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BUILDING COMMUNITIES



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Editorial

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President's Message

I am delighted to write my first message for 'The Principia'. As one of the aims of our Academy is to build fraternity, writing this message is easy as the sense of who our community is has already been established over the years. 'The Principia' is in its 11th year of publication and through the years, it has captured the many facets of the principals' fraternity in Singapore.

With this issue, we want to take a step further and see the community not just within our gates but beyond. Rashidah Abdul Rasip echoes the partnerships several principals have built with various charitable homes, and Charis Wong shares the community she has built with the parents of her students.

You will also read about how Ling Khoo Chow affirms his older students by letting them exercise their ownership of the community outside the school gates. Similarly, you will enjoy hearing how Foong Lai Leong has used design-thinking to bring practical wisdom as her students engage with different Voluntary Welfare Organisations.

Community is not just within our walls. I hope that this issue will give you a glimpse of what lies beyond our boundaries. Even as we cherish the bonds we have within our own fraternity, let us also celebrate the new ones that we make. Let us enlarge our tents and extend our reach so that we can make a difference not just to one another, but to all around us. ■

Shirleen Chee

President, Academy of
Principals (Singapore)





**RASHIDAH
ABDUL RASIP**

Principal, Hougang Primary School

“ **Leadership** to me
is about **servicing people** ”

Why it really takes a village to raise a child

With the aura of a matriarch, Rashidah Abdul Rasip patrols the corridors of Hougang Primary School, hands clasped behind her back as she surveys the surroundings. She sees a student with his shirt tucked out and instructs him to tuck it in. Without hesitation, the edges of his shirt disappear into his pants – faster than you can say ‘Hougang’ – before he scurries away.

The Principal is on one of her daily walks around the school. “I try to do these walks twice a day – early in the morning and in the later part of the day”, she explains. “It’s for me to know the good work of my teachers and see students participating in class. Sometimes when you see the students misbehaving, you get a chance to make that a teachable moment. I don’t teach in class now, so these moments are important for me, because I really want to have this connection with them.”

Take a quick glance at Rashidah and you might think twice about being up to any mischief. Her sharp gaze can scare you straight, and that booming voice of hers reverberates down the school’s corridors, loud enough to wake sleeping students in class. But it is a mistake to simply conclude that the 58-year-old is fierce, for beneath that seemingly hard exterior is a soft core. You would need one if you were serving two community organisations, on top of being Principal to about 1,400 children.

Rashidah is on the board of the Singapore’s Children Society and also volunteers with the North West Community Development Council (CDC). The veteran educator was

formerly chief executive officer of the Malay-Muslim self-help group, Mendaki, too. “Leadership to me is about servicing people – that is my philosophy. Serving is innate in me. I feel good when I’m being able to serve,” she shares, explaining how she views her twin roles in education and community.

ACCIDENTAL TEACHER, FULL-TIME VOLUNTEER

She has been serving the community for almost half her life, beginning at the age of 22, when she started giving group tuition at a Residents’ Committee’s (RC) centre in Bedok. The RC members invited her to join the committee, where she stayed for a decade, serving as a treasurer as well as emcee for events. “I was hooked. It was really fun to see people of different walks of life and races coming together. The RC was like one big family where they treated me as their daughter,” she recalls.

At the same time, she was also considering a career path. She then had her sights on working at the airport, but her father stopped her from doing so because of the shift work. “He said ‘No. Be a teacher instead,’” she says. So Rashidah followed his wishes, by becoming a relief teacher at the now defunct Woodsville Secondary School in 1982, teaching English and Literature for two terms. “I guess I did a good job because I was given a Secondary 4 class, and they asked me to come back again. So I got stuck. I was an accidental teacher!” she exclaims with a chuckle.

Despite that, she flourished as an educator. In 1996, she became Vice Principal of Xinghua Primary School, before leading Huamin Primary School just a year later, which was a

challenging experience. “I became a Principal without having gone through any leadership programme. It was like being thrown into the deep end of the pool. Luckily, I could swim,” she adds candidly. “Being a Principal is not a job that you apply for. All of us joined wanting to be teachers. It was very much about learning on the job.”

Her new job as a Principal did not see her cutting back on her volunteer work. When she was heading Westview Primary School in 2007, the mayor of North West CDC invited her to serve as a District Counsellor, a role which saw her helping out in publications and environment committees full time for six years. Besides vetting Malay translations for the CDC’s newsletter, she also got Westview Primary involved in green activities such as recycling and water conservation efforts. These days, she still helps out occasionally as a resource person for the CDC.

CONNECTING COMMUNITY AND SCHOOLS

But it was a complete break from her career as an educator that allowed her to appreciate the symbiotic relationship between community work and schools. In 2005, she became the first female CEO of Mendaki – a job that she describes as a “life changing experience”. “It was a really steep learning curve,” she recounts. “Many offshoot Muslim organisations were looking at us and seeing whether we were going to help them or not. I had to put myself in many people’s shoes.”

As it was also uncommon for women to play a leading role in the Malay-Muslim community, she had to learn to deal with other organisations, which were mostly led

“I wanted to save the children that came through my hands. Because behind the children might be a sad story, and they’ve overcome that to come to school. Now that they’re in school, what can I do to help them?”

by men. This is where her steely exterior might have worked in her favour. “Interacting with men who have already been in their positions for many years led to me changing my perspectives on a lot of things,” she shares. “You had to feed their ego and make them still feel important and respected. It took a lot of people skills to do that – you had to eat a lot of humble pie.”

But what impacted her most was Mendaki’s work with destitute families, to the point that it changed her outlook as an educator. “I used to think, what were the parents thinking, not sending their kids to school?” she says. “But at Mendaki, you see some of these families who are homeless, sleeping in tents along the beach. They asked me, ‘if you were in my position, what will your priority be? To put food on the table, or send your kids to school?’ It was a very sobering thought.”

At this moment, her veneer of composure cracks a little, her eyes turning wet. “Pardon me. I get quite emotional whenever I think about these things,” she says, wiping away a tear. The Mendaki stint nurtured greater empathy in her, leading to a more mature leader today, one who pauses and considers, before taking action. “I’m not as quick to dismiss a parent as not caring and not placing an importance on education as before,” she notes.

It also made her more aware that schools were more than just institutions for education. They too have a role to play to help the children and their families, such as forming partnerships with community organisations to provide financial aid for needy families. “If I want these students to come to school, I need to partner these community organisations to help these families, so that they can send their children to school,” she says.

As Principal, she forged that partnership through her work with community organisations. She recalls the Singapore Children’s Society once asking her to transfer two brothers, who were residents of a home, to her school. One of them had special needs and was prone to violent meltdowns. Yet, she accepted both siblings, and the school worked very closely with caregivers to ensure that his learning needs were met. “Schools are really part of this ecosystem. We cannot exist on our own, just wanting the children to attend school without the help of other organisations if needed,” she stresses. “There’s a saying – it takes a village to raise a child.”

EVERY CHILD IS DIFFERENT, NOT DIFFICULT

This sharpened awareness of the education system drew her back to school after her stint at Mendaki, a place which she still felt most at home. “I missed the environment of school, what I thought I



Impacting communities: Rashidah was the first female CEO of Mendaki.

Learning from books: Rashidah draws inspiration from books and shares them with students and staff.



could do best – developing people, be it students or teachers. In developing people, it’s also about serving and leading them,” she notes.

She has a renewed resolve to help every child that passes through her school gates. “I wanted to save the children that came through my hands. Because behind the children might be a sad story, and they’ve overcome that to come to school. Now that they’re in school, what can I do to help them?” she adds.

Her approach was a simple one – to believe in the fundamental goodness of people. “To me, every child is different, not difficult. Once you label a child as difficult, then he will never be easy for you.” For instance, when she first came to Hougang Primary in 2015, she was introduced to a Primary 5 boy who had a bad habit of stealing since his first year in school. Despite countless punishments and counselling sessions, nothing worked.

Then one day, a school staff tried an unorthodox method of baiting him with an unattended wallet. To their surprise, the student returned the item. “The child was saying he felt good returning it. Eventually, he was the student

who was taking others to the office when they found something,” says Rashidah. “It took six years for the school community to change this boy. If we had viewed this child as simply being difficult, we might have given up on him. Every child is different. So their needs are different. You cater to their needs accordingly.”

Likewise, for her teachers, she firmly believes that they all have their students’ best interests at heart. “When I look at my teachers, I think they definitely want to improve the lives of the students they’re in charge of. I believe they want to become better in their craft and be outstanding teachers,” she says.

To engage her teachers and students, a wide spectrum that spans educators nearing retirement to children who are only seven, she relies on a vast array of tools. This is where books come in handy. For instance, ‘Leaders Eat Last’ by Simon Sinek, which deals with engaging millennials, is one of her favourite reads. “As a leader, you really need to be aware of the various characteristics of each generation, and therefore when you put them together as a team, you understand the dynamics that can help them grow,” she notes.

She also uses books and movie excerpts to discuss related topics with her key personnel. Her team has just finished a book, ‘The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader’ by John C. Maxwell. “When we come together, we would have discussions about the designated chapter. If one of the chapters is on courage, we will share our own stories of experiencing courage. This is how we develop and grow our people,” she says.

“Whatever it may be, you feel that you’ve spent your time trying to contribute. As a leader, you have to do your job well to make a difference in the lives of the people you lead.”

A BALANCING ACT

Saddled with so many responsibilities as a Principal, it is hard to imagine Rashidah having heavy commitments outside of school. But she seemingly has an energy that could match her millennial peers. Her Principal duties and community obligations may sometimes result in 14-hour workdays. She reaches school by 7am. Then it’s a bevy of activities, whether it is making her walks around school, or being in meetings with parents or teachers.

When school ends, her Vice Principals and her make it a point to be at the gates to send the students off. “Some people are surprised that I know so many students by their names. It’s because I try to connect and talk to them often,” she shares.

Evenings might see her having meetings with North West CDC or with the Children’s Society. Her days sometimes end at 9pm. By 10.30pm, she’s in bed, getting ready for the next day. “An hour to myself is more than enough for me. I find a lot of fulfilment in occupying my time meaningfully. I can’t find myself just idling away,” she adds.

For some, juggling so many things at once might feel like an onslaught. But not for Rashidah who is unfazed. She considers her outside commitments to be “therapeutic”. “I’m

away from the humdrum of school, and it helps me change focus. It’s a different kind of satisfaction,” she says. “The job of a Principal can be tiring and complex – doing this work rejuvenates you.”

SERVING NEVER STOPS

Despite being a few years away from stepping down as Principal, Rashidah does not plan to retire from contributing to the community. “I feel that if I sit down and not do anything...,” she trails off, with a shake of her head. For her, serving is something inherent. It simply does not stop. After retiring, she plans to apply her expertise with youth on another platform – this time by helping youths at risk of being radicalised by wayward ideologies, and working on the educational aspect of rehabilitation.

With over 30 years of experience serving both school and community, she is held in high esteem by her peers. Perhaps it is best exemplified by a recent letter that a retiring colleague from the Singapore Children’s Society wrote her: “You always open the school door to accept our children whenever we had school transfers during those years, even though some of them displayed challenging behaviours. Your kindness, warm acceptance and collaborative efforts to support the children are greatly appreciated.”

It is a legacy that has left her feeling humbled. “Whatever it may be, you feel that you’ve spent your time trying to contribute. As a leader, you have to do your job well to make a difference in the lives of the people you lead,” says the accidental teacher, who went on to become an intentional leader. ■





CHARIS WONG

Principal, Telok Kurau Primary School

“ *I believe
everyone
can learn* ”

Excelling against the odds

Ask Mrs Charis Wong about her beginnings as Principal at Telok Kurau Primary and she replies without hesitation: “Traumatising!” Her first assembly talk nearly turned into a calamitous event. “I posed a question and asked who wanted to come up and give an answer. The next thing I knew there was a whole gang of children running towards the stage. I was so scared there would be a stampede,” she recounts, her eyes widening in horror.

For Charis, her first week at Telok Kurau Primary was filled with plenty of new experiences. Having previously only taught at secondary schools where students are a little more aloof, it was the first time she had 1,200 exuberant primary school pupils under her charge. But that was not all. When the first-time Principal went to the canteen during recess time, she was swarmed by hordes of children wanting to get to know her better.



"After recess, I went back to my room and found it difficult to step out of my room for the rest of the day. The first weekend, I sat on the sofa and told my husband that I was too tired to move," she shares candidly of her temporary crowd phobia. "I'll just say that if you want to feel like a superstar, just walk out during recess in a primary school."

It might have been a rude introduction to life in primary school, but today, Charis looks completely at ease mingling with the children, greeting each pupil with a 'Hello dear'. She is no longer perturbed when they crowd around her in the canteen, patiently engaging each child who talks to her. From a wide-eyed rookie who was overwhelmed by enthusiastic kids, she has become a resolute leader, now in her fifth year as Principal.

LEARNING FROM FAILURE AND A SALES JOB

Charis was never a stellar student. She retook her A-Levels as her grades did not make the cut for the university course she wanted. And when she finally got in, she describes herself as just an average undergraduate.

"I don't even have an honours degree," she reveals. Instead, it was experiences in her Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs) in school and later, part-time jobs that gave her the necessary skills to excel at the workplace. Her first lesson was learnt during her CCA, the National Cadet Corps. "My seniors always said, 'If you want to do it, it must be your best. If not, don't bother doing it.' That attitude has stayed with me ever since – if something is worth doing, you must give it your best, or don't bother," she recalls.

Another lesson was picked before entering university when she worked at tuition centres, handled paperwork at a second-hand car dealer shop, and sold products like language learning subscription programmes. "Sales in particular taught me a lot," she notes, referring to the powers of persuasion that she learnt. When you sell something, you must make a compelling case for why the customer needs to buy your product, and that was an important skill that I picked up which is critical to school leadership – you always have to persuade people to buy into your idea."

"For parents who don't take their children's schooling seriously, or if their children are not coming regularly, we relentlessly go after them."

She carried these lessons with her when she became an educator. When she first started out as a teacher at Anglican High School in 1998, she had to teach History and English – subjects outside her university training. "I remember sitting at my desk and tearing because the first time I taught Upper Secondary history was the first time I read about

Russian history. I was only literally a few steps ahead of my students," she recalls, adding that she was up most nights to read up on the text as well as references.

After five years at MOE HQ CCA Branch and a year-long no-pay spousal leave in China, she made the move to Xinmin Secondary School as Vice Principal in 2009, where

she had to work with students in different streams for the first time. Her job became more complex – she now had to handle a wider range of subjects and address the different abilities and profiles of these students. "I remember I had a stand-off with a boy who refused to hand over his handphone when I told him to. It was quite an experience for me because when I was a teacher, my ex-students were quite obedient," she shares.

That episode was an eye-opener for Charis. "We just stood there and no one was going to give way. I was thinking in my head – what do I do next if he really refuses. Thankfully, he relented in the end and after that incident, we were actually on pretty good terms," she says.

After finishing her 'Leaders in Education' programme, it was yet another period of adjustment when she was posted to Telok Kurau Primary in 2013. As opposed to her peers who were gradually eased into the role of Principal by spending a few months as Vice Principal, she had to take over immediately as her predecessor had left the school earlier for further studies. That was in September. "I was not familiar in primary school. I don't have children, so I asked silly questions like 'is PSLE over?'" she says with a laugh, referring to the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE).

EVERY CHILD MUST HAVE ACCESS TO EDUCATION

At Telok Kurau Primary, a school that is reputed for nurturing character development in students, Charis also pays close attention to absenteeism. "For parents who don't take their children's schooling seriously, or if their children are not coming regularly, we relentlessly go after them," she says.

No longer afraid: Charis is now at ease when being surrounded by her students.

She shares a story of five siblings who were beyond parental control in 2016, and had been skipping school on a regular basis. The school made a concerted effort to try to get them all to come back, something that she describes as an “uphill task”. “There was a group of teachers who would constantly go to the home and talk to the parents and children. Two of my colleagues would even go there every morning at 6.30am to wake the children up and make sure they would come to school,” she adds.

Although it was a tremendous amount of effort, it paid off in the long run. One of the siblings, who had skipped the whole of Primary 5, eventually topped her subject combination during the PSLE. “It was really a turnaround. So every time I think that something is taking too long and too much effort, I remember this girl,” she says.

She also believes that every child must have a right to a quality education, regardless of his or her circumstances. As such, Telok Kurau Primary sees a diverse mix of students from all backgrounds. They range from children from well-to-do families, to those from homes and orphanages.

“This school has the motto – ‘A Caring School that Strives for Excellence’. Care is very much a priority here,” she says, elaborating how the school makes it a point to take in children from very challenging backgrounds. “When social workers need to place a child in school, we always accept them if we have vacancies. Every child must have access to education,” she explains.

For underprivileged students, there is a team of about five teachers who support each child. Last year, Charis had about 10 support groups. The school places these children under student care services and provides the necessary financial assistance. She also makes sure that every student is treated equally, regardless of background. For instance, there are no birthday celebrations in school. “We don’t allow parents to come and celebrate birthdays. I wanted to make sure that the children from the low-income families don’t feel that disparity,” she notes.



This dedication to nurture each individual student was born out of yet another life experience – when her family was struggling to pay Charis’ school fees, her Principal had stepped in to provide assistance. She now pays it forward. “Because of that, I feel a sense of duty to help every child,” she shares. “Who knows, among these children that we help to stay in school, that one child might be the next Principal or teacher who will in turn help others because of what he or she has received.”

THE VITAL ROLE OF THE PARENT COMMUNITY

It is not only the teachers, but also the parent community that also plays an important role at Telok Kurau Primary, functioning as another support channel for the students. “The parents support group is very involved in providing support for our pupils’ holistic development – they provide support to the different departments and also initiate their own activities and programmes,” says Charis.

For instance, the group is assigned to man the Games Room during recess, where there are board games and iPads for pupils to use during their break. They are actively involved with the students’ learning as well, with some members who have teaching experience conducting weekly math remedial workshops for Primary 1 and 2 students who require extra support in the subject.

For these supportive parents, she introduced the ‘Exemplary Caregiver’ award to recognise them, or even relatives of the students, who have worked closely with the teachers to nurture the children or who have been excellent caregivers to their children and charges. This is given out at the school’s annual Prize Giving Day.

The school also encourages students to show their gratitude to their own parents by writing notes of appreciation, which are presented to parents during the Parent-Pupil-Teacher Conference. “Many parents were touched by this kind gesture and have expressed that they were moved by what their children have written for them,” she adds.

RISING TO THE OCCASION

With over 90 years of history, Telok Kurau Primary is best known for being the alma mater of the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew. When Singapore’s founding Prime Minister passed away in 2015, the school was cast in the spotlight. As Principal, Charis was there to face the media storm.

Building character: Team sports are a means of developing values in students.

Bonding time: Charis enjoys spending time with her students.



She was woken up by a call from HQ in the early morning relaying the news, advising her to be prepared for the media. It was non-stop action – three days of media visits left her in a daze. “I can’t remember what they asked me. It was very stressful. I remember I was having such a headache from the camera flashes and interviews. I’ve never had to deal with the media on such a large scale,” she recounts.

During this time, the school community rallied under her leadership. The school had a dedication room where a signed portrait of the late Mr Lee was placed. Students and alumni could go in to pen their tributes on pieces of heart-shaped paper that were hung in the room. The school also came up with a book for staff, students and alumni to write their thoughts. It was also an emotionally draining period for Charis, as she was also personally affected by Mr Lee’s passing.

MAKING THE DIFFICULT DECISIONS

Being a leader also means having to make difficult decisions. On that, the straight-talking Principal is not afraid to say it as it is. When she feels that her staff are not up to the task, she has no qualms letting them go – more a private sector than public sector practice. “It’s not because they’re not good, but just that they may not be suited to teaching,” she reasons. “You must be brave enough to tell them: ‘Look, this may not be the job that you’re most suited for. You may flourish somewhere else.’”

Does she feel bad when she has to make such decisions? “You don’t feel good telling someone to leave, but you have to think of the students that are passing through his or her hands,” she explains. “I also believe that the staff member can be happier somewhere else. It is for the good of everyone.”

She remembers informing a poorly performing staff that she should consider leaving the service. Charis offered the staff two options – go on the performance management process or choose

to leave the service. The staff chose to quit, but still maintains contact with her former boss – a sign that she does not begrudge the decision. “Once in a while, she’ll send me photos of her children and updates about herself – she’s happy now being a stay-home mom,” shares Charis.

That her former staff continues to keep in touch is also a reflection of her understanding personality. “We must recognise that teachers have other responsibilities besides teaching. They’re also children, parents, and spouses,” she adds. This, she learnt from a former boss. “I remember my boss once said: ‘Even if that staff member may be a D-grader for that year, we must remember that he may be the best father, or the best son in the world – it’s just for that particular year, he might not do that well at work. That doesn’t mean that he is a bad person,’” she says.

With that in mind, she is conscious of helping her staff maintain a good work life balance. So there is a rule at Telok Kurau Primary – nobody should message each

other after working hours on weekdays and on weekends, unless it is extremely urgent. “I believe that if teachers have the space to look after their other responsibilities and their personal life, they’ll be more effective when they’re here,” she maintains.

ALWAYS LEARNING ON THE JOB

Charis has come a long way since being swamped by a bunch of primary school children at morning assembly. But she still takes life each day at a time as Principal, ready to meet the next challenge whenever it comes.

“I believe that everyone can learn. When I first came here, I shamelessly said that in seven years, I’ll be a better Principal than today,” she says. “We just need to keep learning. I think one thing I’ve learnt is to laugh at myself for the mistakes I’ve made, and to tell myself, ‘just learn and move on.’” She has certainly gotten over her *gaffe* of asking students to answer questions during assembly. ■

“I believe that if teachers have the space to look after their other responsibilities and their personal life, they’ll be more effective when they’re here.”

LING KHOON CHOW

Principal, Beatty Secondary School



“**The power of change starts with you**”

Transforming the world, one student at a time

The first thing you notice about Ling Khoon Chow is his trademark Cheshire smile that curls up the corner of his lips every now and then – especially when the conversation is close to his heart. Sharing his life motto, he says with that grin: “I think life’s too short for you to do things that don’t excite you. You need to have that drive that gets you out of bed every morning, something that makes you tick. For me, it’s always been about impacting students.”

Over the course of 20 years, his journey as an educator has impacted many people. He has taken on different hats as friend, confidant, teacher, principal and mentor. But regardless of his roles, one thing remains constant: his people-centric approach. “A school is not defined by its building, the type of curriculum it offers or by its rankings. It is defined by the people that make it happen – the students, teachers and staff,” he says in a resonant voice that is at once both confident and reassuring.

Whether it is reminiscing his early days as a trainee teacher or explaining the evolution of a teacher’s role in the classroom, his words display strong ambition and *nous*. Having taken over as Principal of Beatty Secondary School in 2017, Khoon Chow exudes an affable presence and an innate ability to make people feel completely at home.

But to truly understand him, one has to step into his office. Well-lit and roomy, the space holds a lengthy work desk and shelves, each bursting with books and work-related materials. And just in front of the entrance is a cosy table and chair – a sight that immediately lures you into the office

“A school is not defined by its building, the type of curriculum it offers or by its rankings. It is defined by the people that make it happen – the students, teachers and staff.”

and signifies a willingness to start conversations. “Listening is the most important trait anyone could have. When you listen, you are putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and that’s very important,” he says.

His office is a microcosm on its own. It is a busy school day morning, but staff and teachers stop by to say hello. An occasional head pops in every now and then, asking him how his weekend went or to update him about theirs. “Everything happens in cycles. The way you treat people is the way they will treat the next person they meet, so the power of change starts with you,” he observes.

CONNECTION BETWEEN SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

For him, the school and community are inextricably linked. “The school does not exist as an island on its own, it is part of the nation’s fabric. To connect students to Singapore, you must first connect them to the community they live and study in – there’s just no two ways about it,” he says.

At Beatty Secondary, students work closely with the neighbourhood grassroots organisations to do their part for society – from clearing litter around public spaces to helping aged citizens revamp their homes. It is part of the Values-In-Action programme, and he hopes students will take time to reflect on their contributions. “It’s not just about engaging the student to help the community because it fulfils a module requirement. We need to get students thinking, to find out why it’s important to put others before themselves,” he reasons.

One way is organising annual events for non-teaching staff. Every year, the school would have an occasion where students show gratitude to the non-teaching staff, such as the clerical officers, lab technicians, workshop instructors, cleaners, canteen assistants and security guards. This can take the form of different activities in different years, but the objective is the same, “There are so many important people working in the background to help the school run in a clockwork manner. This is our way of telling them ‘thank you’ and to let them know they are part of this big family,” he notes.

This spirit of care and inclusivity extends to other areas too. As the only government secondary school designated as a recognised institution for the hearing-impaired who use sign language to communicate, it is currently home to 15 hearing-impaired students who study in the Normal Technical Stream. Specially-trained resource teachers are placed in each of the four classrooms to translate the daily teachings into sign language.

Welcoming hearing-impaired students has benefitted the school in more ways than one. As a result, other students have taken up basic sign language to communicate and befriend these students – something that brings a great sense of pride to Khoon Chow. “We were quite clear that we wanted the deaf students to do everything normal students would do. Regardless of their hearing impairment, they are people just like everyone else and we didn’t want them to feel any different,” he says.

EVERYONE HAS A SPECIAL GIFT

Khoon Chow is a firm believer that every individual possesses an inborn skill and ability that makes him or her unique from everybody else. The trick lies in uncovering the hidden traits and honing them to perfection. “Everyone is special at something. We need to give students the confidence to realise their abilities beyond the academic sphere,” he shares.

Following this belief, Beatty Secondary launched the Enriched Normal Technical (ENT) Programme last year which aims to inculcate the idea of learning by exposing normal technical students to a variety of non-academic related pursuits. Students spend their entire school day on Fridays learning a new sport or craft for each term. These include modules like samba drumming, hip-hop dance, cross-fit and karate.

Students are also given opportunities to showcase what they learnt to the rest of the school. At the Annual Awards Day earlier this year, ENT students from the hip-hop dance module performed a special number at the ceremony. This not only allowed the students to apply their learning, it provided them with the platform necessary to bolster their confidence.

While most normal technical students might have a harder time coping academically, he hopes the programme will instil in them a love for learning. “We want to show the students that learning happens everywhere and it can be a fun journey if you open yourself up to new ideas and take risks to push yourself,” he says.

COMING FULL CIRCLE

Recalling memories that inspired him to embark on the path of teaching, he shares two episodes. The first was when he was a

Learning journeys: As part of the Normal Technical programme, students spend every Friday learning a new craft or sport like Cross-fit



“Everyone is special at something. We need to give students the confidence to realise their abilities beyond the academic sphere.”



Secondary 3 student at Anglo Chinese School (Barker Road) in 1988, when he got to know Mrs Tessie Cheng, his form teacher, who introduced the concept of community service to the class.

As part of his community service, Khoon Chow and his classmates volunteered at the Singapore Children's Society for a few months where they were each assigned to mentor a beneficiary from the home. Midway, a fellow classmate who was musically inclined came up with the idea of introducing music to the children by teaching them to play an instrument. As there weren't any existing instruments to donate to the children, Mrs Cheng convened the class for a brainstorming session.

“Instead of spoon-feeding us with ideas, she told us that the onus was on us to think and come up with a solution. She genuinely wanted to hear us out and she made sure everyone's idea was brought forth to the table so that no one was left out,” he says. The class decided to stage a school-wide fundraiser to raise money to purchase a piano. They would sell Bak Chang, traditional rice dumplings, over one year.

As Mrs Cheng was a close friend with a Bak Chang stallholder who ran a profitable eatery in Katong, they were able to get mass orders of rice dumplings at reasonable prices. The cost price of each dumpling was \$0.50, so they sold it at \$1 each – earning a decent profit of \$0.50. Khoon Chow and his classmates would go around school collecting orders throughout the week and deliver the orders every Friday.

With no available transport to deliver the dumplings, Mrs Cheng's car was the *de facto* delivery vehicle. “You can imagine, after half a year of delivering droves of Bak Chang, her car smelt like rice dumplings too,” he recalls with a hearty chuckle. After six months and 4,000 dumplings later, the target amount of \$2,000 was raised. “The fact that she had that level of

trust in a bunch of 15-year olds, so much so that she was willing to work alongside us even though she could have chosen not to, that's something I'll never forget,” he says.

Later, at his affiliated Junior College, another teacher would create a lasting impact – his Biology Special Paper teacher Ms Yeo Chee Kai. As the class only consisted of four students including himself, the students were able to interact and mingle with Ms Yeo with great ease. The intimate setting allowed the students to share many personal issues ranging from their aspirations to frank perspectives on world issues. “What was so touching was that she was concerned about seeing us as humans and not as mere digits of the system,” he says.

Coincidentally, he would meet Ms Yeo 20 years later. At Beatty Secondary's parent-teacher meeting last year, a parent of an existing student asked him if he could recall a Ms Yeo from his JC days. Initially startled, he said ‘yes’ and asked the parent how she knew her. The parent replied that she was Ms Yeo's niece. Through the parent, Khoon Chow got hold of Ms Yeo's number and he managed to get in touch with her after many years. In a serendipitous turn of events, he was now Principal to the grand nephew of a teacher who had inspired him all those years back. “I told you life happens in cycles right?” he quips, with a gentle smile.

A TEACHER AND A LEADER

Khoon Chow entered the National University of Singapore in 1994 where he majored in Zoology. When he graduated in 1998, he went to the National Institute of Education and studied teaching pedagogies for almost a year. In May 1999, he was posted to Raffles Institution (RI) as a biology teacher, taking charge of a single batch of students as they progressed from secondary three to four.

As a new teacher, one of the first hurdles he had to overcome was how to best capture his students' attention. “I understood early on that learning in the classroom isn't a one-way street. For students to truly understand the crux of the lesson, there needed to be a two-way channel for communication where I was

Inclusivity in education: Hearing-impaired students are able to receive verbal teaching through sign language.



able to engage them proactively in the classroom,” he says. To get students to think beyond their textbooks, he would organise discussions and encourage students to come up with presentations to illustrate their understanding of a particular topic.

While he enjoyed teaching, life had other plans. Khoon Chow was posted to the Ministry of National Development at the start of 2001. He was tasked with developing policies that would impact the nation. In the process of doing so, he picked up crucial life skills such as critical thinking and managing projects while working with different groups of professionals. But he never stopped thinking about teaching. “I missed the interactions I had with students. At the end of the day, my heart was always with the school,” he says.

So when the opportunity came to re-join RI as a biology teacher in 2002, he jumped at it. At the end of 2003, he was asked to consider a leadership role in another school. Taking up this role would mean becoming a Head of Department in the future, requiring him to step out of his comfort zone of being a subject teacher. The added responsibility was something that worried him. “Will I be able to lead my teachers? Will I be able to be a

good leader for my students? There were so many questions running through my mind,” he shares. But he decided to take the plunge. “I figured that I have learnt from the best leaders thus far, so I should be okay. If I never tried, I would never know,” he explains.

While pursuing his Master’s degree, he was presented with the opportunity to spend 10 weeks at the University of Melbourne where he was attached to schools across Australia. It was during this time that he was able to see first hand the relationship between the school, its students and the community-at-large. “In Australia, the focus was very much on the child and how the community could value-add to the child’s betterment. So it was very common for parents and community partners to link-up with the schools and improve the child’s quality of life,” he says.

This connection with the community was integral in his subsequent leadership roles as Vice Principal of Dunman Secondary School (2006-2008), Vice Principal of Junyuan Secondary School (2008-2010) and Principal of Bendemeer Secondary (2012-2016).

KEEPING HEAD AND HEART ON THE GROUND

By creating a strong sense of community both within and outside of school, Khoon Chow believes that students will realise that a school is more than just about studying. “We have a responsibility to groom responsible and thinking leaders who are able to understand the world around them. A school isn’t just a place to get good grades, it has to impart good traits and life skills too,” he says.

One of his hopes is for students to be leaders with a strong sense of compassion. “No matter how far we progress as a community, we must never forget to think about those around us,” he notes. “A capable leader is one who keeps his head and heart connected to the ground—that’s something I always remind my students.” ■



FOONG LAI LEONG

Principal, Fuhua Secondary School

“ The school of **knowledge** goes **beyond textbooks** ”

The heartbeat of society, at the heart of a classroom

There is an indescribable magic that swirls and saunters its way through the classroom when a student sits on the cusp between relative uncertainty and finally understanding a new theory unknown to him or her before. Once the torch of knowledge is lit, the paths of student and teacher converge as one.

This synchronisation of hearts and minds in the classroom has kept Foong Lai Leong going as an educator for over three decades. The 59-year old Principal at Fuhua Secondary School speaks the same way she teaches, with an infectious humility that is both philosophical yet practical.

“There’s this connection that happens between student and teacher when both are on the same frequency. The transfer of knowledge and wisdom has the power to light up the entire classroom,” she says, her own eyes lighting up as she shared about the joys of imparting knowledge.

Cool, calm and articulate, there is an infectious exuberance in her voice – the kind of energy borne out of a desire to excel in one’s craft. And excelling in her craft is exactly what she aims to do in her capacity as both teacher and now, principal. In particular, she strongly believes in building resilience in students by throwing them in the deep end and letting them figure out how to swim.

Having spent 18 years as a biology teacher at Hwa Chong Junior College followed by two years as a Vice Principal at Presbyterian High School and more than 10 years as Principal, she understands the importance of exposing students to the unfamiliar to trigger their ability to adapt. Whenever students got too comfortable in the classroom or became overly confident in completing tasks and assignments, she would throw them a curveball in the form of different ideas and scenarios to force them out of their comfort zones.

Face-to-face: In an era of e-communication, Lai Leong is a firm believer that it is best to build rapport with her staff in person.





“The school of knowledge that I want them to learn goes beyond the textbooks because they need to be able to adapt to different obstacles in life. It’s not about how good you are, it’s about how much you’re willing to carry on despite your circumstances,” she notes.

She is also a firm believer in the idea that developing critical thinkers in the classroom will translate into the creation of effective leaders outside of school. In an ever-evolving global economy with industry disruptions taking place almost overnight, it is important for students to be able to evolve with changing times and have keen foresight.

But she is quick to add that regardless of how successful they turn out to be, they need to understand that no man is an island. “I want them to be the best that they can be, but it is not just about being a technocrat or bureaucrat. They should be someone who is able to think about the society at large and work from the heart,” she maintains.

A DESIGN-THINKING APPROACH TO CHANGE THE WORLD

To connect with society, Lai Leong recently introduced a project that enables students to directly help Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs). But it requires students to first develop a “design-thinking” approach to solving problems. Design-thinking provides a solution-based approach to solving problems, prioritising the end user’s needs.

This community project takes shape in the form of Fuhua Secondary’s annual VWO fair where charitable agencies are invited to set up booths for a half-day carnival held at the school hall. Students are rostered to go around the booths to find out what causes each VWO is championing. By listening to first-hand accounts, they get to know more about the beneficiaries and their needs. The students then

“There’s this connection that happens between student and teacher when both are on the same frequency. The transfer of knowledge and wisdom has the power to light up the entire classroom.”

customise a programme that would fit the organisation.

“Different VWOs have different needs so a one-size-fits-all approach will not work,” she explains. “By engaging students to think and develop sustainable programmes for them, we are showing them first-hand the benefits of a design-thinking approach which they can employ in other areas of their lives.”

At the end of the fair, students are given reflection logs to note down their thoughts after talking to the different VWOs. They pick three organisations that they can relate to. Apart from a detailed entry describing their personal reactions to the VWOs’ presentations, they write out reasons why they best identify with a particular organisation.

With the help of their teachers, the students narrow down on one VWO that they want to focus on. Next, they devise a sustainable programme plan for the VWOs, and work on this project for a year. “We want students to develop the stamina to see a project from drawing board to actual execution of ideas. More importantly, we want the students to understand the importance of sustainability when it comes to planning for the community,” she stresses.

GOOD PLANNING IS HALF THE BATTLE WON

As someone who has benefited from the design-thinking approach, Lai Leong shares personal anecdotes of incidents that taught her the importance of understanding a community’s needs before addressing them.

On a service learning expedition to a rural village in Cambodia a few years back, she and her colleagues chanced upon a makeshift work hut where villagers were weaving shawls and other textiles. When she encountered the humid conditions and lack of breeze, her first instinct was to suggest setting up fans for the workers. She proposed the idea of asking her students back in Singapore to donate pre-used fans which she then hoped to set up within the work hut.

But her expedition guide immediately pointed out that it was an impractical idea due to the lack of electricity in the area. The entire village's electricity supply was fuelled by generators which were utilised sparingly, so there was no way they would use it to power fans. "Because of my naivety, I thought I was doing them a favour but I did not properly consider all the factors before suggesting a solution," she says.

After this incident, she realised the importance of devising a well thought-out and thoroughly researched idea before proceeding to help others. Similarly, in her role as Principal at Marsiling Secondary School, Lai Leong and her colleagues were taking part in an initiative to give groceries and rations to the underprivileged elderly in the nearby estates when a social worker's insight stopped her in her tracks.

After seeing the school hand out sacks of rice to elderly men who lived alone, the social worker pointed out that a large majority of the men usually don't have the means to cook for themselves, hence, it might not be directly addressing their needs. "We want to do our part for the community but we need

"There must be a willingness to try and fail. Nothing great has ever been achieved without a few setbacks along the way."

to understand the more deep-rooted issues before attempting to solve them. That's what we want the kids to understand which is why we emphasise on a design-thinking approach when they work with VWOs," she says.

ONE COMMUNITY

To drive home the importance of community, Fuhua Secondary decided to put a fresh spin on Total Defence Day celebrations this year. As opposed to previous years, the students were each assigned a character to mimic the realities of actual wartime conditions. For example, one student was an elderly person with high blood pressure, another was a lactose-intolerant teenager and another was a diabetic person. They were then handed basic food rations consisting of milk, biscuits and fruits.

The idea was to see how students interacted and worked with each other as a community, based on the limited supplies they had. They were allowed to trade with each other and donate food from class to class. In a scenario where there was a baby in the family, a class who had an extra pint of milk was allowed to donate their food to the family.

Through compromise and learning to live with differences, the students witnessed the power of working together as one community. "We wanted an approach to get them to understand what it truly means to live as a community. Because in the real world, we need to respect each other's differences and needs if we want to progress as a society," she says.





*Post-it notes:
Personalised
notes help
Lai Leong
connect
with her
teachers.*

THE POWER OF POST-IT NOTES

Lai Leong is a firm believer in the idea that community starts from within. This is why she makes it a point to ensure that everyone working with her – from teachers to the support staff – are treated with due respect and their contributions are recognised.

“From the guards at the gate to the stall vendors in the canteen and the teachers in the classroom, everyone plays an important part in contributing to the students’ well-being,” she says. “Just like a clock that cannot function even if one of its parts is out of place, the school will not be able to give the students the best experience available without the combined help of everyone.”

She also believes in the benefits of experimenting and embracing new ideas, which she encourages by creating safe spaces for her teachers to realise their dreams. “There must be a willingness to try and fail. Nothing great has ever been achieved without a few setbacks along the way,” she notes.

But to build a strong relationship, she highlights the importance of good communication. According to Lai Leong, the rise of technology has brought with it a wider variety of communication channels but it has diminished the value of interpersonal interactions. “There’s just nothing like talking to someone face-to-face. The warmth and sincerity in speaking to someone while standing across from them can never be replicated by technology,” she says.

Whenever she has the time, she will meet up with teachers over tea or coffee at the school canteen to talk to them and get to know them a little bit better. Despite not initially realising the impact of her communication style, she says that this has allowed her to get closer to her teachers.

“The teachers realise that there is always a safe space for them to talk and communicate with me. At the end of the day, we are all human beings and we all value that added personal touch,” she says. “I trust you to do a really good job. Having said that, let me hear you out and provide the necessary support to empower you further in your cause.”

Her direct approach to communicating with her staff and teachers sees them reciprocating by choosing to meet in person to discuss ideas instead of using other means of communication. “People might call me old-fashioned but I will choose talking over texting or emailing any day,” she says.

Unless a situation requires her immediate response via text message or email, she prefers to meet teachers in person to catch up with them or to listen to their feedback. This, she says, has added a human element into the workplace and made people feel right at home.

In fact, she makes it a point to head down to the staff room to leave personalised messages or updates at teacher’s desks using Post-It notes. But she also admits that she maintains a fine balance so as not to infringe on the privacy of her teachers.

She also tries to get to know her teachers by remembering small nuggets about them like their children’s names, their favourite cuisines and even their favourite football team. “I want them to know that they are not just a face in the organisational chart but rather someone who remains dear to me. We’re all part of this big family and everyone matters.”

TO DARE IS TO DREAM

When it comes to giving it her best on a daily basis, Lai Leong believes that the drive and energy of her colleagues are integral factors in spurring her on. “When you love what you do, the passion comes naturally. And it is truly a blessing to be surrounded by talented colleagues because it motivates you to push for greatness in all that you do,” she says.

The most important life lesson that she hopes her students understand is that trying and failing is better than not trying at all.

“Be bold and follow your heart but most importantly, be willing to take risks even when the odds seem stacked against you. Fortune favours the brave so go out there and create a future that you can proudly call your own,” she says. ■

