

# PRINCIPIA

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## Leading Culture

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# President's Message

At the Academy, we thought it would be interesting to see how indeed principals flesh out their various roles as mentioned by Minister Heng Swee Keat at the 2012 Appointment and Appreciation Ceremony for Principals.

We started with "Leading Culture" because with the fast pace of change both in society and even in schools, it will be the culture of the school that will make change meaningful and help principals integrate new initiatives with the other rhythms of school life.

A school will have its history, its particular setting in a community and neighbourhood, and its unique look that is a composite of its architectural style and its blend of concrete and greenery. But the pulse of the school is set by the man or woman who leads the school.

Read about Richard Chew's understanding of what it is to lead a school named after our first President, Shanti Devi's reflective observations that helped her build trust within the school and Chua Choon Guan's philosophy of visibility.

It's always interesting to hear from new principals and in this volume we feature the LEP graduand, Ruby Tan, who won the 2013 APS Prize for Leadership Learning.

As we finish this first half and go on to an equally packed calendar for the rest of the year, may you continue to strengthen the culture in the school with the values you have built your educational philosophy on.

Chan Poh Meng  
President, Academy of Principals (Singapore)



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Richard calls his students *President Men and Ladies*, and desires for them to live out the qualities exhibited by our first President, Tun Yusof Bin Ishak.



# CHAMPIONING THE First President School

*Richard Chew*

*“We must do justice to the name.” With these words, Richard Chew, Principal of Yusof Ishak Secondary School (now retired), began to relate his story of shaping the culture and tone of the school. Over the next two hours, Richard spoke passionately about his belief in upholding the name of the Republic’s first President, of optimising resources to benefit students, and of making school a happy and welcoming place.*

Yusof Ishak Secondary School, named after Singapore’s first President, Tun Yusof Bin Ishak, was established in 1965 and declared open a year later by Singapore’s first Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Richard was quick to point out the significance of this – the First President School was the first school declared open by the first Prime Minister, and the only school named after a President of our nation. Richard’s pride in the school’s heritage is evident; his sense of duty to uphold the stature of its namesake, no less apparent.

It is no surprise then, that improving the standing of the school and exhorting his students and teachers to live out the qualities exhibited by our first President have become enduring priorities of Richard’s leadership of Yusof Ishak Secondary.

## **NURTURING PRESIDENT MEN AND LADIES**

Richard became the Principal of Yusof Ishak Secondary in December 2005, his last posting before retiring at the end of 2013 after 42 years of service in Education. The observations he made in his first year in the school and the interactions he had with teachers, students and parents led him to realise that there was much more to be done to get people to value the school.

He explains the psychology behind his approach to changing perceptions: “We are like a petite lady. She is made beautiful and lovable because we care about her. We adore her and therefore others look up to her.” Richard is convinced that in order for people to value the school, the school must first value its people. To Richard, the most important people in the school are the students.

The school’s envisioning exercise in 2007 culminated in a vision that Richard champions tirelessly. Yusof Ishak Secondary would be *The First President School, an institution that nurtures Scholars, Sportsmen and Statesmen*. Success in every child is a goal for every teacher, and all Yusoffians are regarded as President Men and Ladies. “If you expect students to behave in a certain way, and you treat them accordingly, they will rise to the occasion.” To walk the talk, Richard replaced all the anti-smoking, anti-drug and ‘warning’ posters in the school with photos of happy and cheerful students. He stands in the foyer to greet students in the morning, and reminds them often of the character and conduct becoming of dignitaries.

One wonders if a label like President Men and Ladies would spark more



*Richard is proud of the rich heritage of Yusof Ishak Secondary School, and exhorts his staff and students to uphold the stature of its namesake.*



*Richard thinks that being a small school has its advantage – relationships are close-knit and teachers collaborate more closely to optimise resources.*



*To Richard, the school serves as a moral compass to anchor the students in good values and habits so that they can navigate the seas of life successfully.*



*Richard displays students' art work around the school to create a cheerful environment.*

scepticism than self-control, especially amongst the youths. “Cynicism, no. Disbelief, yes.” Richard explains that to students who are more often told that they are found wanting rather than worthy, such favour instills dignity and motivates positive behaviour. For his teachers, Richard’s sincere, regular conversations with them over the years have clarified direction and deepened their commitment to the school’s vision.

### PREPARING STUDENTS TO SAIL THE HIGH SEAS

Believing that perseverance and a healthy self-esteem are important determinants of success in life, Richard initiated the Performing Arts Programme (PAP) in 2007 to give his students an avenue to discover their passion and develop their strengths.

All secondary 1 and 2 students in Yusof Ishak Secondary are exposed to various performing art forms, and those interested and with the talents are given a chance to further their skills by staging performances such as *Grease* in 2008, *Bukit Batok Westside Story* in 2009, and *Army Daze* in 2010. As Richard recounted the school’s first large-scale musical production in 2011, *My Fair Lady*, which was held at the University Cultural Centre, his pride in his students’ achievements was evident. The journey has not been without setbacks though, Richard acknowledged: the first attempt to put up a small-scale drama performance in 2007 failed. It was the first year that PAP was implemented, and the teachers felt that the students needed more time to put up a polished performance.

To Richard, it is not the disappointment of a planned but

not realised event that troubles him, but that this incident signals the lack of belief and confidence in the students. “Even if they cannot put up a good show, they can put up a show.” He regrets that one batch of students had missed the opportunity to be affirmed on stage, and the school had lost a ‘teachable moment’ to instill determination. To the staff who persuaded him that postponing the performance was a win-win solution, Richard calmly asserted, “Nobody wins if we don’t believe our students can do it.”

With this firm belief in his students’ potential, and in the importance of cultivating the right attitude and behaviour to sail the high seas of life, Richard continues to support programmes that develop each child holistically. He encourages his teachers to talk to the students often, understand their needs and concerns, and provide the necessary push and support to help them taste success.

A very encouraging example that spurs Richard and his teachers to persevere in their endeavours is the story of a boy, who despite his humble background, was given the opportunity to shine and excel in the school. Muhammad Fairuz bin Mohd Jamil was talented-spotted in the PAP and played the role of Professor Higgins in the school’s production of *My Fair Lady* in 2011. With financial assistance, he was able to focus on his studies; and with support from the school community, his learning experience was broadened by various school programmes and an overseas Learning Journey. Fairuz is currently pursuing a diploma in Law and Management in Temasek Polytechnic, and has achieved a grade point average of 3.9 out of a possible 4.0, making him one of the top students in Temasek Polytechnic.



*Richard and his teachers enjoy themselves during the Teachers' Day celebration.*



*Students in the school are given exposure and opportunities to excel in academic and non-academic areas.*



*Richard looks forward to spending more time with family after his retirement, especially his wife of 37 years.*

### PROVIDING A BEACON OF LIGHT

Stepping into the school's foyer, visitors are drawn to the bust of Tun Yusof Bin Ishak (the only replica outside the Istana) amidst the backdrop of a towering lighthouse. With the flick of the power switch, the beacon lights up, alerting vessels to the perils of the open seas, keeping them on course, and guiding the captain's navigation.

Richard commissioned this design to serve as a visible and constant reminder of the role of the school in nurturing our young. Just as the lighthouse stands on solid ground, the school and its teachers serve as the moral compass to anchor the students in good values and habits. The Chinese idiom, 学以致用 (to study for practical application), prominently displayed in calligraphy on a pillar in the foyer, sums up Richard's philosophy of education - to cultivate a love for learning, and to apply the learning to the good of others. "The road to application of learning is far and wide. A student may not seem to be applying his learning within his 4 or 5 years in the school, but one day, after he has left us, he may do something to benefit others. That is our encouragement."

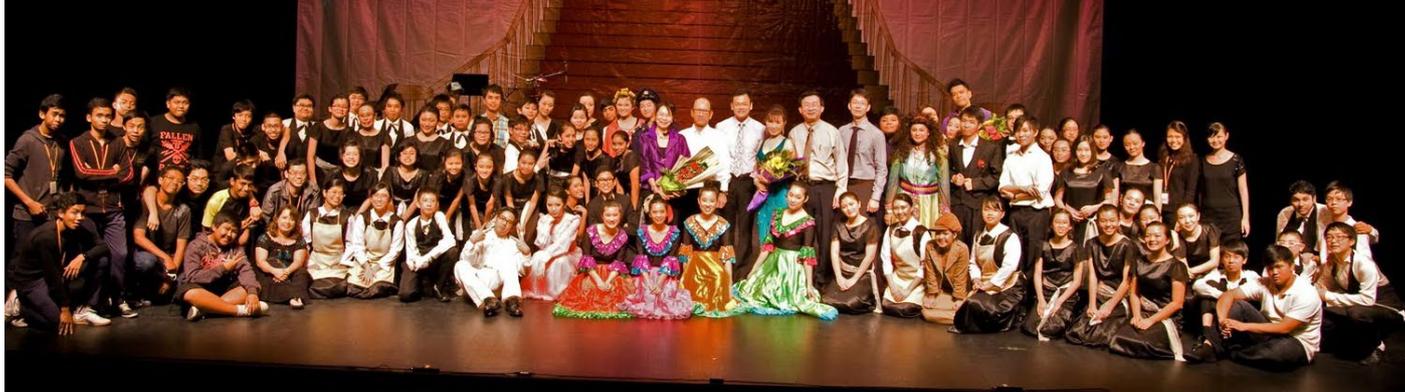
For the right learning to take place, Richard believes the school must be a happy place so that students are happy to come everyday. They must feel valued, not insignificant; cared for, not despised; and safe, not intimidated. Indeed, the principles of respect and love are so key that Richard would not hesitate to say "I can only respect teachers who respect my students". And so paramount is students' mental, physical and emotional well-being that discipline is deemed a safety concern and designated Student Safety and Management, guided by the Safety Mission: *To create a culture of safe practices for teaching and learning.*

### BEING A GOOD STEWARD OF RESOURCES

On how a school with a relatively smaller student population (850 students across secondary 1 to 5) manages its resources to allow for varied learning experiences, Richard has this to offer: "Small can be beautiful. Relationships are close-knit, and we are forced to be more ingenious with the way we deploy our resources." In allocating budget and manpower, Richard encourages his teachers to "look at the larger picture", to be very purposeful and to collaborate where possible to optimise resources. His principle is to "offer as much as we can, not do as little as we can".

Hence, Yusof Ishak Secondary is able to offer Pure Sciences and Pure Humanities subject-combinations with the help of efficient time-tabling; initiatives like the Applied Learning programme on Environmental Science sees the collaboration of Science, Humanities and Design & Technology departments; and money saved from engaging relief teachers to 'babysit' classes (since the students can be counted on to do their work independently) is channeled into more meaningful programmes that benefit the students.

Richard counts his teachers as his most important resource and has great respect for them. He is heartened that they "care for the students and are not afraid to work hard", so he sets clear expectations but gives them space to innovate and develop ownership. When asked for a tip on managing teachers, Richard eases into a benevolent smile, and in the same kindly manner, he shares this quip: "I tell my teachers that I have no land, so there is no need to 'play politics' and pander to me in the hope that I will sell some land to them." His message to his teachers is simple and clear - to focus energies on doing things that benefit the students.



*Students from the school are given a chance to showcase their talents in the annual Festival of Arts, organised by the school.*



*Richard accompanied his students on a trip to China for an immersion programme.*

In Yusof Ishak Secondary, open classrooms and open feedback are the norm. Richard explains his thinking using the analogy of a bunch of dumplings: “When you pull one dumpling up, the whole bunch gets pulled up.” The more good lessons his teachers see, the better the lessons they deliver. While it is useful to help teachers realise their shortcomings, it is showing them how to improve that makes the difference. Richard also challenges his teachers to give quality feedback to raise professional standards. For instance, feedback to trainee teachers is given in the presence of all trainees, cooperating teachers, the NIE supervisor and the School Staff Developer. His presence at these meeting sends a clear signal of the value he places on teacher development and constructive conversations.

### **SETTING A DREAM IN MOTION**

It becomes clear that Richard favours a gently persuasive but deeply resolved approach to leading culture in his school. He articulates his vision, practises what he preach, and provides platforms for desired behaviours to develop and take root. “We don’t need to wait and expect students to greet us. We greet them first, then they will reciprocate. In time to come, it will become a culture, and they will become polite.” So it is teach-by-doing and change-by-showing - no need for rules and elaborate statements; simply show what it looks like and how it is done.

Beneath the benign demeanour is a man with big dreams and unyielding tenacity. Richard dreams that one day, Yusof Ishak Secondary School will become Yusof Institution,

paying tribute to our first President by nurturing distinguished men and women.

For now, Richard looks forward to spending more time with his family when he retires in a few weeks<sup>1</sup>, and especially with his wife of 37 years who has made countless sacrifices to raise their son and three daughters. With a twinkle in his eyes, Richard says, “Now that our children are grown, it is time for me to look after her.”

Having started off as a trained technical teacher in Upper Aljunied High School in 1971, Richard has come a long way in his education career. After graduating from the National University of Singapore in 1985, he taught Science in Victoria School before moving on to be the Senior Assistant and eventually Head of Department in Bedok Town Secondary School. Before his posting to Yusof Ishak Secondary, Richard was Vice Principal of Loyang and Beatty Secondary Schools, and Principal of Peirce Secondary School.

Clearly, Richard Chew has done his part putting in place the pieces due in this season of the school’s development. He leaves the school in the good hands of the incoming Principal, Mdm Jessie Koh, and future Principals of Yusof Ishak Secondary School, who will continue to put in place other pieces until the final picture comes to fruition. For an institution’s history is not for one to create, but for the entire community to shape.

<sup>1</sup> Richard was interviewed in December 2013.



# TAKING LEAPS OF Faith

*To Shanti, good character and sound values undergird academic excellence.*

## *Shanti Devi Thambusamy*

*Shanti Devi Thambusamy is a practical idealist. She is not afraid to question assumptions and pursue ideals, yet is intuitively aware of how ground realities impact decisions and actions. Beneath her cool reserve lies strong convictions and great empathy. She wants what is best for her students, but she does not 'sweat the small stuff'. She communicates her expectations, gives her teachers latitude to operate, and offers guidance where necessary.*

As Principal of Ping Yi Secondary School, Shanti has made many difficult decisions and taken several leaps of faith. She encounters each challenge in her characteristic style of calm restraint, and always with humility and sensitivity. Her focus is clear – character development takes precedence over academic achievement. “If we get the values right, everything else will fall into place.” Over the past six years, Shanti has dedicated herself to developing the ethos, policies and procedures to support a culture of care in Ping Yi Secondary.

### **CONTEXT MATTERS**

Shanti spent the first fourteen years of her education career in St Margaret's Secondary as a Humanities teacher

and later Head of Department. She then served as Vice Principal in CHIJ Katong Convent, and after the Leaders in Education Programme, she was posted to Chestnut Drive Secondary as Vice Principal before coming to Ping Yi Secondary as a newly-appointed Principal.

Having spent most of her career thus far in aided schools, Shanti admits with a smile that besides getting her used to not saying “Good morning, girls”, her experience in Chestnut Drive Secondary was eye-opening. It awakened her to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, and taught her the importance of context in education. Hence, when she came to Ping Yi Secondary, she came with an open mind and a desire to understand

the needs of the school and its students.

When Shanti assumed leadership of Ping Yi Secondary in December 2008, one of the things she consciously told herself was to not make any changes before she understood what was happening on the ground. “Never assume I know what is the right thing to do – that would be arrogant.” Instead, Shanti spent her first month in Ping Yi Secondary meeting all the teachers individually. She wanted to hear their thoughts of where the school should be heading and what they expected of her. The teachers were candid. Their opinions and her own observations helped her form a deeper understanding of the school's context and needs. So valuable were



*Shanti believes that teachers play an important role in setting the culture and tone of the school, and her role as Principal is to support and proliferate this culture.*



*To show her students that she trusts them to do the right thing, Shanti turned the school's Archives room into a common space for all to access the exhibits.*



*Shanti celebrates with the students, parents and teachers of the sports house that won the Sports Day Championship.*



*To keep students meaningfully occupied after school hours, the school organises many activities such as a pool competition, and prizes are kindly sponsored by its partners.*

these conversations that Shanti has continued the yearly, one-to-one dialogue sessions with her teachers ever since.

### VALUES ARE PRIORITY

Shanti is convinced that character development and the instilling of sound values should take priority in Ping Yi Secondary. Quite a number of her students face adversity early in life; they may be street smart and may have developed some resilience, but some lack a significant adult in their lives to guide them. Shanti's rationale is this: "If we don't teach them the critical things in life, where are they going to learn them?"

She encourages her teachers to aim for balance between character development and academic achievement. While both are equally important, Shanti tells them that in a situation which presents a need for them to choose between the two, they will always have her support if they chose character. "It does not matter where our students come from but it matters where they go and what they become, and we have a big part in influencing this!"

This message resonated with her teachers, and they felt understood. Beyond imparting knowledge, her teachers are genuinely concerned about the child. "What we want to create here in Ping Yi Secondary is a culture of care and excellence, in that order and priority." Interestingly, this culture of care in the school seems to take a life of its own. The senior teachers automatically take new teachers under their wings and orientate them to this culture; the young teachers "pick it up very quickly" and reflect that this culture of care somehow "spreads on its own". Shanti puts things in perspective: "The culture and tone of the school is determined by the teachers." Her role as Principal is to support and proliferate this culture.

### BELOW THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

While she believes that her teachers are the greatest propagator of the culture of care in the school, Shanti also acknowledges the role of Restorative Practices (RP) in undergirding this culture. RP is an approach to handling misconduct that helps the doer of the deed see the effect of his actions and take responsibility to repair some of the harm. In this way, it helps to restore relationships and build connections amongst people.

Although Shanti's students may interpret her composed exterior as sternness, inside she is anything but distant. She cares about people and values relationships. The RP approach thus resonates deeply with her.

Ping Yi Secondary began its RP journey in 2006 under the leadership of then Principal, Mrs Julia Woo. Shanti recognises the value that RP brings to transforming behaviour and building healthy relationships, and has over the past six years, consolidated RP in the school. Having been trained in restorative approaches, the teachers do not immediately treat undesirable behaviours as discipline issues, but instead take pains to uncover the underlying concerns that trigger those behaviours. As a result, they come to understand the students better. And because students relate to teachers who relate well to them, they are less resistant to correction because they know that the teachers truly care for them.

Shanti affirms the effectiveness of this approach. “We are evidence that it works.” Her students are now better behaved and the relationships between the teachers and students are stronger because there is more communication and more understanding. She shares the example of a boy who was caught sporting long hair. Instead of meting out punishment, the teacher talked to him and found out that he could not afford a haircut because the monthly financial assistance that his family depended on had not arrived. The school then gave him \$10 for a haircut, and he returned the change!

The nature of the RP approach is significantly more time-intensive, so how does Shanti manage this? Just before this interview took place, Shanti had to deal with a Secondary 1 boy who exhibited behavioural problems. Of all the comments given by his teachers, one stood out: “He is a pleasure to teach.” Clearly, this Science teacher had connected with the student, and would be the best person to get through to the child. Deeper conversations with this boy revealed that his poor showing in the PSLE and the subsequent failure to get into his school of choice had affected him tremendously. A conclusion was reached and a course of action decided: this student needs to taste success and be affirmed regularly. “It takes a lot of time, but he is going to be with us for the next four years. It’s worth the time!”

Hearing these stories of how the teachers relate to the students, one cannot help but ask, what are the distinctive qualities of a Ping Yi teacher? Without hesitation, Shanti offers: “They epitomise the culture of care. In fact, they live it.” Six years into her time in Ping Yi Secondary and Shanti

has never failed to be amazed by how much her teachers care for her students and how far beyond the call of duty they would go to help them. So significant is the impact of this culture of care in the school that Shanti proclaims, “The critical success factor of Ping Yi is quality relationships.”

### WALKING THE TALK

Shanti strikes one as a reflective observer who is keenly aware of the impact of her words and actions on others, and the responsibility of the office on her shoulders. It is easy, hence, to understand why she thinks it is so important to walk her talk. To support the culture of care in Ping Yi Secondary and take RP to the next level, Shanti has made subtle but significant changes, several of which she says are “leaps of faith”.

Taking a leaf from the morning prayers and devotions in the mission schools, Shanti introduced ‘Values for Breakfast’ in the school, a 5-minute sharing everyday during morning assembly by school leaders, teachers and students. She is heartened that over the years, these sharings have evolved from stories lifted off the Internet to personal experiences with powerful lessons. It is Shanti’s hope that this daily grounding in values would start the day right for the students, and allow values to gradually become internalised.

Shanti also formalised teacher-student conversations by incorporating them into the timetable. The 30-minute ‘reading period’ every morning, while providing silent reading time for the students, actually serves as an avenue for teachers to engage with students individually, because Shanti believes it is important to “resolve issues as they crop up instead of letting them fester”. During ‘Circle Time’ that



*Shanti attends the monthly Parents Support Group meeting, and bonds with the parents over activities like bowling.*



*Shanti respects her teachers’ dedication and care for the students; many of them go beyond the call of duty to help students in need.*



*Shanti is inspired by the enthusiasm and willingness of the parents, some of whom continue to serve in the Parents Support Group even though their children have graduated from the school.*



*In celebration of the school’s 30th Anniversary, the human chain demonstrates connectedness; Shanti was the last person in the chain as “to lead is to serve, to give and to achieve together”.*



*Shanti enjoys travelling, and counts her trip to South Africa as one of her most memorable.*



*A nature lover, Shanti creates tabletop gardens in her free time.*

takes place once a fortnight for one hour, the Form teacher and another class teacher sit in a circle with all the students to discuss issues that they are facing. Form teachers also conduct dialogue sessions with individual students at least once a term (or depending on the need, once a semester) to get to know them on a deeper level.

Another bold move that Shanti has made to signal the importance of character formation is in the deployment of teachers. In all character development programmes, two teachers are deployed, and this takes priority over academic subjects. In addition, the Pupil Management, Pupil Development and National Education committees have priority over the teachers they want in the committees.

Shanti is clearly serious when she says that values education is priority in Ping Yi Secondary. “What we expect of our students, we need to expect of ourselves. When we say we trust our students, we need to show them that we trust them indeed.” And so, Shanti broke down the walls of the Archives room, turning it into a common space and allowing students unlimited access to the exhibits and artefacts depicting the school’s history. Although she heeded her practical instincts to install security cameras, she is glad that she has never had to view the recordings.

What is very encouraging in Shanti’s story in Ping Yi Secondary is that the school’s steadfastness to its mission of “nurturing students with strong and upright character” has brought about unexpected returns. The school has over the years garnered various awards in academic achievement and co-curricular activities. Most recently in 2013, the school received two Best Practices Awards in Teaching & Learning and Staff Well-being, adding to the 2010 Outstanding Development Awards in Character Development and National Education. Shanti explains that these achievements are not the result of a deliberate plan to acquire accolades. The teachers implemented programmes that they thought would benefit the students, and these became validated in the process. “So when our Education Minister emphasised student-centric values education, we all breathed a sigh of relief because we have been on this journey all along!”

## OF IMAGES AND COLOURS

In conjunction with the school’s celebration of its 30th anniversary, colourful pinwheels of various sizes have been put up around the school campus. Metaphors and visual reminders are powerful instruments to Shanti, whose own eye for aesthetics and love for nature have fuelled her hobbies in tabletop gardens and sand art.

Various metaphors have been used to help the school community visualise and internalise key messages: the butterfly for the school’s 25th anniversary to symbolise transformation and how change builds resilience, in conjunction with the change in school leadership; the kite in 2012 to depict a free-flying spirit anchored by strong values and how tugging at the string brings errant kites back on course; and now pinwheels to show connectedness and how a little encouragement by the wind would set it in motion.

A deliberate action, one Shanti never actually articulated to her staff, is to change one facet of the school environment every semester. School must be inviting, she rationalised, and a little surprise now and then keeps people excited. Over time, the butterfly and eco gardens, and the Art, History and Design Coves have been added. These little touches add colour, life and dimension to the school experience in Ping Yi Secondary.

So what is most rewarding to Shanti in her first school as Principal? “The expectations that people have of you makes you an incredibly better person!” Shanti teasingly tells her teachers that she now waits patiently for the green man before crossing the road even when the road is clear for she needs to follow the very advice she gives her students – “Doing the right thing even when no one is watching”. Her personal growth, the growth of her teachers and students, and the progress that the school has made thus far are rewards enough.

Looking back, Shanti Devi Thambusamy can confidently say that she has taken leaps of faith, and has landed on her feet each time.



# FEELING THE Heartbeat of the Children

*Chua Choon Guan*

*Chua Choon Guan has his heart, hands and feet on the ground. When the students from Compassvale Primary School arrive at Gate 3 every morning, one of the first faces they will see is their Principal's. Just as the children's spontaneity and exuberance energise him, his warmth and words of encouragement lift their hearts. 31 years into his service in Education, Choon Guan speaks from his experience and conviction when he declares, "Teaching is a joy!"*

This Principal is clearly well-loved and respected by his staff and students, and it is easy to see why. To Choon Guan, Education is a people-oriented profession, "so it should be all about people - the students first, and the teachers and parents". Because one cannot manage people or build relationships with them from behind a desk, Choon Guan believes in being visible and engaged in the fabric of learning. So he sets the tone, walks around and talks to people. In doing so, Choon Guan builds a culture of openness and trust, and a spirit of continuous improvement in Compassvale Primary.

## **MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

Choon Guan began his education career in Swiss Cottage Primary School where he stayed for 17 years, and later moved to Canberra Primary School where he served for the next

10 years as Head of Department for Mathematics and Vice Principal. As a teacher, Choon Guan's greatest delight was interacting with the students, impacting their learning in the classroom and after school through sports like basketball and soccer. He calls himself a "reluctant leader", having declined initial invitations to take up management positions until his then Principal in Canberra Primary, Ms Ratnasingam Selvarani convinced him with these words, "Don't just stay where you are and impact a small circle; move up and impact the wider community."

For Choon Guan, education is all about making an impact on our young. He believes that in order to teach a child effectively, the school has to understand the community supporting the child. Hence, engaging with parents is not just

a necessity, but also a passion because of the difference it can make to the child's development.

He shares several instances of how, through patience, sincerity and tact, he wins parents' understanding, support and trust in the school's efforts. In one incident, a Primary 6 boy accidentally broke a window when he played basketball in an area where ball games are prohibited. This boy admitted guilt, and offered to pay for the damages amounting to \$30 from his own savings. Because payment was involved, his parents were notified and they turned defensive, demanding evidence of their child's transgression and threatening to send the bill to the Ministry of Education instead. Choon Guan patiently explained that it was not the money but the instilling of the right values that the school desired. This child displayed integrity when



*Choon Guan provides exposure and opportunities for his students in the hope that they will find something they can excel in.*



*Choon Guan encourages his students to pursue their passion and give of their best in whatever they do.*



*The school has two niche areas of excellence, one of which is Music, part of the Learning for Life Programme.*



*Choon Guan believes in innovating curriculum and employing a range of pedagogies to better engage students and help them learn better.*



*Choon Guan enjoys interacting with his students, and seizes teachable moments to instil values and life skills.*

he owned up to his mistake and wanted to make amends, so accepting his decision would affirm his honesty and self-discipline. The boy's parents eventually relented when they realised that discipline was meted out in the spirit of care and not retribution.

Another group of people to whom Choon Guan has made a difference is his teachers. He takes pride in developing his teachers' confidence and capabilities, and personally coaches them to "alleviate their fears and show them possibilities". He takes time to clarify doubts and explain expectations of different job roles; he prints nomination forms for Caring Teacher Awards and President's Award for Teachers for all students, and gives the teachers a copy of what their students wrote in support of them. In his five years in Compassvale Primary, Choon Guan has grown his team of Senior Teachers from the initial two to the current ten. His Key Personnel positions are fully filled except for one which he is grooming a teacher to take on, and succession planning for the subsequent group of middle managers is in place.

Acting on his conviction to impact a wider community, Choon Guan openly tells his teachers: "I am developing you for the education system, not just for Compassvale." When asked why he would not hesitate to recommend his teachers for leadership positions in other schools, Choon Guan replied, "If the good teachers don't move on, others equally good would not be able to move up."

### **GROUNDING IN REALITY**

Out of the office and on the ground is where Choon Guan discovers what is really happening and where he can make the greatest impact. Through face-to-face interactions and proactive conversations, Choon Guan finds out whether the school's mission and values are lived in reality.

Every morning, Choon Guan stations himself at Gate 3 of the school to welcome his students. This simple act achieves three goals: to cheer up the students; to connect with the parents; and to stand by the teachers rostered for gate duties. "Each day, I see the same student but a different face. I see a child who looks unhappy and I ask her why; she tells me her mother scolded her that morning so I encourage her, and she starts the day on a more positive note!"

Choon Guan believes that by being visible to the parents, he sends the signal that the school values their partnership and feedback. By making himself available to clarify doubts and address concerns, he has on many occasions prevented the unnecessary escalation of issues. By showing solidarity with his teachers at the gate, Choon Guan also conveys the message that he supports and respects them.

Having spent two decades in school as a teacher, Choon Guan finds great comfort and fulfilment in "feeling the heartbeat of the children". He has a soft spot for the children in the school's Student Care Centre and visits them often to show them that besides their parents, someone else cares for them. He chats with students in the canteen during break times to see whether they are eating healthily and if they are getting their money's worth. He explains,

“When the canteen vendors see us around, they are more likely to do the right thing for the children.”

Because “the most well-intended actions may backfire if people misinterpret their intent”, Choon Guan always explains his decisions and thinking to his teachers. So, his being at the gate every morning is not to identify late-comers but to build relationships with students and parents; his walking the school grounds is not to inspect behaviours but to understand ground realities; and his visiting the staff room is not to keep teachers under surveillance but to get to know them personally.

### **CULTURE OF OPENNESS AND TRUST**

One of the first things one notices about Choon Guan is that there are no airs about him. When the situation calls for it, he is happy to dispense with formalities and speak freely. His approach to leading people is practical, participative and personal; he inspires respect, not demands it.

Choon Guan is determined that with his teachers, there would be “no hidden message and no hidden agenda”. He operates on the principles of transparency and consistency, trusting his teachers and sharing relevant information that will help them to do their jobs better. For instance, he takes the effort to explain how officers are developed and appraised in relation to their peers in the respective substantive grades. Would this not increase pressure and competition among the teachers? Choon Guan calmly asserts the contrary. “I am empowering my teachers with the reality - if they must benchmark their performance, they should do it based on fact rather than assumption.” His teachers welcome such clarity and openness, and the school's improvement over the past five years to a Band A for staff engagement in the MOE School Climate Survey, is testimony to his ongoing efforts to win the “hearts and minds” of his teachers.

In the same spirit of openness, Choon Guan invites his teachers, especially his School Management Committee, to point out his blind spots. “I tell my SMC to not always say ‘yes’ to me but to challenge my assumptions when the need arises. They must be my second pair of eyes and point out pitfalls that I did not anticipate.”

Choon Guan makes himself available to his students, teachers and parents, and by his presence he communicates care and genuine interest in their well-being. So accessible is he that a Primary 1 student walked right into his office one day and confessed, “Mr Chua, I have a problem.” Her parents had given her a full lunch box together with \$1 for two meals but this girl could not decide whether to spend the money during recess or at lunch!

### **SPIRIT OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**

Another mindset that Choon Guan wants to shape is a “spirit of continuous improvement along with an appreciation of others who came before us.” One of the first things he did when he first came to Compassvale Primary was to paint the picture of reality for his staff - the Punggol-Seng Kang area was developing rapidly and new schools were slated to start up over the next few



*Choon Guan greets the students and parents at the school's Gate 3 every morning.*



*Choon Guan's teachers appreciate his presence and support; they find him approachable and nurturing.*



*Choon Guan takes pride in developing his teachers' confidence and capabilities.*



*Choon Guan has built a culture of openness and trust amongst his staff.*



*To foster a spirit of continuous improvement in the school, Choon Guan leads by example and participates in learning activities with his teachers.*

years. How then could Compassvale Primary continue to be valued by the community and remain a choice school in the neighbourhood?

Choon Guan is convinced that schools must continually improve to better serve students in the face of an evolving educational landscape and changing demographics. He led his teachers to innovate and customise the school's curriculum to stretch the potential of all its students and enable every child to progress and succeed. He initiated the school's inaugural Open House event in 2010, which continues to attract strong crowds annually. When the school was earmarked for upgrading by the Primary Education Review and Implementation (PERI) committee, Choon Guan seized the opportunity to apply for Flexible School Infrastructure (FlexSI) provisions to create flexible learning spaces to support the diverse pedagogies that teachers can employ to better engage the students in their learning. He continues to support professional development while pacing teacher training to prevent burnout.

Today, Compassvale Primary has two niche areas of excellence in Music (Learning for Life Programme) and Robotics (Applied Learning Programme). Its Primary School Leaving Examination outcomes are above the averages of comparable schools. The upgraded school facilities include three Co-Curricular Activities rooms that can be combined to form a theatrette complete with retractable seats and a stage, a special room for the school's Brass Band, and a fully landscaped garden opening out to a pond-cum-glass aquarium. Its teachers have recently completed training in the Whole School Approach for Effective Communication (WSA-EC), and are equipping themselves to enrich students' learning experiences through Self-Directed Learning (SDL) and Collaborative Learning (CoL) facilitated by Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

Not one to rest on his laurels, Choon Guan admits that "there are still gaps to close". He is keenly aware of the challenges faced by his predecessor, Mr K. Govindan, who coincidentally, was a childhood friend. "I always tell my teachers to be appreciative of people who were here before us. They too had difficulties, and they did their best within those conditions." Hence, when Choon Guan took over the school in 2010, he did not question the way things were done previously. To him, a need identified is an area for improvement; and when his staff makes mistakes, he wants them to be honest with him. "Here in Compassvale, we have a no-blame culture. When a mistake is made, we deal with it, and learn from it. Yes, the person has to be accountable, but the focus is on resolving and learning from the issue, not pinpointing blame."

### HELPING PEOPLE TASTE SUCCESS

What is Choon Guan hoping to achieve in all the efforts put in? In an unwavering voice, with words as clear as his conviction, he answers, "To bring out the best in every child, regardless of his or her starting point and circumstance."

And what is the underpinning principle that guides his decision-making? "The priority is our students and they must be better off as a result of any decision made."

Choon Guan admits, "I don't apologise for decisions that are student-centric. My teachers know that my heart is for the children, and they are with me." Hence, when Compassvale Primary began to function in a single session in 2013, 8:00 am was chosen as the starting time to give its students more time for rest. To the school bus operators, Choon Guan firmly maintains, *gin na seng* (Hokkien for 'children as first priority').

"If we only define success in academic terms, not every child will get to taste success. But if we give them exposure and opportunities, every student has something to look forward to, and each child can discover something he can excel in!" The school's broad-based curriculum exposes all Primary 1 and 2 students to music, and Primary 3 and 4 students to robotics. To date, 18 students have participated in the Ministry of Education's Talent Development Programme in music, and others have gone on to pursue music at a higher level. Several students have also taken part in international competitions in robotics.

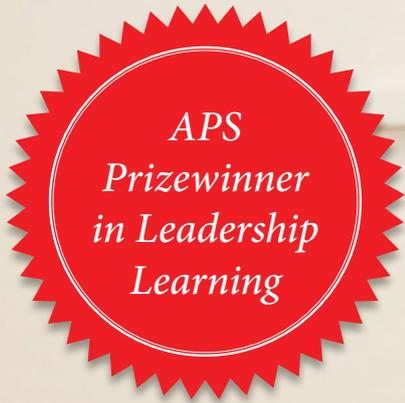
One gets the impression that Choon Guan is the same person in school and at home - he values family time but gives everyone at home space to pursue personal pleasures; he anchors his son in sound values and trusts him to do the right thing. On a typical Saturday, Choon Guan jogs, reads the newspapers, and takes naps to recharge while his wife practises yoga and his 18-year-old son plays basketball with friends. They then have dinner together and chat.

Three decades ago, Choon Guan chose to teach because he wanted to make a difference to people. He later chose to lead because he wanted to impact even more lives. His approach to influencing people and shaping culture exemplifies this maxim of visible leadership: One can manage from behind a desk, but to truly lead one has to leave the comforts of the office.

Under the leadership of Chua Choon Guan, the students who enter the gates of Compassvale Primary stand a promising chance to grow into *Soaring Individuals, Serving Citizens*.



Choon Guan values his family and enjoys spending time with his wife and son.



APS  
Prizewinner  
in Leadership  
Learning

# Experiencing, Reflecting, Growing



*Ruby says being a Principal brings about “endless reflecting” because she constantly has to think about what she does.*

Ruby Tan

*Ruby Tan was appointed Principal of Jurong Secondary School on 15 December, 2013. Two months into her role as head of school, this recipient of the APS Prize in Leadership Learning for graduands of the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP) in 2013 is invited to share her thoughts on winning the award and leading a school. The interview quickly turned into an open and honest conversation as Ruby, in her modest, easy-going manner, let us in on her reflections and journey of growth as an educator.*

**The APS Prize in Leadership Learning is awarded to the LEP participant who exhibited the highest level of reflection. Can you share from the reflection journal you kept during the LEP?**

During the LEP, we had many opportunities to discuss a wide range of issues in education. One particular thread that got me thinking very deeply was the idea of ‘Every School a Good School’. Different people I encountered had different definitions of a ‘Good school’, and I wanted to make sense of how the elements of engaged learners, caring teachers and supportive partnerships come together to make

a school good. So I reflected upon each of these elements, for instance, I asked myself, “What does ‘Every Teacher, a Caring Educator’ mean in practice?” To me, teaching is a calling, and we teach because we care, so isn’t it already a given that all teachers care for their students? As I reflected deeper, I began to realise that my own caring instincts for students have been fostered by the supportive environment I grew up and worked in. It then hit me so clearly that our teachers need affirmation and nourishment of the heart too, so that they can build the capacity to care for our students. So if I want my teachers to care for

my students, I must first appreciate my teachers and care for them! The closure at the end of my reflection journal was that leadership is like conducting a symphony: it is about bringing together the right people and instruments, rallying them, focusing their attention and energies, listening carefully to each player, and keeping everything in harmony.

**Are you a naturally reflective person? What do you think about when you reflect and how do you find the time to do so?**

For me, reflection is both a conscious effort and a natural instinct. I consciously make time to reflect



*An avid reader, Ruby reads e-books on the go.*



*Ruby helps her teachers to clarify intent and direction, and synergise efforts to multiply desired outcomes.*

whenever I am alone, like when I'm walking along the corridor. Taking the public transport also gives me the time and space to reflect while on the move. I tend to reflect upon things I see and hear, from my observations and interactions with people. Perhaps it is because of my disposition - as a student I was generally reserved and preferred to observe and process things in my mind quietly. And perhaps my training in the Humanities (Ruby read Geography and Literature in the University, and taught Geography and General Paper) has made me more attuned to different perspectives and I tend to reason and analyse things more deeply. In Literature, we do character studies, and we try to understand the emotions and state of mind of particular characters and how these influence their behaviour and actions. My reflections usually revolve around emotive aspects - how people feel about issues and changes, or what is going on in their minds when they speak or act in a certain way. I think this helps to balance the 'task' side of me, which is good because as a school leader, we have to juggle between getting things done and managing people successfully. I used to reflect internally, but increasingly, I find myself reflecting with people, to bounce off ideas and achieve a greater balance in my perspectives. I also tend to follow a certain thinking process - I usually start with the issue, then examine causes and

factors, look for evidence, and think about what could be done.

### **You seem to have a particular interest in how people think and feel. What has shaped this way of thinking?**

From my interaction with students over the years, I have come to appreciate that every child has a story and desires attention. One particular incident when I was teaching in Jurong Institute (now Millennia Institute) many years ago taught me an enduring lesson that we should not just focus on 'symptoms' - outward appearance and behaviour. There was a boy in my class who showed a slight dip in his performance in one term. He was generally well-behaved and submitted his work on time. If we just looked at the symptom (the dip in grades), the natural thing to do would be to put him on remedial classes. However, when I met with his mother during the Parent-Teacher meeting, I learnt that there was tension between them. The 17-year-old boy wanted more personal space but his mother thought he was getting rebellious and imposed more restrictions on him. The real issue here was the frustration the boy was facing which had affected his ability to focus on his studies. So, remedial classes would not likely help. This is a good reminder to me to always make the effort to unearth sentiments and real issues. I'm still learning to do this, but I'm a lot more

conscious now of the need to listen to my teachers and students, and understand their concerns.

To Ruby, every experience is a journey of growth, and every journey is an experience which stretches, strengthens and shapes one's character and capacity. Throughout the conversation, phrases like "I'm still learning" and "It's a journey" keep coming up, hinting of a hunger to learn that is grounded in humility. Indeed, Ruby strikes one as an admirably balanced person - confident, yet teachable; resolute, yet adaptable; and efficient, yet deliberate. One wonders how she is like as a boss.

### **What do your teachers think of you?**

I think people who do not work closely with me may think that I am very task-focussed. But those who know me better say that I am approachable. People tell me that I am very systematic, and when I was Head of Department and Vice Principal, my teachers told me they felt assured working with me because I knew my direction. I used this analogy with my teachers and they laughed: Some of us work well in 'bubbles' - we are happy working on specific programmes and events; I am more of a 'package' person - I need to see the big picture, understand how all the bubbles are connected, and know where we are going."

**As a leader, how do you make decisions? What or who do you rely on?**

During the LEP, our former Director-General in Education, Ms Seah Jiak Choo, came to speak to us, and one thing she said stuck with me: “In times of crisis, we will always go back to our basic core”. When the rubber hits the road, we will always rely on our basic values and beliefs to guide our actions and decisions. That got me thinking about the kind of values I should have as a leader and what my core beliefs are. So, one of the first things I did as Principal was to share with my teachers my belief that all teachers want to do good because all our students deserve the best. So if a teacher comes to me with a problem, I will work on the premise that she wants to do good and not that she is trying to avoid work. Then our conversation will be more constructive, I will ask the right questions and we can find a suitable solution. I am fortunate to have very good teachers in Jurong Secondary. I work very closely with my middle managers, and we talk openly. If I have to make a particularly difficult decision, I will always consult them.

Ruby counts her blessings for

having good mentors at different stages of her education career who have taught her valuable lessons in leadership. She is grateful to the principals she worked closely with in Jurong Institute and CHIJ St. Nicholas Girls' School, as well as the Deputy Directors she interacted with when she served in the Curriculum Planning and Development Division, for the opportunities to take on different roles and projects that helped broaden her perspectives about leadership. In particular, she learnt the importance of focusing on finding solutions instead of getting caught up in the problem, the need to maintain clarity of direction in the midst of change and uncertainty, the value of clear and open communication, and to always make time for conversations with different stakeholders in the school. She also credits the ordinary heroes in her life - her grandmother, parents and brothers, who modelled resilience and taught her how to stand up for herself.

Ruby has taught pre-university students and served in secondary schools. During the LEP, she also had the chance to work with Yew Tee Primary School on her Creative

Action Project (CAP). It would be interesting to hear her perspectives on the challenges of teaching today's students.

**There is a thinking that students nowadays are difficult to teach. What challenges do you think our teachers face in connecting with our young, and instilling values in them? How can teachers overcome this?**

To me, it is not that students nowadays are more difficult to teach, but that it takes more from teachers now to motivate them to learn. I think students today are no less hungry to learn than students in the past. However, the social context has changed and the typical classroom is perhaps more heterogeneous now because our students' experiences are much more varied. They also have more options and are more forthcoming in asserting their views. One key challenge that many teachers face is how to make learning meaningful for students. Because our young are more exposed, many of them have strong views about the type of learning experiences they want. It is then important for our teachers to connect with them and understand their psyche. I think one



*As Principal of Jurong Secondary, Ruby hopes to better support her students and develop them holistically.*



*As Vice Principal of CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School, Ruby wanted to help her students discover their strengths and explore possibilities in life.*



*As a teacher and Head of Department in Jurong Institute, Ruby saw her role as not just preparing students for higher studies, but also equipping them with the attitudes and skills to live successful lives.*



*Ruby believes that it is important for teachers to be able to connect with students, understand their psyche, and help them find meaning in their learning.*

way that will greatly help us to better engage students is to increase our repertoire of skills so that we can connect with a diverse group of students and help them find meaning in what they are learning. Also, due to the variety of influences that our young are more susceptible to, it becomes all the more important for us to instill the right values in them, and this should start early in their school life.

Ruby went on to share her experience engaging with primary students in Yew Tee Primary for her CAP, and in particular, one incident which reinforced her thinking that values inculcation should begin early in a child's schooling experience.

My CAP focussed on heightening pupil engagement in Character and Citizenship Education, and in one dialogue session with a group of Primary 3 and 4 students, I laid out a few animal-shaped paper clips and got them to identify one that they particularly liked. After that, I allowed them to take the clip they had chosen but the catch was for the youngest in the group to start first. Naturally, not all managed to get what they wanted, and a few of the older students raised their hands to indicate this. I then asked the rest of the group if any of them would willingly give up what they had to these particular students and one girl, without any hesitation, said she would give hers to her senior. She said her father had taught her that if someone else is happier because of her sacrifice, she would be happy as well. Such a big heart she had! And that tells me how malleable young children are and how important it is to mould their character from young.

Ruby believes in raising future leaders and citizens who are resilient and gracious. She emphasises that "education is about the heart" and it is important for educators to engage students' hearts in order to impact their minds.

So how has LEP prepared Ruby for school leadership? And what are her priorities for the Jurong Secondary?

**How different is it between being a Vice Principal and a Principal? How has LEP helped you in your role as school leader?**

When I was a Vice Principal, I could always count on the counsel of my Principal. Now as Principal, although I could go to my Superintendent for advice, most of the time it is really a judgement call and I am accountable for my own decisions. During the LEP, we had many meaningful discussions and activities, and how much we took away was dependent on how much we reflected upon what we had experienced so that we could distil learning that would positively impact our practice. The conversations I had with my syndicate members helped me to clarify and refine my own perspectives, and this is really valuable in preparing me for some of the questions and issues I now face in school. The network of support is also very comforting for first-time Principals like me.

### What are your plans for Jurong Secondary School?

The students here in Jurong Secondary are very good, very teachable and very warm. My teachers work very hard, so I want to help to clarify intent and direction, and create synergies where possible, so that the outcomes of their efforts can be multiplied. For example, I think there is room for us to have more clarity in the outcomes we want to see in our students when they graduate from our school, so that all the efforts we put in for each child are not piecemeal but integrated to achieve the desired outcomes. As we embark on subject-based banding, this is also a good time for us to review our academic programmes to see how we can even better support each child. I'm looking at achieving progressive growth - building from the foundation we have, taking deliberate actions, and keeping an eye on our priorities.

The appointment letter to School Principals reads: "Through your hands passes the future of the nation." Ruby thoughtfully adds, "And our future lies in their hands." Ruby entered the teaching profession because she wanted to make a difference to young lives, and to pass on her love for Geography and Literature. Today, as a school leader, she continues to find her work "meaningful, enriching and rewarding". "For me, the litmus test is this - the day I drag my feet to school is the day I stop finding meaning in what I do. But for now, I am happy to say that I look forward to school every day!"

There is something refreshing about the way Ruby values learning, the way she humbly accepts each new experience as a chance to learn, and the way she takes time to reflect and distil enduring lessons. This avid reader who also likes to knit and cook says her life is simple. But one gets the impression that Ruby Tan's outlook on life is far from simplistic. Perhaps, a glimpse of her perspective may be offered by the words of one of her favourite poems:

**What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.  
No time to stand beneath the boughs  
And stare as long as sheep or cows.  
No time to see, when woods we pass,  
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.  
No time to see, in broad daylight,  
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.  
No time to turn at Beauty's glance,  
And watch her feet, how they can dance.  
No time to wait till her mouth can  
Enrich that smile her eyes began.  
A poor life this if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.**

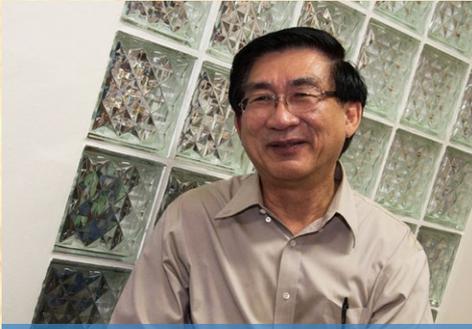
*(William Henry Davies)*



*Ruby values the discussions she had with her syndicate members during the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP), and appreciates the mutual support for one another.*



*Ruby is grateful to her grandmother, parents and brothers, who modelled resilience and taught her how to stand up for herself.*



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## Championing the First President School

*Richard Chew*



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## Taking Leaps of Faith

*Shanti Devi Thambusamy*



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## Feeling the Heartbeat of the Children

*Chua Choon Guan*



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## Experiencing, Reflecting, Growing

*Ruby Tan*

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