

## Towards a Quality Education

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Concern about the quality of education has been expressed by philosophers, politicians, parents and educators for centuries. The concern stems from how individuals perceive the role and nature of education in society and it is a concern that will doubtless continue to exist. Over the past decade, there has been a resurgence of interest on how to improve the content of specific subjects, particularly language learning, science and mathematics. Many countries have revised syllabi in these subjects in order to improve student performance. This focus on content has been very successful in those countries where the attainment of knowledge is regarded as the most important ingredient of a quality education. And to ensure that the quality is maintained, a standard of performance by students is measured by regular testing and the use of standardized benchmarks. Singapore has led the field in providing a focus on content. International research by Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) a leading global international science and mathematics study, has placed Singapore as a leader in demonstrating that curriculum content is a powerful and important factor in ensuring strong student performance.

A powerful comprehension of subject matter, by itself, however, does not provide a quality education. Many educators have emphasized that trans- and interdisciplinary skills must be used for a core curriculum in the 21st century. These skills cut across subject boundaries and allow integrated learning that can be applied in a wide variety of settings. This new learning framework emphasizes skills such as :

- Problem framing and solving
- Communication and the development of interpersonal relationships
- Teaming, and
- Independent and life-long learning.

In his new book, *Five Minds for the Future*, Harvard professor Howard Gardner describes the need to develop five kinds of minds or ways of thinking and acting that must be offered to students today. Three are related to the intellect: the disciplined, synthesizing and creative minds; two emphasize character: the respectful and ethical minds. He argues very persuasively that the tools of knowledge from one discipline are not sufficient any longer to answer the questions of an increasingly globalized world. What is needed is interdisciplinary expertise and teams working on common goals to come up with solutions that are creative and wise. A quality education must foster intellectual development and students must be able to distinguish what is relevant and meaningful from the mass of available information. Type the word "education" into Google, for example, and you will receive 603,000,000 responses! The human mind is not pre-wired to cope with such a vast amount of information and so

schools must assist students to discover ways of sorting useful information from the non-useful. As students mature, they will need to synthesize this knowledge so that they can make sense of what they have learned. Thinking outside the box (if there is a box) means that schools must give students opportunities to take a risk and to take chances to think differently and in non-orthodox ways. Remember, five hundred years ago the conventional wisdom was that the world was flat and that Earth was the center of the Universe! It took courage and a creative mind to challenge the existing orthodoxy. Creative people take chances. Schools must also encourage real respect for cultural differences and demand that students reflect on the quality of their work.

Introducing students to both subject matter and new skill directions is the essence of the learning approach adopted by our school as we use the pedagogical framework of the International Baccalaureate. Students must cross disciplinary boundaries because emphasizing content without corresponding attention to pedagogy is downright dangerous. When students are tested about isolated facts or procedures, they do not connect their knowledge to what they encounter in the outside world. Students then begin to fear those tests and classroom experiences which rely on rote-learning and as a result they can become unhappy and frustrated with school. Enhancing the learning environment means blending concept, fact, knowledge and application. How can this be done? The key characteristics are:

- A focus on effort and positive attitudes to learning
- The use of new tools and approaches to learning and teaching
- Adopting accelerated learning strategies for those who need to "catch up" or for those who should advance at a quicker pace
- Improving the quality of assessment and feedback to students and parents
- Shared knowledge about best practice
- Energetic and sustained leadership by all

A key role of the school is to ensure balance in all areas and that in this era of international educational reform we use our experience as educators to ensure that students receive an education that will effectively prepare them for the next stage of their learning and give them the skills and the knowledge to make them confident to tackle the unknown challenges of the 21st century.