



The Singapore School and the School Excellence Model

Ng Pak Tee

*Policy and Management Studies Academic Group,
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University
Singapore
(E-mail: ptng@nie.edu.sg)*

Abstract

In line with the national vision of 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation', schools in Singapore are now asked to develop themselves into excellent schools. To support this change, the way that schools are being appraised has been changed since 2000. The school today is asked to do self-appraisal using the new School Excellence Model (SEM), which is adapted from a business excellence model. This article discusses the SEM, its major implications to the leadership and management of schools in Singapore and the areas still to be addressed in the implementation of the model. In particular, school leaders should focus on the substance and not the form of the SEM, be systemic in their approach to quality improvement in schools and truly lead the way by being the first believing and practicing member of this movement.

Key Words: excellence, leadership, quality, school, self-appraisal

Introduction

It is fashionable nowadays to speak of organisational excellence in the corporate world, made popular perhaps by Peters and Waterman (1982) in their book 'In Search of Excellence'. However excellence is an elusive concept and can depend upon a diverse set of competencies and values (Koch and Cebula, 1994). The advent of the excellence models and awards in the 1990s has fuelled interest in the pursuit of organisational excellence and has given a more definitive shape to an excellent organisation. This wave has now reached the Singapore education scene.

In line with the national vision of 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' (TSLN), schools in Singapore are now asked to develop themselves into excellent schools. They are given more autonomy so that they can be flexible and responsive to the needs of their students. Principals are encouraged to think of themselves as the CEO of their schools. They are to lead their staff, manage the school systems and produce the desired educational outcomes. To support this change, the way that schools are being appraised has been changed since 2000. The school today is asked to do self-appraisal using the new School Excellence Model (SEM). Gone

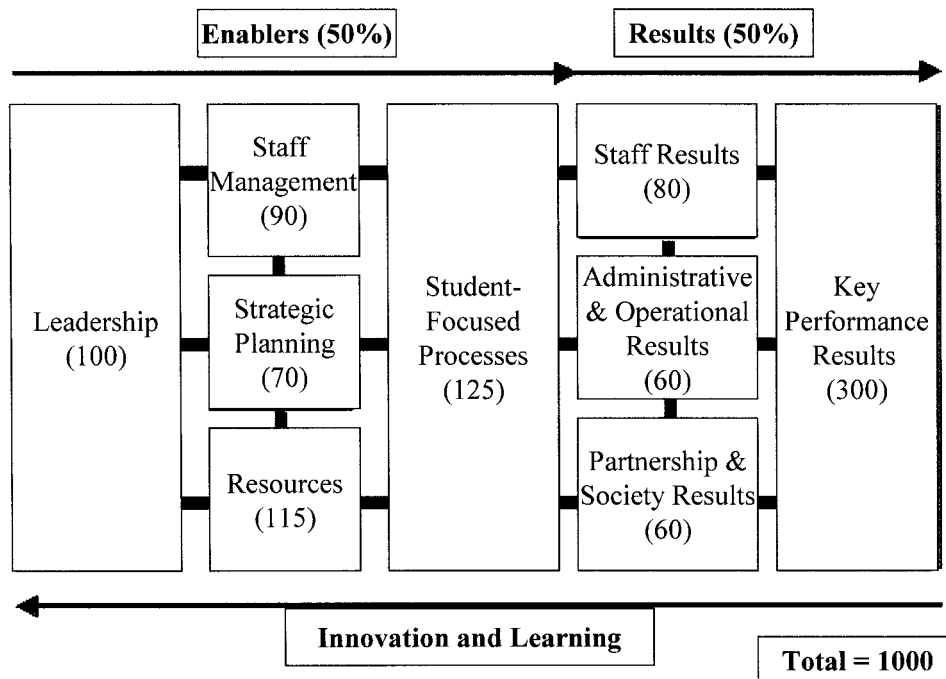


Figure 1. The School Excellence Model (SEM).

are the days when school inspectors swoop upon schools to vet their operations using measures that are not entirely transparent to the schools.

While the introduction of the SEM is important and timely to support TSLN, it is a policy change that will deeply affect the way that schools are being managed. This article describes the SEM and reflects on the implications and challenges of the SEM on school management.

The School Excellence Model

The SEM is a self-assessment model for schools, adapted from the various quality models used by business organisations, namely the European Foundation of Quality Management (EFQM), the Singapore Quality Award (SQA) model and the education version of the American Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award model (MBNQA). A conscious effort is made to align the SEM to the SQA so that schools can pitch themselves against national benchmarks for organisational excellence. The SEM aims to provide a means to objectively identify and measure the schools' strengths and areas for improvement. It also allows benchmarking against similar schools, stimulating improvement activities that can positively impact on the overall quality of the school and ultimately the quality of the education system.

The SEM is driven by a set of core values, which defines the purpose and form of the SEM. The core values emphasise the importance of having a purposeful school leadership, putting students first and seeing teachers as the key to making quality education happen. The SEM recognises the importance of student-focused processes in bringing about sustained results. The SEM also recognises that results extend beyond the academic achievements. While a school's academic performance continues to be important, an excellent school is one that provides a quality and holistic education. In the SEM, excellent results as those which meet target, are sustained over a number of years and show positive trends. It is premised on the belief that an excellent school does not produce one-off good results.

The SEM framework has two broad categories – 'Enablers' and 'Results'. The 'Enablers' category, which comprises cultural, process and resource components, is concerned with how results are achieved. The 'Results' category is concerned with what the school has achieved or is achieving.

The SEM comprises nine quality criteria against which schools can be assessed (Ministry of Education, 2000 refer to Figure 1):

- Leadership: How school leaders and the school's leadership system address values and focus on student learning and performance excellence; and how the school addresses its responsibilities towards society.
- Strategic Planning: How the school sets clear stakeholder-focused strategic directions; develops action plans to support its directions, deploys the plans and tracks performance.
- Staff Management: How the school develops and utilises the full potential of its staff to create an excellent school.
- Resources: How the school manages its internal resources and its external partnerships effectively and efficiently in order to support its strategic planning and the operation of its processes.
- Student-Focused Processes: How the school designs, implements, manages and improves key processes to provide a holistic education and works towards enhancing student well-being.
- Administrative and Operational Results: What the school is achieving in relation to the efficiency and effectiveness of the school.
- Staff Results: What the school is achieving in relation to the training and development, and morale of its staff.
- Partnership and Society Results: What the school is achieving in relation to its partners and the community at large.
- Key Performance Results: What the school is achieving in the holistic development of its students, in particular, the extent to which the school is able to achieve the Desired Outcomes of Education (Wee, 1998).

The SEM basically describes an excellent school as one in which the leaders lead staff, devise strategies and deploy resources, all of which are systematically fed into clearly identified student-focused processes for which targets are set and performance monitored and managed. These 'enablers' then produce results in staff

and stakeholder satisfaction, as well as impact on society, all contributing to the achievement of school results and excellence.

In doing assessment using the SEM, the model requires evidences of:

- a sound and integrated approach for systematic, continuous improvement for all criteria of quality defined by the model;
- a systematic deployment of the approach and the degree of implementation;
- a regular assessment and review of the approaches and their deployment, based on monitoring and analysis of the results achieved and on-going activities;
- an identification, prioritisation, planning and implementation of improvement activities;
- a set of appropriate and challenging performance targets;
- a continuous improvement of results over three to five years;
- a benchmarking of performance against comparable schools;
- an identification of the causes of good or bad results.

The assessment process is one whereby for each of the criteria, the assessor considers how well the above few points have been achieved where appropriate, the better the achievement, the higher the score.

A significant point to note is that the assessment process is explicit in requiring evidence to justify a certain score. Assessors are not permitted to score on the basis of their instincts or feelings. So, even when a school is thought to perform well against a particular criterion, if there is no evidence of this, the model permits no score beyond that for ad hoc performance. Moreover, to score well, a school, in addition to having explicit evidence relating to a criterion, must also have evidence of continuous improvement. Trend analysis information is required.

Schools can also use the SEM as a holistic developmental and management framework. Instead of merely using the SEM to measure how well the school is doing, the SEM provides a framework for schools to engage actively in capacity building. It helps the school to identify areas for improvement and strengths for the school to tap on to innovate.

The new system stresses the importance of self-assessment as a primary mechanism to drive school improvement. Self-assessment is a comprehensive, systematic and regular internal review of an organisation's activities and results referenced against a model of business excellence. Porter and Tanner (1996) maintain that self-assessment is not only a means for measuring continuous improvement, but also an excellent opportunity to integrate total quality management into normal operations. An external team from MOE validates the self-assessment results using the same criteria approximately once in five years.

Linked to the SEM is the Masterplan of Awards for schools. There are 3 levels of awards. The first level comprises the Achievement Awards given to schools each year for current year's achievements. The second level comprises the Best Practices Award (BPA), which recognises schools with good scores in the 'Enablers' category and the Sustained Achievement Award (SAA), which recognises schools with sustained good scores in the 'Results' category. At the apex of the awards

is the School Excellence Award (SEA), which gives recognition to schools for excellence in education processes and outcomes. Schools may also apply for the Singapore Quality Award (SQA) just like any other industrial or commercial sector organisation. Schools may request for additional external validations, other than the once-in-five-years mandatory external validation, to qualify for these awards.

Implications of the SEM on School Management

The introduction of the SEM to the Singapore education system has a few major implications to the leadership and management of schools in Singapore. Against a backdrop of intense inter-school competition, the mental model of school leaders should be aligned with the intent of the SEM as a tool for self-appraisal and not another field for inter-school competition. The holistic approach of the SEM also implies that school leaders need to be systemic in their management approach. The high demand spelt out in the SEM of an excellent school implies that a greater level of school leadership is needed than ever to bring schools to a new plane of excellence.

Schools should focus on the Substance and not Form of the SEM

School excellence is both a journey and goal. The SEM is merely a tool along the journey to reach the goal. Therefore, the schools should focus on the substance and not the form of the SEM. Otherwise, the SEM score may become the goal in itself and school excellence a by-product, if it is achieved at all.

In order that school excellence is meaningful, school leaders should concentrate on school excellence as the desired outcome and leave the SEM score as a product of the journey. Any award is an encouragement to continue the effort, not an end to the journey. In this way, the SEM will truly serve as a useful reference framework for school excellence, a guide to identify areas for improvement. The school excellence journey will be driven by substance and not form.

The SEM represents a fundamental change in the way schools in Singapore relate to Ministry of Education (MOE). The SEM represents a breakaway from the old model where schools merely receive and execute edicts from headquarters. The SEM forms part of the platform on which schools can spearhead their own education or reform initiatives within the broad policy parameters defined by the MOE. It is primarily a tool for self-appraisal and not for headquarters to grade schools. This is a new mental model and it will take time for school leaders to embrace it. However, for this new mental model to be eventually rooted, it needs to be a shared vision among MOE officials and school leaders. If the SEM is used an 'examination' or a 'ranking' of schools in a rat race, the meaning and purpose of the SEM is lost. Some form of competition and benchmarking is healthy but too

much of that will make the SEM an exercise in developing evidences instead of a real drive for improvement.

In theory, the SEM supports a culture of moving away from fault finding to learning and improvement. This is in line with a major characteristic of a quality culture that emphasise trust and not blame (Crosby, 1980). However, there is tension because such a new mindset has not completely replaced the old one. While MOE has made clear that the SEM is for self-assessment and improvement, some school leaders may still interpret the model as one for control and scrutiny, which can affect their careers, hence the need to score well whatever it takes.

Therefore, without a common understanding of what the SEM really is and what it really stands for, there will more and more projects undertaken throughout the school system, all in the name of school excellence, but merely out to satisfy the criteria specified in the SEM. Speeches are made. Projects start with a big bang. There is great publicity at the start but soon, the romance grinds to a halt. The heat just fizzles out. Valuable resources are wasted throughout the education system.

The crucial question here is whether the school is serious in its goal to achieve excellence or is it out to score in the SEM. The two aims are not mutually exclusive but there is a significant difference in emphasis. The espoused goal is school excellence, but is that really the goal-in-use? The actual goal-in-use may very well be to 'create' fanciful school management frameworks or other evidences to get external assessors to give them an award. Moreover, school excellence is a long journey and may take a few years to bear fruits. In the mean time, the school may still have the mindset to quickly showcase something good, whether it is for ranking or for awards. This is a quick-fix mentality – a search for quick wins. Instead of maintaining the effort to reach the goal of school excellence, the goal is lowered to claim quick credit.

In this light, it is important that school leaders and MOE officials take care not to perpetuate the sense of keen competition already found in the system. The SEM is not a new arena for competition. A shared vision to take the SEM at face value, a self-appraisal tool for school improvement, is much needed in the education system.

School Leaders Need to be Systemic

The traditional principal manages a school by managing it departmentally: language, science, mathematics, arts and administration. The aim is to get optimal results from each department. However, with the advent of inter-disciplinary approaches, the performance of the entire school as a system depends increasingly on how the departments fit into a bigger picture, not just on how they perform separately. In pursuing school excellence, school leaders must not only know how to break up problems. They must also approach these problems in a systemic or integrative manner. The SEM embodies this philosophy by providing a systemic

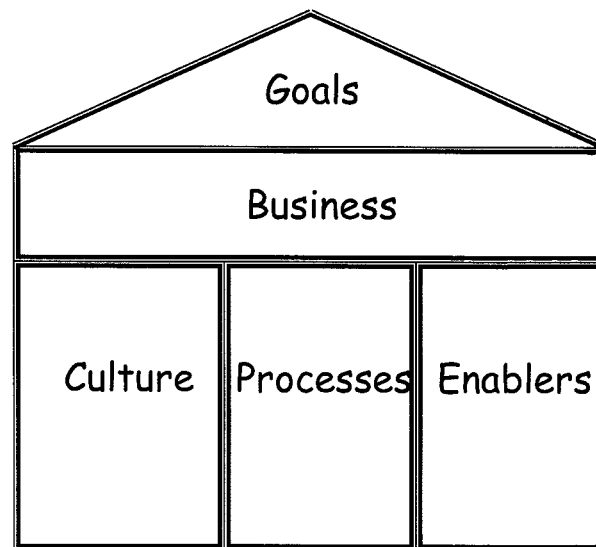


Figure 2. The Organisational Change Model.

framework to enable schools to examine their practices not discretely, but as parts contributing to a whole.

A successful school leader thus requires a deep understanding of the interdependent nature of school functions, and an appreciation of the interrelated impact of school programmes. All parts of the school must be aligned with the effort for school excellence.

School excellence, in the context of the SEM, can be thought of as a state of the school in which its goals, programmes, culture, processes, and resources are coherently, and seamlessly integrated together in a robust and yet lean architecture, to produce superb education results. In this light, school leaders could refer to the Organisational Change Model (Ng, 2001 – refer to Figure 2) and ask themselves some fundamental questions before embarking on the journey towards school excellence:

- (a) Goals: are the goals of the school still valid? Do they need to be redefined? Are they clearly articulated and shared by all members of the school?
- (b) Business: are the programmes supporting the goals? Or are the education programmes a relic of the past era?
- (c) Culture: is the culture conducive to bring about success in the new education paradigm? Is there open-ness for learning to take place?
- (d) Processes: are the education processes streamlined to bring about learning in the most direct way?
- (e) Enablers: are the resources of the school utilised effectively and efficiently to supporting the programmes?
- (f) Systematic approach: are the culture, processes and resources of the school

integrated seamlessly and coherently to support the education programmes?

While the questions are understandably non-exhaustive, it is good to think through such questions first and have a preliminary feel of the pulse of the school. This allows the school leaders to understand the gap between current reality and the envisaged future state. If a large-scale change takes place without asking the right questions in the beginning, half the battle has been lost.

In being systemic, one very important consideration is to look beyond the symptoms to find the root causes of the problems. The SEM may help to identify broad areas for improvement. But in addressing the problems, the root causes may be related to the culture of the school, the work processes or the working tools. It is important that school leaders do not introduce ‘aspirins’ to tackle the symptoms. Instead, they should be thorough and probe the fundamental reasons of why things are not working the way that they should. Finding the solution to these root causes alleviates a whole lot of related symptoms. This is systems thinking (Senge, 1990; Senge et al, 2000) in action.

Consider some schools that would like to promote a sense of teamwork among departments. Team-building days are held and teachers are bundled to some off-shore islands to build relationships through fun and games. But nothing changes when the teachers return to their workplace because fundamentally, the work of the school is departmentally divided. A team is not the fundamental working unit. Team teaching is not the mode of delivery of curriculum. No numbers of team-building days are going to strengthen teamwork unless the way that the school works is fundamentally changed. When a school requires its teachers to change, either in their thinking or their behaviour, but fail to redesign the systems and structures around them, the new behaviour goes unsupported and un-rewarded, and the old behaviours creep back, in the midst of heightened cynicism. These activities provide evidence to assessors that team building has taken place, but in reality no real change has happened.

Therefore, in using the SEM, it is particularly important for the school to assess itself as a whole, before areas for action are prioritised. However, the many areas covered in the SEM means that there can be many areas of improvement in the school. There is a danger that the school may end up trying to do too much at one time to address the areas for improvement. That is why systems thinking is so important to find the highest leverage points to take action to achieve holistic improvement. Also, change management is important to ensure that the path of change is smooth. It may be wise to identify high leverage points for change, devise an overall strategy for change, attain small albeit complete successes first before embarking on other projects. In order that the SEM may bear significant fruits in school improvement, school leaders need to be good systems thinkers.

The School Leaders Must Lead the Way

There is a difference between leadership and management. Leadership is about steering the ship forward. Management is about keeping the ship afloat. A good balance of both is necessary. The problem is that many schools appear to be over-managed and under-led. The SEM appears to be a management framework. But school excellence is not merely about keeping the ship afloat. It takes great leadership to chart the direction to achieve school excellence.

School excellence is a systemic and systematic pursuit. Leadership is critical to steer the entire school forward to a new state. The Principal, Vice-principal and Heads of Department (HODs) should work together as a team with a common purpose and not a committee with diverse vested interests. Only a united and committed school leadership team has the clout and power to make things happen. The school leadership team can affect the culture by their words and deeds, and put in place the necessary platform to sustain change. If school excellence is to happen, the school leadership team must be the first believing and practising member of the new construct called the excellent school. Only then will staff members of the school believe in the call and be galvanised into action. If there is incongruence of word and deed, cynicism will set in and teachers will believe that school excellence is yet another fad, an exercise to satisfy the SEM or to pursue awards.

The challenges in developing school excellence are so demanding that the need for high quality and committed leaders becomes paramount. Such school leaders must demonstrate an accurate understanding and appropriate interpretation of the national agenda, keep all key groups within the school informed and motivated, and develop good external relationships with external stakeholders. In this respect, the SEM assigns ten per cent of its weighting to leadership. Schools should demonstrate that they are applying the principles of the SEM to the following four sub-criteria, in terms of how leaders (Ministry of Education, 2000):

- develop the school vision and set focus and direction
- ensure that the school's management system is developed, implemented and continuously improved;
- communicate school values to staff, students and other stakeholders;
- role-model commitment to excellence in their day-to-day activities.

The SEM stresses the importance of getting staff involved in school improvement. School leaders are encouraged to conduct dialogue sessions and establish so-called feedback mechanisms. Teachers are encouraged to give ideas and participate in work groups. While some may think that the role of leadership appears to have diminished in this new paradigm, in actuality, greater leadership is required than ever before. In a sea of voices and opinions generated from a more participative management style, it will take great leadership to find the best strategy, explain and convince the people, urge the people forward, manage transition, stay focused and get results.

Areas to Address in the Implementation of the SEM

The SEM is still in its infancy within the education system. There are still teething issues to be addressed and refinements to be made, both in policy and in practice.

One acute issue is about school leadership. The policy is already in force, but are school leaders prepared for such a role in practice? Many school leaders have to transit very quickly from a paradigm of receiving 'orders' from headquarters to one of self-appraisal and improvement. Some may adapt quickly enough but others may struggle in the transit. Moreover, the profitable usage of a quality framework requires a skill that is not often found even in the industrial and commercial sector. School leaders now have to be systems thinkers, champions of change and leaders of men. Are school leaders adequately trained in the art and prepared in the heart for a perilous journey in school excellence?

Another issue is the measurement of the desired outcomes of education. At present, many of the assessed criteria in the SEM do not have established measures, for example, student morale. It will take a few years before valid and reliable measures are found for all the criteria. It will take another few years before any trends in the collected data can be deemed very meaningful. At the moment, schools use measures that they deem 'reasonable'. But, the validity and reliability of these measures have not been proven. However, it is hopeful that the introduction of the SEM will drive the development of educational processes and its associated measures.

Another issue is that while the SEM provides a framework to approach school excellence systematically, it is possible to score reasonably high on the SEM by 'distributing the work' so that each unit of a school takes a portion of the SEM and tries to undertake projects to score high on the individual category. However, the problem is that while the SEM allows reasonably high score based on evidence in each category, there is no guarantee that the initiatives add up and synergise in a coherent whole. The SEM should emphasise more acutely the need for a systemic approach in its scoring system.

Another area for possible refinement is that while the SEM is a good diagnostic system for self-appraisal and identifying areas for improvement, it itself does not come with a remedy system. But without the appropriate remedy action, the search for areas for improvement is but an academic exercise and the SEM self-assessment process may lose momentum. Therefore, more importantly, the role of SEM should be firmly been located in the strategic planning, programme implementation and performance monitoring of the school. In this respect, the SEM could be coupled with an appropriate quality improvement action framework. It is critically important to integrate self-assessment with action planning and implementation, followed by effective review. Without this tight cycle, momentum may be lost and the translation of self-assessment outputs into continuous improvement is not likely to be effective.

How schools can integrate the SEM into its everyday business and use the SEM profitably is an area of concern. While one of the major strengths of the SEM is that many of the initiatives schools may current undertake, such as the People Developer Standard (PDS) (a quality initiative in human resource development in Singapore) and ISO 9000, can be incorporated within its framework, there is a danger that some school leaders and staff may view the SEM as an add-on initiative. Instead of getting everyone in the school involved in a school excellence journey, certain members of the school are tasked to tackle the requirements of the SEM. But if schools in Singapore are to see school excellence at the heart of school development and quality education, the SEM cannot be seen as yet another project.

However, it is almost certainly true that this new appraisal system will add on to the workload of the schools. There will be a lot of work needed in the beginning phase of implementation to lay the platforms for the SEM. Schools will be required to get their information management up to standard fairly quickly to do self-appraisal sensibly and meaningfully. Many schools will have to implement the SEM in the midst of developing richer education programmes. Schools will have to take care not to allow the implementation of the SEM to distract the teachers from their fundamental business of teaching.

There is also a danger that after identifying a long list of areas for improvement, schools will embark on improving on all the aspects, biting off more than they can chew. Also, driven by a desire to improve SEM scores, school leaders may also be blinded by one other very important aspect of the SEM. Instead of always concentrating on weaknesses and addressing them, school leaders should also tap on the strengths identified through the self-appraisal process to innovate, bringing the school to a new level of excellence. But the emphasis on weaknesses sometimes blind leaders to strengths and their profitable utilisation.

Many schools are keen to achieve the awards that come with the SEM. But they should also learn from the history of such awards. The advent of quality and subsequently excellence awards in the 1990s, for example the European Quality Award and the Baldrige Award, gave impetus to many organisational excellence projects. Organisations that achieved a certain score were deemed excellent. But the failure of many of these organisations to maintain their positions showed that achieving the awards did not guarantee sustained 'excellence' and therefore awards should not be the end outcomes in the minds of senior executives.

Therefore, before we hail the SEM as the definitive step forward in the quality journey of a school, we should consider whether the application of excellence models is really suitable for an education context. For many years, the world of education has been unsullied by influences from the business and management world. With the recent influx of business models, certain school leaders may question whether the use of an excellence model is appropriate and whether it can really deliver on its promise.

For example, is it appropriate for a school to aim for excellence against all the SEM criteria? Can a school be an excellent school without collecting evidence of

its excellence? Can a school be an excellent school, just simply known for its caring teachers and values inculcation? Certain school leaders may feel that the SEM and its requirement to collect evidences is just a hindrance because the school has been doing all the right things except that it has not been keen on codifying everything and producing evidences. The need to work to the requirements of the model may actually distract the school from the primary purpose of education.

For another example, can a poorly performing school indeed turn itself around using the SEM? Is the lofty goal of seeking improvement in the nine criteria too intimidating to the schools seeking improvement? Can a school really inspire its staff and students by aiming for excellence according to the SEM criteria? Could it be de-motivating rather than inspiring for the teachers? Would a 'back to basics' message have been easier to motivate the struggling teachers to go back to their first love of the students and teaching and seek improvement from there? These are worthy questions for educators to reflect upon.

It could also be argued that the SEM could not take into account the softer and finer aspects of education that is embedded in human relationships rather than in systems and processes. It is difficult to fully quantify or capture evidence of the love, care and role modelling of teachers in their everyday lives. But it is in this softer and rather tacit aspect that lies the noblest and most precious of education. Therefore, there are cultural issues unique to the education field that has to be addressed in adapting business models to the management of schools.

One good point of the SEM is that it forces the pace of stakeholder involvement in the school, which is a key thrust identified by the headquarters for the schools. Because of the requirement within the SEM, schools are forced to consider how the various stakeholders can be meaningfully and profitably involved in school, something that is important but not particularly urgent in the context of a Singapore school. Many schools have come a long way without significant synergistic interactions with its stakeholders. Although a wealth of advantages can be reaped through stakeholder involvement, there is little urgency to make that happen. Therefore, the SEM has the potential to focus the attention of school leaders on the key thrusts in the education system.

Conclusion

It will take a few years before one could tell whether the SEM has worked as envisaged. What will be profitable is to have a longitudinal research to examine the impact of the SEM on school practices and culture in Singapore. The information generated through the research will provide both policy makers and researchers a better understanding of how a quality framework coupled with self-assessment can lead to changes in the school system.

In any change, it is usually easier to change the structures and systems than to change the culture. It is hopeful that the SEM as a platform will influence culture.

Pursuing school excellence is still primarily a school affair. The school leadership team must be the first believing and practising member of the excellent school. The party driving the change must be willing to change first. Otherwise, school excellence is just lip service, however well the scores in the SEM turn out to be. The platforms will be laid. The systems will be installed. Awards and trophies will be placed on the table. The letter of the law is satisfied. But the spirit of school excellence is absent.

References

- Crosby, P. (1980). *Quality Is Free: The Art of Making Quality Certain*. New York: Mentor Books Penguin.
- Koch, J. & Cebula, R. (1994). In search of excellent management. *Journal of Management Studies*, 31 (5), 681–700.
- Ministry of Education (2000). *The School Excellence Model: A Guide*. Singapore: The School Appraisal Branch, Schools Division, Ministry of Education.
- Ng, P. T. (2001). Five pointers to organisational excellence. *Marketing Insights*, Jul–Sep 2001 Issue, pp. 11–12.
- Peters, T. & Waterman, R. (1982). *In Search of Excellence*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Porter, L. J. & Tanner, S. J. (1996). *Assessing Business Excellence: A Guide to Self-assessment*. Oxford: Butter-worth-Heinemann.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation*. New York: Currency Doubleday.
- Senge, P., Cambron-McCabe, N., Lucas, T., Smith, B., Dutton, J. & Kleiner, A. (2000). *Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents and Everyone who cares about Education*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Wee, H. T. (1998). *The Desired Outcomes of Education*. Singapore: Ministry of Education.