



Speeches

Speech by Mr Heng Swee Keat, Minister for Education at the Launch of 'Stories Teachers Tell' on Thursday, 2 Feb 2012 at 10.00 am at Greenridge Primary School

Colleagues from MOE

Principals and Vice Principals

Teachers

Ladies and Gentlemen

Girls and Boys

Good Morning

1 In my Parliamentary speech in October, I said, "I would love to see our teachers and writers creating stories for our students, stories that they can instinctively resonate with." I am delighted to be here with you today to launch two very special books consisting of 12 original stories and poems written by our teachers. These were selected from approximately 200 entries submitted as part of a writing competition called, 'Stories Teachers Tell'.

2 Stories are an important part of our lives. Each time we recount an incident or relate an anecdote, we tell a little story. As every teacher knows, stories are a great resource for teaching and learning. We can use a story to illustrate a point, highlight an important value or help us remember things better. Stories are an essential part of any language curriculum. When we provide opportunities for students to tell or dramatise stories, we foster listening and speaking skills. Stories form the backbone of all reading and literacy programmes. Indeed, most of us learnt how to read with simple, illustrated stories.

3 Stories are also important for another reason. The stories we tell reflect who we are and what is important to us. The Singapore Memory Project, which aims to collect, preserve and provide access to memories and stories related to Singapore, shows just how important it is to tell our own stories. These enrich our understanding and appreciation of our past and our present. Hearing, telling and re-telling our nation's stories will help strengthen and deepen our values and beliefs.

Singapore Stories in the Curriculum

4 We started 'Stories Teachers Tell', as we wanted to create English language materials to support the teaching of reading using stories that our children can identify with. The selected and published stories will be the beginning of an anthology of Singaporean stories for children to read for interest and enjoyment.

5 When children can imagine themselves as having things in common with the characters in the stories they read – that these adventures could happen to them – then they become more engaged with what they read. This positive engagement is a crucial step towards building fluency, comprehension and critical appraisal of what is read. For instance, in the story, ‘The Last Wish at the Changi Tree’, the author, Poh Wei Leong, hopes that after reading his story about three boys and a treasure chest, students will be intrigued enough to do some research to find out more about the actual ‘Changi tree’: what species it was, where it was located, when it existed and why it was symbolic.

6 Likewise, Rachel Teo and Stacey Low wrote two very different stories based on a historical event, the great fire at Bukit Ho Swee in 1961. This event in Singapore’s past has been retold through the eyes of a family torn apart and then reunited in ‘Kampong Ablaze’, which was inspired by true events. ‘A Tale of Cats and Mice in Singapore’, on the other hand, retells the story of Bukit Ho Swee in the form of a fable, where experiences are told through the eyes of animals rather than people.

7 By allowing us to retell and re-imagine momentous events of the past, stories enable us to relive the past, as if we were there. Teacher, Poh Wei Leong, reflects that ‘it is good that students can finally read stories about Singapore as part of their journey in learning English, because Singapore stories really warm the heart. Sometimes when I read local stories, I can feel, smell and hear what the author is describing more vividly, as if they were my own experiences. They always remind me that I am a Singapore boy.’

Teaching Values through Stories

8 It is precisely because Singapore stories connect us through shared experiences that we can see the potential of these stories to support values education – to help children understand themselves, their families and the wider environment in which they live. Let me share an example with you. Janice Ng wrote ‘The Fall of the Castle’, which is about how a girl deliberately loses a game of chess to her grandfather even though she could have easily won. Janice says: ‘This story was written with my parents in mind. As I grew older, I became aware that my parents were getting older and initially, due to my ignorance and the lack of patience that are commonly associated with youthfulness, I got annoyed and frustrated with them. This showed in my words and actions. Gradually, as I grew more mature, I could sense the hurt that I was causing them. Although as parents, they quickly forgave and forgot, which I am thankful for, I am still ashamed of my total disregard and neglect of the feelings of others, especially my loved ones. ‘The Fall of the Castle’ was written to convey a child’s growing awareness and maturity as well as the emotions that accompany it.’

9 Another teacher, Quek Si Min, was also inspired by her parents when she penned her story, ‘A Life in Ten Cents’. She says, ‘My parents, especially my father, inspired the story. When I saw the flyer from ‘Stories Teachers Tell’ and dwelled on the question of what stories I think Singaporean children should read and remember, I immediately thought of the stories that my parents told me. Most are very personal, but I picked out the stories that I felt Singaporean children needed to know; that it was not many generations ago that life was a far cry from life as we know it now.’

10 Kelvin Koh wrote ‘A Meal to Remember’ based on a real-life encounter he had while having a meal at a hawker centre in Bukit Merah. His story describes the struggles of the elderly whose children have abandoned them. He hopes that readers will work hard and strive for success but never forget the people who helped make them who they are today and that they remain filial and always care for their parents. This and other stories remind us of our shared values through ordinary, everyday things. ‘The Magic Box’ by Samuel Goh, ‘The Games We Played’ by Koh Ser Lian and ‘The Reunion Plate’ by Trinity Wang tell of the arrival of television in our homes in the 1960s, of kampong games and of ancestral traditions, but underlying these diverse stories are messages about the importance of family, kinship and community.

11 By having our teachers write for the curriculum, 'Stories Teachers Tell' also encourages our teachers to grow creatively and professionally. Teachers know their students best. They have an in-depth knowledge of the curriculum and how it relates to their teaching objectives. The stories our teachers write often relate directly to their students' experiences as well as their social and emotional needs. Yap Chwee-Pheng was inspired by her Primary 1 pupils to write 'Big School'. She recreates the excitement of starting primary school, helping to allay the fears and anxiety that some young children experience. Chwee-Pheng hopes to use her poem to reassure her young charges and, at the same time, motivate them to be aspiring writers.

12 Similarly, 'Taxi Taxi' by Lim Lean See and 'My Pasar Malam' by Susan Neo have been written specifically for lower primary children so that they can relate to familiar contexts – such as the people and places that a taxi-driver encounters, or the sights and sounds of a night market. When teachers write, they inspire their students to write as well, not compositions for practice, but stories to share and read for enjoyment.

13 The teachers who wrote these prize-winning stories come from a broad cross-section of our schools – primary, secondary and pre-university. They are teachers of English Language, Literature, History, Aesthetics and Biology. I am encouraged by the creativity and imagination of our teachers, by the range and diversity of the themes and topics they have chosen, as well as the different narrative techniques they have adopted.

14 This first set of 12 stories will be the beginning of a collection of Singapore stories that we will incorporate in the school curriculum, initially at the primary and lower secondary level. You will notice that each story has been carefully edited and leveled. Leveling means that each text has been evaluated in terms of content and language and assigned a recommended reading age.

Launch of Open Category

15 From 2012, we will expand the scope of the writing competition and invite more contributions so that we can have stories at the pre-school and upper secondary level as well. It is therefore my pleasure today to announce that in addition to 'Stories Teachers Tell' (a category for teachers), we will have an open category from this year onwards. I invite all Singaporeans, including our students, to write and contribute their stories. The best entries will be published by MOE as stories for our teachers to use in the classroom, that is, stories for teachers to tell.

Conclusion

16 I would like to thank the Academy of Principals (Singapore) for their support in co-organising 'Stories Teachers Tell'. I congratulate the teachers for their wonderful, heart-warming stories. I hope that with this competition, we can encourage more Singaporeans to tell their own story. I would like especially to encourage our students to contribute their stories, for the Singapore Story is one that each and every one of us is a part of. Thank you.

Copyright ©2012 Ministry of Education, Singapore. All rights reserved.

Last updated on 1/01/10