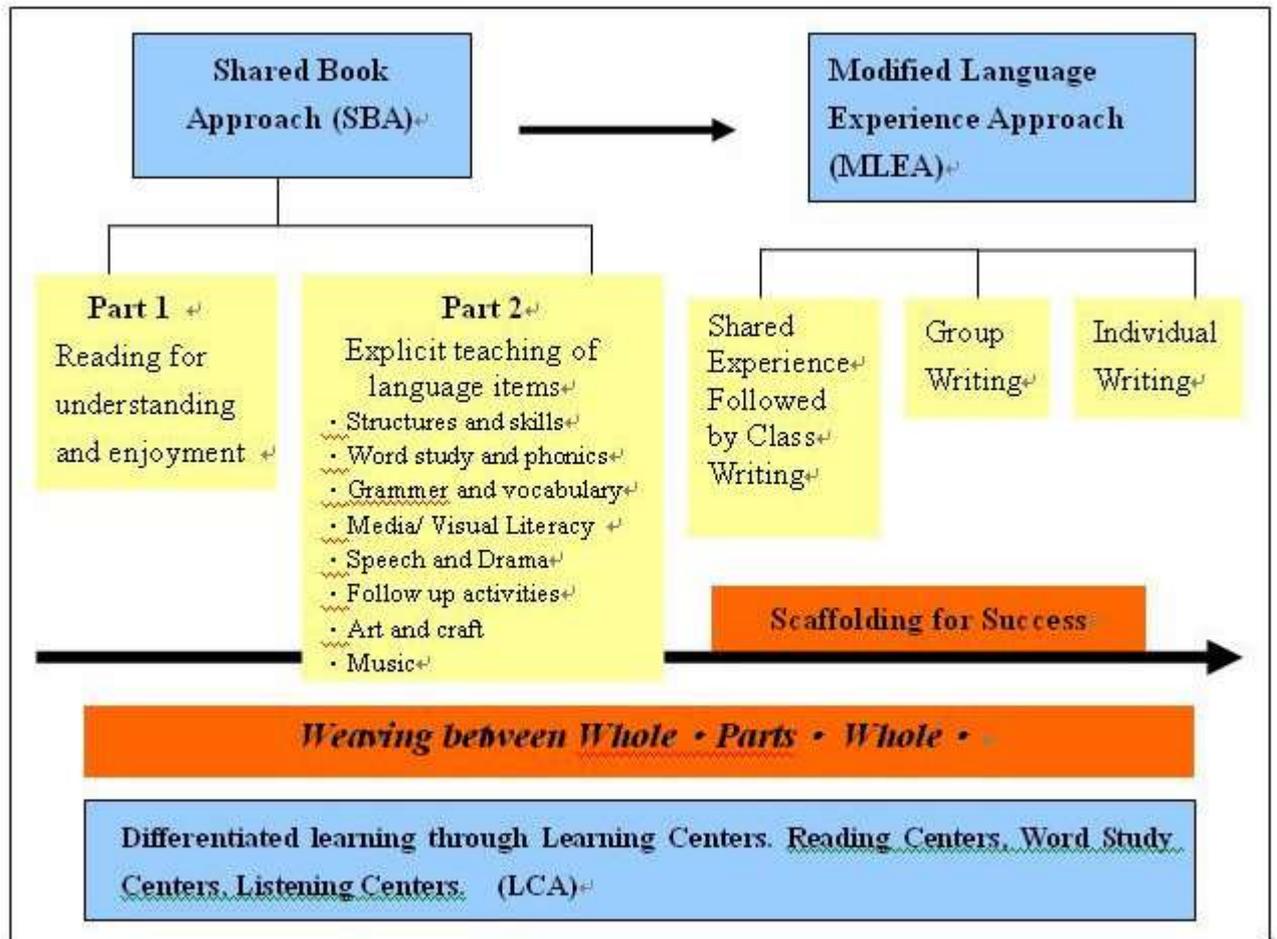


Figure 5. The STELLAR Program

In addition, it designs all kind of learning activities and effective strategies, the Shared Book Approach (SBA), Modified Language Experience Approach (MLEA) and the Learning Centers Approach (LCA) are to reinforce student's speaking, listening, reading and writing ability. We can see more clearly about the STELLAR Pedagogic Model for lower primary as figure 6.



**Figure 6.** The STELLAR Pedagogic Model

At first, in the Shared Book Approach (SBA), the procedures are to let the children tuning in reading, re-reading, and then move to follow-up activities, e.g. the concepts of print, phonemic awareness and identifying the target vocabulary.

Secondly, in the first stage of MLEA, the procedures for class writing are reading, arithmetic, and writing. In the MLEA stage 2, the group is of mixed ability students. The procedures are 4 steps as follows :

- Brainstorm for ideas
- Record and write ideas
- Read and edit story together
- Share and written with other groups

Thirdly, the Learning center is applied for different ability tasks, and will be discussed. From above, the approaches are applied to assist children learning language at the very beginning time and adjust to learners both the top-down and bottom-up method.

## **Learning Center**

Learning center is another highlight in classroom observation. During this section, the learning center was applied in many ways. Multiple Intelligence classrooms are bigger than normal classrooms and have colorful decorations and clean floors and students' worksheet, compositions, art pictures on the walls.

The Malay-Singapore teacher in the MI (Multiple Intelligence) classroom showed us the progress of listening center, word game center and reading center as well. For example, in the game center, there is a piece of paper on the table explaining to the students how to play the memory game and also notes the aim to practice the present tense and past tense. Here are the rules of the game:

1. Shuffle the cards and place the cards face down.
2. Arrange the cards as the pictures shown below.
3. Players will take turns to play.
4. The first player will select two cards and turn them over. One card would be the first Present Tense and the other card would be the Past Tense.
5. If two cards match, for example, lock licked then the player will keep the cards and the next player will continue.
6. If two cards don't match, the players will need to turn them over and the next player will continue.
7. The player with the most cards at the end of the round wins the game.

In the reading center, the teacher sat in the middle and mainly took care about this part; she was very involved in telling a story. Sometimes, she asked questions and sometimes responded to student's questions with vivid expressions and gestures.

A Learning center arrangement chart is prepared in advance to let the three groups in the classroom run fluently. As shown in the figure 7, the three groups are named by different lovely animals; they are hawk, meerkat and leopard. During the operation of the teaching progress, I found the teacher plays as a crucial role as a time controller. She whistled one time

to mention that time was over and to move forward to next centers. What I had seen was all the primary 2 students moved to another table to start another centre in order.

The teacher told that the learning centers are designed areas in the classroom where small groups of children at similar progress levels can gather for reinforcement and extension of Shared Book Approach (SBA) and Modified Language Experience Approach (MLEA) lessons. Students will work independently in each of the learning centers while the teacher focuses on a group that needs further instruction.

Various types of Learning Centers are used by the teachers for different purposes, e.g., Listening Centers, Game Centers, ReadingCenters and Word Study Centers. Each center is supplied with appropriate materials and equipments to facilitate independent activities encourage children to use the language skills they have acquired during the preceding unit's work. Besides, LC cultivates children by practicing their language skills, proper use of the LC develop generic social skills for group interaction such as cooperation, respect for others and responsibility while fostering independence from the teacher. At last, about the assessment that the teacher may apply the worksheet or checklists to let students accustomed to do self-evaluation, peer evaluation or teacher evaluation.

What are the benefits of this learning center instruction?

- Opportunities for students to explore, discover, create, practice and apply skills
- Promotes critical and creative thinking skills
- Develops independent learning strategies
- Cooperative learning
- Addresses different learning styles when a variety of activities are available for student choice
- Differentiated instruction if activities vary by complexity and take into account different levels of ability/readiness
- Allows the teacher opportunities for flexible grouping and varied activities such as individual conferencing and guided reading groups
- Promotes independent learning
- Provides opportunities for students to take responsibility for their learning and demonstrating what they have learned

The senior teacher Mrs. Redwan was very interested in the application of LC in Taiwan and we discussed a lot about the topic. I told her that so far the idea of LC still had some worries like the misbehaved children and the classroom management problems, etc. She shared her experience that we ought to teach children more times to let them get used to an independent way of learning. She has used a very positive way to encourage student to do their best.



Figure 7 Game Center



Figure 8 Listening Center



Figure 9 Reading Center

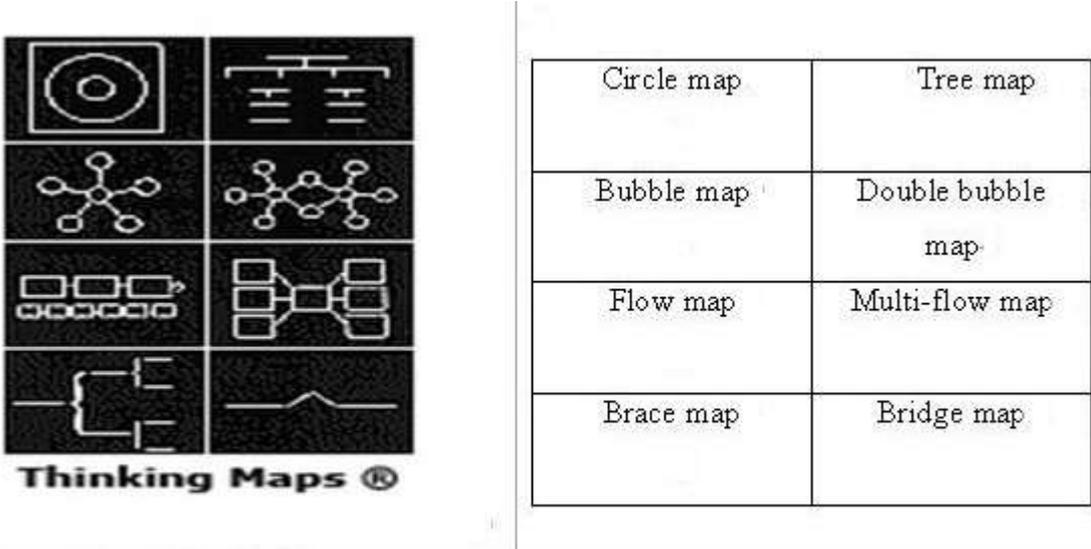
HAWK	MEERKAT	LEOPARD
Word Game	Listening	Reading
Reading	Word Game	Listening
Listening	Reading	Word Game

Figure 10 Learning Center arrangement chart

## Visual Instruction Support

Both the mind maps and graphic organizers are very good instruction support in organizing and clarifying ideas that assist students to comprehend in a visual way to organize and recall information better. During the classroom observation, one thing that caught my attention is the use of mind maps. I saw the teacher drew a spider web on the board to outline the whole progress of the story after sharing the big book story with children. Use vivid pictures instead of long paragraphs and printed words to illuminate students' concentration and try to enhance students' ability to verbalize. Undoubtedly, a picture speaks more than ten thousands words.

According to [David Hyerle](#) in the Visual Tools for Transforming Information Into Knowledge, there are eight maps that are designed to correspond with eight different fundamental thinking processes. The eight kind of maps and its thinking process are listed as follows:

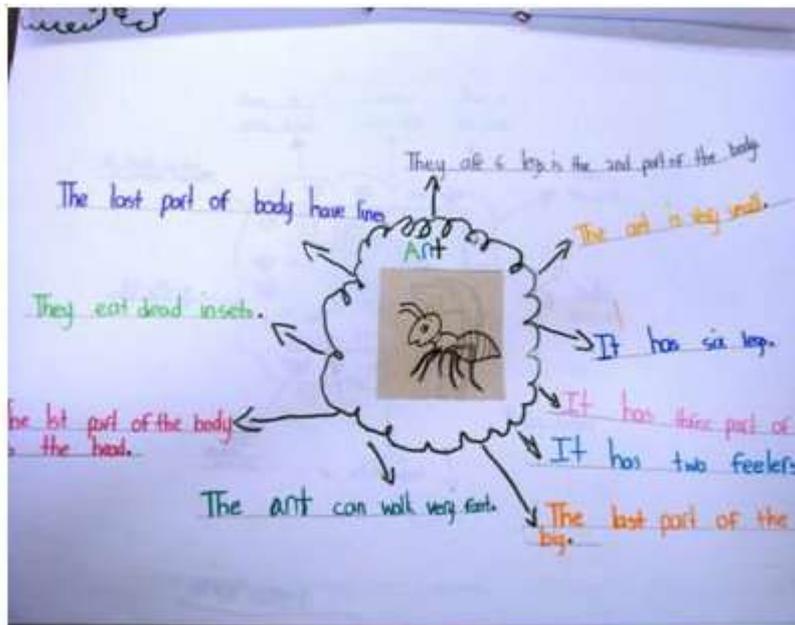


**Figure 11.** Eight thinking maps

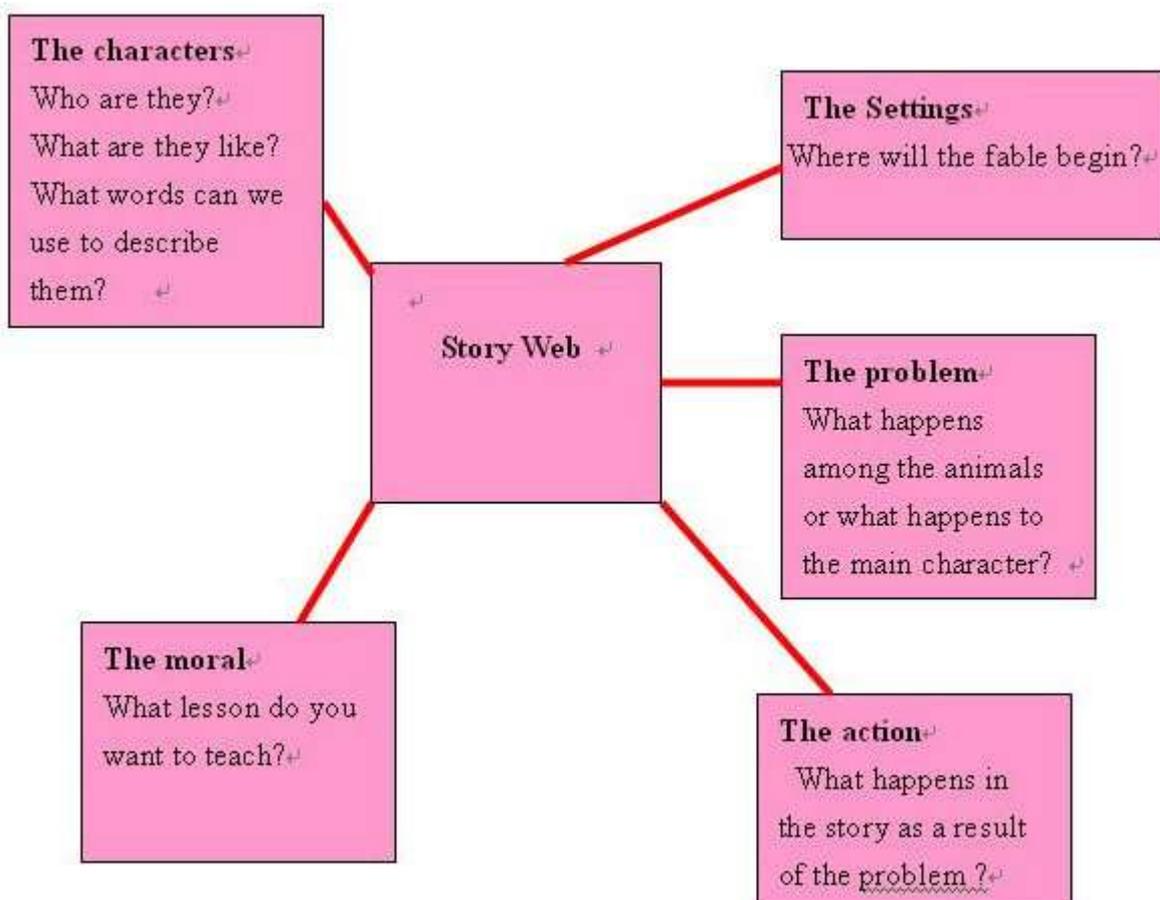
**Table 2** The thinking process

Thinking Maps	Thinking Process
Brace map	Part-Whole Relationship
Bridge map	Analogies
Bubble map	Describe Qualities
Circle map	Defining in Context
Double bubble map	Comparing and Contrasting
Flow map	Sequencing and Ordering
Multi-flow map	Causes and Effects
Tree map	Classifying and Grouping

Spider web is one of the mind maps that were frequently applied in the class, as it assists students in writing to brainstorm ideas. The story web clearly explained how to write a fable on one’s own. The teacher asked students to clarify the story by 5w and 1H; they are who, what, when, where, why and how. This also reflects the importance of teaching students how to be a critical and creative thinker in their instruction.



**Figure 12.** One example of a student's mind map work



**Figure13** One example of the Spider web

## **Other Programs**

Sembawang Primary School is a typical example which presents diversified programs such as Social Skills Program, Character First Program, Social Emotional Learning Program (SEL), Student Care Center, High Ability Program, Talent Development Program and Overseas Immersion Program. Among these programs, I would like to suggest our government adopt Character First Program and Overseas Immersion Program as one part of education policy.

Character First Program is applied as a whole-school approach in nurturing citizens that will make a difference to society. Pupils learn character traits in a fun way using stories, dialogues, role plays and art & crafts activities. To help pupils remember, each character trait is associated with an animal; for example, the quality of patience is associated with a butterfly having to go patiently through the stages of its life-cycle before emerging as a butterfly.

In 2005, Xingzhi Learning Center (行知文教中心) was one of the organizations which advocated the Chinese Culture and better education policy including Overseas Immersion Program. I found that the Overseas Immersion Program areas are all over the world including China, Taiwan, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. In the Sembawang Primary School more than 10% of the children had traveled to the above countries.

Singapore does regard the Overseas Immersion Program as an integral component of the children's education to help them get more culturally savvy and to expose them to the world and so far most of the trips restricted to the neighborhood Asia.

## **CONCLUSION**

Singapore's potential is not only due to the important Strait of Malacca geographic advantages but also the Education, the people. "A leader is the one who knows the way, goes the way and shows the way." This motto impressed me during the visit. The Singapore government has great ambition in education on cultivating creative leaders through the streamed education. A diversity of fabulous language programs to strengthen both languages and leading skills. As an educator, we really need to learn how to improve the efficiency of school administration and give our children a better education environment.

I would like to suggest that the board of education in Taiwan should consider adopting the English ability streamed class policy to solve the problem of differentials of English ability through this way at first. How to find out a balance in a class with both slow and fast learners?

While taking care of the slow learners, we should not ignore the fast learners who may one day become a future leader in the country.

Secondly, our end should devote more expertise in working on the student-centered language programs to the fundamental building up of students' English ability to better the English learning policy not just put efforts on the output orientation. To take Taipei County Education Board as an example, the policy are mostly competitions but less whole developmental language programs for basic ability advancement, be it in speaking, reading, listening or writing. Our education board should devote more time and resources to develop the English curriculum to fulfill what our students need.

Thirdly, develop the Overseas Immersion programs into the primary education to enlarge students and teachers' eye sights and learning motivations. Let Taiwan's School connect to the world. For example, each school could build up sister relationship with schools in other countries to get more exchange opportunity. It is a persuasive reason to children to study English.

Finally, facilitate the school Vision, Mission and Core Values by separating the administration and teaching affairs to elevate the efficiency of school development. Let the primary teachers focus on the teaching matters, separate the teaching and the administrative jobs.

Singapore's experience of the successful language education and administration efficiency is a mirror to reflect that Taiwan government still can do a lot to elevate Taiwan's competition among the so called The East Asia Tigers. As John C. Maxwell said, "A leader is the one who knows the way, goes the way and shows the way." Only by education should we not only survive from these economic recessions but lead Taiwan to become another prosperous and important country.

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