

Nurturing talents in the school

Francis Thomas is best remembered as the principal of St Andrew's School from 1963 to 1974. But he was a man for all seasons - he was a politician, a prisoner of war on the Japanese death railway in Burma in World War II, a Minister of Communications and Works from 1955 to 1959 and a social service sector leader. His book, *Memoirs Of A Migrant*, was first published in 1972. Now a new edition of the book, which includes personal photographs and letters provided by his daughter, Margaret, a former journalist, has been published by Ethos Books. It will be launched at the Arts House next Saturday. We present here an excerpt from the book.

By FRANCIS THOMAS

SINCE I became principal, I have given the minimum of time and attention to the formal academic side of our work. I have complete confidence in the competence of our senior teachers to deal with questions of syllabus content and methods. They know much more about their subjects than I can. There is, in any case, very little decision-making to be done; most things are decided centrally for us.

My main job is to provide the business management infrastructure which will release the capacities of staff and students. It has been remarkable how rapidly and competently quite young teachers have taken over major duties and carried them out much better than I could have done. Full delegation is the obvious basis for efficiency in our situation.

We have recently tried to carry this principle of delegation into the student life by setting up a Student Councils scheme. Each class elects its own committee, and the chairman of each class committee sits on the student council for his age group: lower secondary, upper secondary and pre-university.

We hope these councils will develop more self-discipline, self-reliance and initiative among the students. It is too early to say, but the first signs are that this is what is happening. They confirm my belief that Singapore has huge stocks of unused talent and capacity, and that the shortage of local leadership is artificially created by unfavourable institutional structure.

From the time I took over as principal, I have tried to see in what ways the school as an institution was wasting human talent and opportunities. There is no complete way of measuring this, since waste takes place in adult life long after school days are over. But it is obvious that there is great waste in all schools. This must not be treated as a minor matter.

In my first years as principal, I assigned myself the teaching of Malay to the worst Secondary 1 class of each year. This enabled me to meet continually the practical problems of boys doing an unwelcome subject under unsuitable conditions - a class of more than 40 is unsuitable in size for most learning, but especially unsuitable for learning a language where the need for use is high.

The teaching work soon made clear that for a number of boys a new kind of help was needed; something quite beyond what a school can or ought to provide from among its professional teachers. One case can show what I mean.

One little boy showed good intelligence in Sec 1. If he worked rightly, he would have no difficulty in getting a Grade 1 School Certificate and qualifying for pre-university and tertiary education.

But he had defects of character. In practice these showed up mainly in a variety of ingenious stealing episodes and in a certain amount of gang-type activity. He came from poor parents who lived more by hawking than anything else one could identify. I never saw his father, but his mother was a decent old lady.

We struggled with this boy year after year until he was in Sec 4. There we had to expel him and two other

boys from the same original Sec 1 class, who had different but equally serious personality problems.

Expulsion is very rare indeed at St Andrew's. It does not mean we wash our hands of a boy's problems; only we cannot allow him to disrupt the education of other boys, and we have to try other ways to help him. For this boy, we were able to ask our Schools Counselling Service to keep in touch, and through them we provided money for his tuition fees.

We kept him on our Cambridge examinations lists, and at the end of the year he sat and passed the School Certificate. Then the counselling service found him a job at Jurong. He was quite a good worker and we felt hopeful about his future.

After a while, he left his job and moved to a firm nearer his home, and also nearer gang connections. Soon after this, he went with some friends to the New World amusement park on a Saturday night. As they were going home in the Aljunied Road area, they were ambushed by a rival gang. His friends got away, but he had his skull smashed and was dead before the police arrived. The last thing we were able to do for him was to help his parents with the funeral expenses.

This was a wasted life, where talents and opportunities existed above the average, but which was destroyed by circumstances beyond what a school can hope to deal with. Beyond what any formal structure or institution in Singapore can deal with.

His death was part of a new social situation. Trying to understand this new social situation, and what it needs, has been the main preoccupation of my work as a principal.

The book will be available by the end of the month at major bookstores at \$28, before GST.