

# PRINCIPIA

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## LEADING NATIONALLY

DGE Ms Ho Peng

DGE Ms Seah Jiak Choo

DGE Mr Wee Heng Tin

DOE Mr John Yip

DOE Mr Chan Kai Yau

### ALWAYS LEARNING

— DGE Ms Ho Peng  
(2010-2015)

### ASCENDING THE HEIGHTS

— DGE Ms Seah Jiak Choo  
(2004-2009)

### EDUCATION IS A LIFELONG JOURNEY

— DGE Mr Wee Heng Tin  
(1996-2004)

### THE TRUE VALUE OF EDUCATION

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(1987-1996)

### YOU REAP WHAT YOU SOW

— DOE Mr Chan Kai Yau  
(1975-1982)



# President's Message

This is a very special year as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of Singapore's beginning as an independent nation. The trepidation with which we first started is well documented. Yet there was a confidence that we could survive, with method, rational thinking and an emphasis on excellence.

For us in schools, the steady changes that have since established our education system as world-class are best reflected in the story of five Director-Generals of Education (DGEs) some of whom started teaching before independence.

As you read about the steady stream of initiatives that came under each of their watches, you will see the history of some of those changes and their initial impact while of course you may well be experiencing first-hand the longer-lasting effects.

Earlier DGEs (though they were called Directors of Education initially) will also bring a breath of an earlier Singapore, of a salient Chinese stream of education, of technical schools and integrated schools, of the VITB that preceded today's ITE, and of CDIS and its role in ramping up the quality of teaching in the early days.

I believe you will also be intrigued at the very different personalities that have led our Education Service. Mr Chan Kai Yau is your quintessential civil servant, dignified and responsible. Mr John Yip has never lost his fighting spirit, holding to what is true. Mr Wee Heng Tin remains the equable, patient and calm gentleman that steered the great ship of MOE. Ms Seah Jiak Choo continues to inspire with her outdoor spirit that always looks for the big perspective. Ms Ho Peng is the inimitable nurturing educator. Yet, they all had one common goal – to improve the lot of teachers and students through education so that they will be lifted up and society with them.

**Chan Poh Meng**

*President, Academy of Principals (Singapore)*

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# Always Learning

– Ms Ho Peng

Reminiscing over her past as MOE's recently retired Director-General of Education, Ms Ho Peng (2009-2015) gave me some personal glimpses of a woman born into simple circumstances, but who overcame the odds with dogged determination and perseverance. Both parents migrated to Singapore after the war with little in hand. Her father was a clerk in an insurance company, while mum became a homemaker when the children came. She grew up in a two-roomed SIT flat along Alexandra Road before the family moved to their own home when she was 16. As the second child in a family of four children, she was surrounded by books in her growing up years. Both parents were avid readers, and the children were exposed to Chinese classics, as well as English history and literature from young. The family had a daily subscription to the Straits Times, an English newspaper and the Nanyang Shang Bao, a Chinese newspaper. This gave her a good bilingual foundation. She credits her late mother, Madam Chan Chiew Ping, as being her greatest source of inspiration. She was self-taught, fiercely independent, a great cook, learnt to sew, enjoyed playing gu-zheng (the Chinese harp), practised tai chi, drove a car and attended English lessons at the local Community Club well into her 70s.

Her mum possessed tenacity of spirit and was a pillar of strength despite her lack of formal education. *"Mum led by example and the four children were immersed in the two languages very early in life under mum's daily supervision. There were no distractions in those days - life was simple."* She fondly remembers the family enjoying simple pleasures such as jam sessions, her father playing the violin by ear while his young daughters would bang on the piano with the neighbour's children hitting a cooking pot as the drum.

*"2015 is a special year of honouring our past and yet looking forward to the future. Schools are organizing events to help students appreciate the pioneering spirit of the older generation. Yet at the same time, it is important that our young see themselves as the pioneers of their generation, for them to develop the courage and tenacity to take Singapore forward into the future. This is our hope in them."*



Books and music were, and still are, her constant companions. She is thankful that her parents instilled deep within her the love of reading. She learnt the piano and was drawn into the military band at both secondary school and junior college. Marching under the sun and rain and in two national day parades was the best way of developing an inner toughness and sense of being a Singaporean at a time when the 'rugged society' was very much in vogue. Being a drum major taught her valuable life skills - caring for others, the importance of discipline, strict punctuality and the spirit of never giving up. This environment of 'always learning' moulded and shaped who she is today.

School was enjoyable and fun. She made good friends whose friendships have withstood the test of time. In secondary school, students were given much autonomy to organise events and activities. She relished the time when she and her schoolmates wrote to factories for visits, hired the buses and got schoolmates to go. She also remembered staging "The Barretts of Wimpole Street", a literature text then, she playing the part of Mr Barrett, given her height.



Ho Peng retired on 1 April after serving in the education service for 36 years, wanting to spend more time with family, especially her elderly father. *"As a caregiver, I felt guilty when at one visit to the eye surgeon, the nurse asked if my dad wore glasses. I said yes, and was corrected by my helper; 'Ma'am, kung kung doesn't wear glasses anymore.'"*

**So what drove her?** *"My staff and colleagues kept me going. I drew strength from watching how they would put in their best to get the best possible outcome. The directors were a cohesive group, lending support to one another. The younger officers were eager to learn, and it was immensely enjoyable spending time with them. Being single too, I had more time to devote my life to work. I have great admiration for colleagues who are parents and yet would go the extra mile at work."* What gives her the most satisfaction is how the education system has all come together through teamwork and commitment through the years.

As an idealistic young teacher teaching General Paper and History, Mr Wee Heng Tin, her principal, was someone whom she looked up to. *"He exemplified what one sees in a leader and a professional. Soft spoken, sincere, blessed with an unflappable calmness, he had a quiet gravitas that drew the teachers' respect. He had foresight and strong convictions, and the courage to carry out what he thought was right for the college then. He also had a genuine respect for people, and cared for teachers' welfare. These were qualities I remember when I ran my own school years later."*

### Looking Back at Major Changes in Education

*"There have been several major changes in the Singapore education system since I first became a teacher in 1979. What is apparent is the breadth of study options now open to students. Over time, many pathways have been provided at secondary school level. This has allowed for more choices so students could progress at their own pace. Schools are so much better equipped today, both in terms of infrastructure, facilities and equipment."*

*"The quantity and quality of teachers has also improved vastly. The professionalism of teachers is very evident these days with more opportunities given to them to advance in different ways. We are now developing teachers such that they can specialize in teaching students with more distinct needs. In the last couple of years, we have introduced a range of support programmes such as the 'I-Can' which really helps kids who are struggling with learning. I see that as we move on as a system, the level of skills of teachers will continue to grow. This is the greatest investment we can have for future generations of children."*

*"Yes, we have seen both qualitative and quantitative changes to the education system, especially in the last 20 years."*

As Director-General of Education till her recent retirement, she saw her greatest challenge in changing the mindsets of teachers and parents, helping them to accept the idea that success in education is defined not so much by the 'A's one gets in examinations, but rather, what the child has gained in terms of intangible, non-quantifiable qualities in his/her character. It became an overriding goal to help schools, teachers and parents see that education goes beyond ensuring students do well academically. With passionate fervour, she believes that developing a child holistically is crucial for the future, *"an important responsibility of our work."*





### Looking towards Education Systems in other countries

The 21st century competencies that are now so much a part of a school's plans were formulated during Ho Peng's watch.

*"In 2007, I led a small team to various systems to study the focus of education in these countries. These study trips yielded rich insights. From our scans and study trips, we drew up the 21st century competencies, dividing them into three sets - Civic Literacy, Global Awareness, Cross Cultural Skills & Understanding because we are becoming so interconnected with the rest of the world; Creative and Inventive Thinking to generate new ideas that can bring Singapore forward; and, Information and Communication Skills, which would help develop the confidence in our young, and enable them to be plugged strategically into technology." It was a bellwether for schools and teachers. While the various sets had appeared now and then on the horizon, through conferences and readings and single initiatives, this 'swiss roll' as it came to be known, connected all the pieces. "But how do you translate all this into your everyday teaching? We review syllabuses once every six years and work these in. But the tight curriculum time remains always a challenge."*

### Is there any particular country that has an education system we can emulate?

*"A key strength of the Singapore education system is that we do not look to any one particular system abroad. As a ministry, we undertake study trips from time to time- to understand the systems of other countries and to draw lessons from them. Do we emulate any particular system? I would say no, but we do pick up many tips and good ideas. What is to some extent reassuring is that while the context in each country differs, many do face similar challenges such as closing the gap between the haves and have-nots; and reaching out to the struggling learners. Interestingly, in the last 10 years, there has been a steady stream of overseas visitors to learn from us, from the United States to Bhutan."*



*Ultimately, the systems and solutions we adopt must sit well within our own cultural and historical context."*

### Big Ideas in CCE

MOE's Character & Citizenship Education (CCE) also came in during Ho Peng's watch. What she is particularly pleased with is the distinctive approach that allows schools to contextualise their own values education programme within CCE's guiding principles, the Big Ideas of "Identity, Relationships and Choices". Ho Peng is confident it will take off well in schools because teachers get to own the curriculum they design, with help and support from the HQ CCE team.

## Building Up A Holistic Education System

What has been the other big rock for Ho Peng was the way the curriculum was viewed. It pained her that some subjects were considered non-core, either because they were not examinable or they were electives. *“Realising holistic education is a key challenge. To this end, specialized academies such as the Singapore Teachers Academy for the aRts (STAR), Physical Education and Sports Teachers Academy (PESTA), English Language Institute of Singapore (ELIS) and the big one - the Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST) - were set up because we wanted to level up teaching competencies and provide quality instruction in the smaller subjects such as PE, Art and Music. If you want quality education, you must have quality teachers who are well-trained. We are addressing this through the academies and steadily growing the number of the master teachers.”*

At the same time, possibly because of the old way of looking at things, teachers of specialized subjects as Art and Music were not many. *“A challenge we face is getting enough trained PE, Art and Music teachers in primary schools. Hopefully by 2018, we should have enough of such trained teachers. Looking at the outcomes, there is clearly a marked difference between having trained and untrained teachers in PE, Art and Music. These teachers now have a much stronger sense of identity; they feel that they belong somewhere and their needs are taken care of.”*

This move came together with another big impetus to make the teaching track an attractive option, to develop a strong base of skilful teachers and to grow teacher leaders to champion their subjects and lead the fraternity. *“The setting up of these specialized professional academies gave the impetus for the strengthening of what we call ‘the teaching track’ - starting off as a teacher, you move up to be a senior teacher, a lead teacher where your responsibilities go beyond school and later a master teacher who can reside in one of these academies. We are focused on identifying very good teachers, bringing them to the academies to inspire other teachers in schools, building up the competencies of all teachers and giving them a stronger identity - thus deepening the ethos of the profession, championed by AST and the academies.”*

Nor was this the only reason for the academies. Ho Peng was concerned with not just having enough teachers but having teachers skilled and with sound values. She saw both the schools as well as the academies as jointly owning the responsibility of building the ethos of the profession and upholding professional standards. *“We are seeing a generational change as younger teachers come on board. Values may change, but there are core values which must remain with us as teachers - care, convictions and commitment. We believe that every child can learn, so a teacher must know how to customize and develop teaching techniques to reach even the slowest child.”*



## The Ideal Roles of a Principal and a Teacher

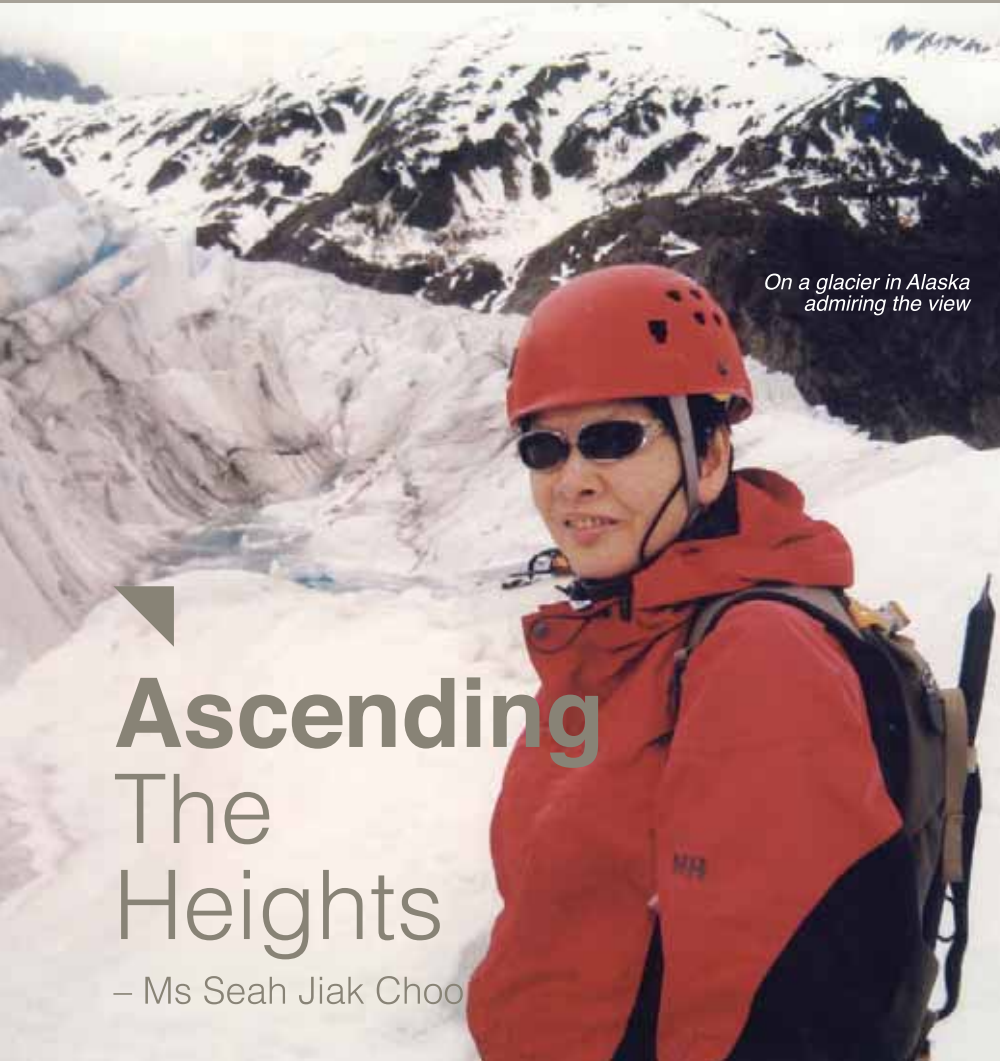
Wanting to be a principal or a teacher is not a vocation for the faint-hearted, but rather a call to individuals desiring to make a difference that would impact the future. Teaching impressionable young minds and leading a school of teachers and students are huge responsibilities, requiring tenacity and courage by educators with a vision for the future.

*“I believe it’s the idealist in us as educators. A teacher should always care for his or her students and go the extra mile, seeing them beyond the classroom. If a child comes to school and doesn’t seem to be himself or herself, you need to ask the child what’s wrong. In reality, it’s hard to do as a teacher has a class of 40 to look after. One of the things we ask of our teachers - and I know that this is something that is not always easy - is that they must get to know every child, especially the form teacher. You must spend time interacting with your students and look out for every available opportunity to be able to do so. The principal, on the other hand, must lead at the school level, be hands-on, and student-centric in trying to meet the needs of all students under their care. This is not easy as they would need to deploy available resources to meet those needs in the best way possible.”*

## Parting Words

*“2015 is a special year of honouring our past and yet looking forward to the future. Schools are organizing events to help students appreciate the pioneering spirit of the older generation. Yet at the same time, it is important that our young see themselves as the pioneers of their generation, for them to develop the courage and tenacity to take Singapore forward into the future. This is our hope in them.”*





On a glacier in Alaska  
admiring the view

# Ascending The Heights

– Ms Seah Jiak Choo

Trekking at high altitudes is more than just a hobby for Miss Seah Jiak Choo - it's a lifelong passion. A favourite personal quote she made up had me chuckling: *"We were not created to be indoor plants but sadly, many of us are just that."* She says that increasing stress at work, being desk-bound for long hours and experiencing much anxiety over personal and work issues are all signs that one hasn't really taken care of oneself and this constant state of being sedentary is likely to result in health challenges sooner or later. *"We all need to get outdoors and smell the roses more often."*

She takes her own advice and looks forward to regular holiday treks in different parts of the world as it gives her something to look forward to, forces her to constantly keep fit, exercise and train no matter how busy she gets, and motivates and encourages others to follow her example. *"Exercise by way of hikes, walks and jogs, has always helped me maintain clarity*

*and balance. I take time to pray, think through how to solve problems at work and even compose short speeches as I walk or jog. I have always advocated spending time outdoors to recharge and reconnect with self and nature."*

The physical challenges and group dynamics involved in group trekking also taught her a lot about the uncertainty of life. *"The unknown terrain ahead, unpredictable weather conditions and different fitness levels among the people you are with, are part and parcel of the challenge - mishaps and things going wrong in this unique environment are a given. You've just got to be prepared for anything and everything!"*

What has given Miss Seah the most satisfaction in her 32-year career is seeing her students grow up into responsible, caring adults. *"Imagine the satisfaction of seeing some of your naughtiest students become teachers and aspiring to be principals, so that*

*"Study how water flows in a valley stream, smoothly and freely between the rocks. Also learn from holy books and wise people. Everything - even mountains, rivers, plants and trees - should be your teacher."*

— Morihei Ueshiba



*they can, so to speak, 'pay it forward'. Seeing my students change and grow over time is my greatest reward. Passion, purpose and perseverance are key to success in any worthwhile project. Passion is especially important because it is contagious and keeps you going when the going gets tough.*

*As a young teacher in the profession, I was mentored and inspired by very good teachers. Many were enthusiastic, passionate, humorous and caring - and that all rubbed off on me. I found that as teachers, we ourselves are always learning - there is always something new to learn from everyone we meet."*

Ms Seah joined the Education Service as a teacher in 1977, teaching in Raffles Institution and Raffles Junior College, and was later promoted to Principal of Tanjong Katong Secondary School from 1990-1993. She also held various appointments in MOE, in curriculum planning, testing & assessment and school supervision. She rose through the ranks to become the Director of Schools in 2002 and was subsequently appointed Director-General of Education on 1 April 2004, finishing her 5-year term on 31 March 2009.

During her tenure, she led the transformation of lower primary education with an emphasis on the learning (rather than the teaching) experience. Through the introduction of the SEED (Strategies for Effective Engagement and Development of Pupils in Primary Schools) programme, a ground-up approach for teachers to design the most appropriate strategies and programmes, primary school students were provided with an approach that stimulated learning.

She also contributed significantly to the enhancement of teaching using technology through the development of the third Masterplan for Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Education. She put school leaders at the heart of this drive, challenging them to provide the direction and create the conditions, instead of leaving it to more technology-savvy colleagues. This role school leaders had to play was a tough yet critical one, but it did lead to a distinct and positive cultural shift in innovation with ICT in schools.



As a steady advocate for the professional and leadership development of teachers, Ms Seah also made significant contributions to two comprehensive reviews to enhance the recognition of the teaching profession in recent years.

#### **Instilling professionalism among the teaching force through the years**

*"Professionalism is putting the interest of our students at the centre of everything we do and doing the best we can through upgrading and sharing knowledge, skills and resources. Over the years we have created many platforms to do this - harnessing technology, encouraging teacher-led workshops, setting up centres of excellence for teaching and learning, forming learning communities, just to name a few."*

Even as Director of Schools, Ms Seah felt strongly that she needed to change the culture of 'us' and 'them' that seemed to divide the schools from the HQ. Principals still remember her stringent and apt description of Team A and Team B and her unequivocal remark that there was only Team A.

*"My ultimate objective in helping principals see that they and HQ were part of the same team was that in working together we can achieve more - and get to where we want to*

*arrive faster. A lot of energy is wasted when people in the same organization pull away from each other rather than pull together. Increasing trust and understanding between principals and HQ just makes good sense. When we think and operate in terms of "we" and "us" instead of "they" and "them" we are more nimble, sure-footed and have more helping hands."*

SARS was the ultimate test of this. Under Ms Seah's direction, HQ had to put out a centralized tracking programme and schools had to follow through to make that tracking meaningful and effective. "SARS in 2003 tested the strength of our teamwork, but I would say we came through that period very well."



Since the late 1970s, the junior colleges have had a provisional admission exercise followed three months later by a final admission. It was extremely disruptive but was thought to be unchangeable because of the timing of the release of the GCE O level results.

*"Combining teamwork with innovation adds value. One of the changes I was involved in was bringing forward the release of the 'O' level results by 6 weeks, which enabled us to streamline Pre-U admission and gain valuable curriculum time.*

*That one change involved many innovations and careful handling of each innovation. Obviously, we cannot compromise the quality of any of the deliverables. All innovations involve teamwork - diverse talents pooled together to achieve a compelling goal; and I was privileged to work with many passionate innovators".*

### The TSLN initiative

*"The Thinking Schools Learning Nation (TSLN) initiative launched in 1997 by our then Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, was a significant milestone that impacted my early career right from the start. That vision heralded the shift toward emphasizing thinking skills in our curriculums and examinations, which was crucial, given that our students need to be well-prepared for a world where answers to problems are not going to be found in textbooks or model answers."*

School leaders of earlier decades remember the school inspectorate system where schools operated in silos, with little collaboration and an uneven understanding of HQ policies. It was replaced by the Cluster System. As with all new systems, its beginnings were a foray into new relationships where inspectors and principal had to re-draw their patterns of interaction. Ms Seah's role as Director of Schools in 2002 did much to develop these relationships so

that it went beyond a mere reporting system to one that promoted growth at several levels across schools. Ms Seah saw the school cluster system as *"fertile ground for the spreading of best practices among schools. Today, new principals have a natural and ever-expanding network of more experienced principals to learn from. The Cluster System has enabled all our school leaders to level up quickly through synergy, sharing and mutual support"*.



With colleagues at a training course

### TLLM Prepares Students for Life

Perhaps the one programme that will draw most recognition from school leaders in the last decade will be TLLM or Teach Less Learn More. Coined succinctly by the Prime Minister at his inaugural National Day Rally in 2004, it was taken up with celerity by the Ministry of Education because it neatly encapsulated what educators had been long sensing – that students were imbibing a lot yet not necessarily learning. *"The "Teach Less, Learn More" (TLLM) approach is aimed at teaching better, engaging learners, building character and preparing students for life. All teaching should be aimed at preparing students well for the uncertain future that they will face. Obviously, students would need more than just content knowledge to do well in life. 'Teach less' is a call to examine what we teach and how we teach it. Are we merely spoon feeding large amounts of content? Are we willing to consider other options to facilitate the acquiring of knowledge and skills, which may be more effective in producing curious life-*

*long learners? 'Learn more' speaks to students about taking ownership of their own learning and finding enjoyment in their studies. Granted that we are always hard pressed for time but we should not short-change our students by doing the learning on their behalf. Figuring out how to get students to take more initiative and be more engaged in their own learning should always be our priority. That would give our students an aptitude that would serve them well in life".*



### Parting Words

An educator never retires. True to the calling of shouldering the mantle of education, there is no end to teaching and learning. Ms Seah continues to contribute to MOE in the capacity of an advisor to the Ministry on the professional and leadership development of the teaching profession as well as other education matters. *"I am glad to return to teaching - I just love to teach. I have opportunities to teach in the LEP and when invited, at zonal seminars involving school leaders and teachers. I am teaching the Bible in adult classes at my church and I enjoy that tremendously. Just as I've been trekking for well over 20 years, I will continue to explore new heights and wider horizons in 2015 and beyond."*



# Education is a Lifelong Journey

– Mr Wee Heng Tin



Mr Wee receiving the Meritorious Service Medal from former President S.R. Nathan in 2004

Mr Wee Heng Tin (DGE from 1996-2004) thoroughly enjoyed his well-rounded exposure to different facets of his work at MOE. He put his hand to the plough diligently, resulting in him seeing the big picture and realizing the enormity of the task of education. If anything, it kept him firmly grounded, the reality sinking in quickly that it takes many 'heads' to run a school. Even more so an entire nation's education system!

He is very grateful to the late Minister Mentor Mr Lee Kuan Yew who, in the late 50s and 60s, had allowed some Chinese-stream students to enrol in the then University of Malaya (now the National University of Singapore).

*"I was among the first batch of Pre-University students to take on the challenge of tertiary learning in the English medium and made the transition only through sheer determination and hard work. Little did I know then that this opportunity would pave the way for my future career in education. MM Lee still inspires me with his idealism, guts, charisma and genuine desire to serve the people of Singapore. My other source of inspiration was my mother, who had a difficult time putting me through university – fees were high back then and she made many sacrifices for the sake of my education, at least for the first year. I subsequently received a government scholarship."*

As with the other Director Generals interviewed who entered the profession as teachers, Heng Tin was an idealistic, fresh-faced young man, who, at 24, passionately wanted his students at Beatty Secondary to succeed in their studies, eventually to become good citizens and responsible parents. Reality hit home hard when he discovered that getting a holistic education was a far cry from their goal - most of his students (and their parents) just wanted a basic qualification to help them find a job.

But Heng Tin never gave up on his quest to inculcate good values and build character in his students. He spent 3 years (1964-1967) honing his teaching and leadership skills at Beatty



*“In all my 39 years and 9 months in the Education service, I’ve been in only one profession, yet actually performed many types of jobs - my MOE postings have included teaching, heading secondary schools & junior colleges as a principal, supervising schools and principals, taking charge of administration and personnel matters, overseeing libraries and text books and even PE (Physical Education) lessons.”*

before heading to the US to undertake his Masters’ in Education. On his return, he taught very briefly at Raffles Institution (where he met his school teacher wife Linda) and later at National Junior College in 1969 (when it was first set up) as the HOD of the Science department, teaching physics.

*“In December 1971, I was offered the opportunity of a lifetime - to become the principal of Dunearn Secondary School. I was only 31 then, a relatively young age in those days to advance up the career ladder. Seniority was often the deciding factor and I was taken aback – I would not have dreamt of ever becoming a principal at that age.”*

Embracing this appointment with open arms, Heng Tin began exercising his leadership skills on the job and cherished, in particular, the time he spent personally nurturing and guiding his teachers, inculcating not just the values that came with being an educator, but also encouraging them to experiment and try out ideas and implement curriculum concepts they might have. He continued to demonstrate his exemplary leadership skills as a further opportunity presented itself in 1977 when he became the founding principal of Temasek Junior College, the second government junior



A family vacation

college to be set up. That leadership experience within a brand new post-secondary institution proved to be a steep learning curve, but one where he developed greater self-awareness. Growing in stature, wisdom and experience, a few years later in 1980 he was charged with heading National Junior College as its principal at the (still) relatively young age of 39.

Unknowingly, he would later become a teacher and mentor to fellow DGEs Ms Ho Peng and Ms Seah Jiak Choo, inspiring them with his unique teaching concepts and far-sighted ideas, humility and compassion. Those under his watch commented that he led with a heart that understood their needs and concerns. *"I'm a less formal person - I like to walk about when I talk, not being in front of a desk. I prefer the soft approach in communicating as it's non-threatening and gets the message across without fear."*

He took the same approach in introducing the concept of National Education, first mooted by Mr Lim Siong Guan, the then Permanent Secretary of MOE. When communicating to principals the importance of building pride in the students for the future prosperity of the nation, he reminded them that *"No one owes us a living. Students needed to see that the success of Singapore did not come easy and if they wanted Singapore to continue to be independent, they needed to work hard."*

The implementation of National Education was widely reported in the media and, alongside it, ideas of enhancing education using IT, which had the strong possibility of lifting up standards of teaching and learning, both inside and outside the classroom. A programme was piloted at Crescent Girls School, the student-centric approach was good for the students and MOE decided to go full steam ahead with IT on a nation-wide basis. *"We needed a roadmap, a plan that would guide us from one stage to another. So we engaged a consultant to help us craft a Masterplan for IT, a national-level school programme on how to use IT to benefit students. Our main goal was to provide every school*

*with adequate facilities and resources – computers and servers as well as basic equipment – to facilitate user-friendly learning."* Looking back at the events that unfolded thereafter, he reflects that this initiative was largely responsible in propelling Singapore to the forefront of technology today.



Described as a man ahead of his time and a true visionary, Heng Tin understood the relevance of principals and schools assessing and asserting themselves while taking ownership of what they were doing. *"When you own something, you would really want to take care of it, you will cherish it. It makes you automatically responsible and builds excellent leadership skills."* He is therefore fully in support of the 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' (TSLN) vision - where teachers teach and students learn, but also where both students and teachers are given periods of quiet time just to think. Where they are given room to come up with new ideas, they become thinking individuals. If everybody within a school thinks, the school then becomes a thinking school! As Director of Education at the time, he was not a part of the team that articulated this vision, but nonetheless he played his part, changing the mindset of school principals and teachers so that students were not merely expected to regurgitate what they learn, but were given the room to express their individual ideas and concepts.

As an extension of thinking individuals, the concept of lifelong learning extends beyond one's years of formal education, however young or old, where citizens then form a learning nation. He quotes a famous saying of Confucius *"You live to a very old age, You learn to a very old age"* meaning you learn as long as you live, it never stops.

### Parting Words

*"We learn new things everyday as long as we are alive. So we train our students to face an uncertain future with a well-rounded education. It is my belief that given Singapore's constraints, its future depends on the future of education - how well we teach our students and how well the education system performs. Without proper leadership in education, Singapore will not have a bright future."*







# The True Value of Education

– Mr John Yip

*“On reflection, things I would like to see, which are not under my control, are focused on the state of education in Singapore. I’ve spent my whole life pursuing excellence in education, which is very close to my heart. I’m quite concerned about education. How we perform as a system - are we forming character and personality, giving kids the right balance? I’m sure the schools are doing that, but is society, unwittingly, negating some of these things? Life is not about making money, yet we value materialism above many things. If you are making lots of money, you are seen to be successful. If not, your life is deemed to be a failure.*

*What is the true value of Education? – it isn’t just about books. It isn’t merely reading and acquiring knowledge, it’s learning how to behave, how to hold oneself up, how to live life and understand what life is really all about, how we relate and interact with people, how we live as a community, how we see ourselves through the eyes of others – this is what getting an all-rounded education is all about! Are we getting these messages across to our students?”*

## **Looking back at his own life with much satisfaction**

Reminiscing on his lifetime in the education service over coffee, banana bread and ginger cookies, John Yip relived his formative years in St Joseph’s Institution. *“I lived close enough to be able to hear the school*

*bell ringing and looked forward to learning new things everyday. The pace of life was relaxed, learning was fun and there was no pressure to excel – my teachers stressed character formation and personality development instead of academic achievement.”* He credits three particular teachers, upper secondary Science teacher Mr Sng Yew Chong, Standard 5 form teacher Mr Rappa and English teacher Mr Peter Paul Gomez, as being major life influencers, in particular the way they instilled their love of knowledge in a fun way, so much so that John’s childhood dream of becoming an educator was shaped and moulded by his own positive experiences as a schoolboy.

Inspired and deeply motivated by his teachers at St Joseph’s Institution, he wanted nothing more passionately than to teach. He believes it was deeply ingrained in his DNA as a young boy. And now, having enjoyed an illustrious career in the Education service for more than 36 years (particularly his tenure as Director of Education from 1987-1996), he affirms that he wouldn’t have traded his chosen lifelong career in education for anything. He spent nine years teaching at Raffles Institution and later at Tanjong Katong Secondary Technical School, honing his teaching skills, before he was posted as acting School Principal to Kim Seng Technical Secondary School and then New Town Secondary School. The latter school (a merger of 2 schools, Baharuddin Vocational School and New Town Secondary School) with an enrolment



*With the passage of time, John is now ready to embrace a new phase of life, whatever it may be, always reminding himself that a true educator never loses his salt - or retires. Once an educator, always an educator!*

of 3,600 students exposed him to a bi-lateral co-existence of both academic and technical education in both English and Chinese streams - and also taught him the importance of the greater need for discipline. He recalls some of his more memorable experiences while at Kim Seng Technical Secondary School (now closed) which was just opposite Great World – in particular, hauling his schoolboys and schoolgirls (with the guidance of a torchlight) out of Great World, Globe and Sky World cinemas and pool halls - *“a good number of kids were caned in this particular school but a lot of good came out of it. Some of them came back to see me as adults and thanked me for the discipline. Such are the rich rewards I have reaped through the years and this has made my life very meaningful”*.

### John swallowed a Fishbone

A catastrophic incident in 1973 brought John back full circle to MOE – and he still jokes about it today – he literally swallowed a fishbone, which entailed two painful surgeries, resulting in one of his vocal chords being damaged. His voice now significantly diminished, he came to MOE headquarters and focused his skills on developing school appraisal systems, planning classroom curricula and primary and secondary school syllabuses. As Director of Schools in charge of Primary and Secondary schools, he felt strongly that principals, vice principals and teachers should be well-trained and that schools were not being properly developed



and thus largely ineffective. To combat this, he identified training experts overseas who were able to advise on leadership development and set many programmes in motion to improve these areas. John also helped set up the Singapore Educational Administration Society to raise the professionalism of principals and HQ officers.

As Assistant Director of Education (Curriculum) from 1973 and Chairman of Curriculum Development Committee from 1987, he implemented fundamental changes to the system largely to raise the standards of teaching to make it more responsive to the needs of pupils of different abilities - all of this arising from a deep sense of accountability. He also

looked at the role of inspectors - and how they were not working closely in collaboration with principals for the betterment of students - and realized something had to be done. *“Pupils are at our forefront - they need to imbibe good values and learning habits . In order for that to happen, proper training of educational professionals was needed.”* An open university degree programme (OUDP) was set up to upgrade non-graduate teachers to graduate status; at the same time the Institute of Education was re-structured as NIE, offering degree programmes for new entrants into the profession. Graduate teachers began to replace non-graduates, especially at secondary levels. Principals began having more autonomy over their schools. *“We needed teachers and principals with broader mindsets to embrace and lead the education system.”*

### Giving Adults A Second Chance

Being driven and fuelled by passion and tirelessly acting on what you believe is gratifying and which makes life more meaningful described John, even after retirement from MOE. A firm believer in giving adults a second chance at getting a degree, John became personally involved in the development and advancement of the OPEN University under the SIM Open University Centre which introduced degree offerings to working adults through the OUDP and partnerships with reputable overseas universities. He took on a second career as Executive Director and CEO of the



Singapore Institute of Management (SIM) in January 1997 soon after his retirement from MOE at the end of December 1996. Such was his depth of passion that his initial two-year stint at SIM extended itself to six and a half years. Whilst at SIM, John played a major role in conceptualizing two universities, the Singapore Management University (SMU) and SIM University (UniSIM).

He retired from full-time employment at SIM in 2003, but continues to be associated with education, serving a number of international schools in an advisory capacity. Today, the Singapore Management University (SMU) and SIM University (UniSIM) offer higher education opportunities for working adults, all thanks to John Yip's tireless efforts.

### The Power of the Pen

In 1990, John co-edited the book *"Evolution of Educational Excellence"* with Dr Sim Wong Kooi, Director of the Institute of Education, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Singapore as an independent nation. It painstakingly traced the Government's efforts in building a good education system. Simultaneously, in 1989/1990, he collaborated with Polytechnic principals and representatives from the Engineering departments of NUS and

NTU and the Director of ITE on another book entitled *"The Development of Technical Education in Singapore"*. Writing and editing both books gave him immense satisfaction and a deep sense of personal fulfilment that he has indeed come full circle in his field.

### Living Life Meaningfully in the Silver Years

*"I like to spend each day happily and meaningfully - even if it entails driving all the way to my favourite haunts in Tiong Bahru market or Toa Payoh Central – just to enjoy a good cup of coffee. One cannot measure the level of joy my wife and I feel soaking in the experience of simply sitting down and watching the world go by!"*

That's not to say he believes in leading a sedentary lifestyle. Once a week, John and his wife don their dance attire and tap shoes - and dance the evening away at a ballroom dancing class. A firm believer in lifelong learning too, his wife is a line-dancing enthusiast, plays the piano under the guidance of a Russian pianist, learns French from a French priest and takes art lessons from a Chinese master, while John takes off to the golf course to improve his social golfing skills and handicap. They both certainly believe in living a well-rounded life – on their recent agenda in March was a cruise where they romantically



headed out to the high seas for 14 days to take in the sights of Vietnam, Hong Kong and Taiwan. They cruise once a year and last year they ventured to the British Isles. John keeps in touch with ex-classmates and ex-colleagues, many of whom have since become close friends.

### Parting Words

With the passage of time, John is now ready to embrace a new phase of life, whatever it may be, always reminding himself that a true educator never loses his salt - or retires. Once an educator, always an educator!





# You Reap What You Sow

— Mr Chan Kai Yau

*“You only  
live once,  
but if you do  
it right, once  
is enough.”*

— Mae West

Mr Chan Kai Yau could have been inspired by Mae West’s quote about living life to the fullest, for he has certainly reaped the benefits of sowing the seeds of education in his lifetime. He reflects, a tad philosophically, on the more than three decades he had spent in Singapore’s Education Service.

*“I came from a family of teachers, the eldest of 8 siblings, so I was also responsible for their welfare – thank God for scholarships in teaching during those early days that got us all through university. My parents were teachers in Beijing and Hong Kong before we settled in Penang before the Second World War. All eight of us siblings essentially grew up in Penang and left Penang for tertiary education in Singapore or Kuala Lumpur. My wife, born and bred in Singapore, co-incidentally was a school teacher and so were her father and sister, so it wasn’t surprising that I ended up in the education field.*

*I started my working life as a teacher with an innate sense of curiosity. I remember being interviewed in 1955 by a British officer who happened to be the Chief Inspector of Schools. He asked*

*me why I wanted to be a school teacher and what kind of teacher I aspired to become in the future. That set me thinking. Many teachers, fellow lecturers and principals had played a part in showing me the ropes back then and confirmed my calling as a lifelong educator.”*

Kai Yau first began working as a teacher in Beatty Secondary School. *“I was someone who simply loved his pupils and enjoyed the process of instilling knowledge in their young minds. There was passion, excitement and a sense of destiny and purpose wrapped up in my dreams of being an educator. I’ve retired for some 30 years now and nothing has given me a greater sense of satisfaction than to have shaped, moulded and influenced the minds of future generations.”*

## Reflecting on Changes to the Education System

Looking back on his role as Director of Education from 1975 to 1982, he reflected on some fundamental changes he had personally implemented during his tenure – especially those which changed the face of education in



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Singapore: streaming in secondary schools in 1978 into Express and Normal classes and streaming in primary schools which began two years after that in 1980 which created a separation into Normal, Extended and Monolingual. *“In reality, these changes were very difficult to implement as there was much resistance – from teachers, parents, pupils and also from within the Education Service itself. The basic reason for streaming was to cut down wastage and the systems engineers who made these proposals felt that streaming was the only way to go – first at secondary level and later at primary level. The 10 year basic school system would no longer be the same.”* To make things more difficult, what was called ‘normal’ was not then the norm. Since before independence, the norm had been six years primary education and four years of secondary education. With streaming, four years of secondary education was now called the ‘Express’ route while the so-called ‘Normal’ route was extended to five years in secondary education. Similarly, six years primary education was extended to seven and eight years. *“These changes caused much confusion at the time.”*

In implementing the national policy to reduce the attrition rate, the process of acceptance took much time and patience. *“Indeed in educational matters, a minimum period of 15 years is required to settle in and see results. Thus we have to wait patiently while the proposed changes set in.”* In the meantime the process led to unintended labelling because of streaming, especially in secondary levels. *“One main reason is also because every child develops at his or her own pace, and talent takes time to develop.”*

Alongside streaming, various committee studies into Vocational and Technical Education and the provisions of avenues to prepare academically weaker pupils for vocational careers led to the establishment of the Vocational and Industrial Training Board (VITB) in 1979 to oversee technical education and industrial training. *“VITB centres were established during the late 70s and early 80s and they were necessary to offer some continuity for two to three more years for those who had successfully completed Normal Stream hands-on learning. It also proved to be a viable choice for students*

*with ‘O’ Level qualifications seeking a different path from junior colleges and polytechnics. Proper technical training follow-up in whatever field was necessary and helpful for this group of students. The job market at that time was good and successful students could get jobs easily upon graduating from any of the seven VITB centres”.*

But this would not be the only big changes that Mr Chan oversaw.



### An increasing emphasis on English secondary and tertiary education

In the mid-60s through to the 70s, there was a pressing need for a national education system fuelled by the country's economic growth, the post-war baby boom and the job market. Increasing emphasis was placed upon the use of English as the main medium of education – resulting in more opting to do their secondary and university studies in the English medium. Concurrently, enrolment in Chinese-medium schools continued to decline rapidly. *“Indeed, those were tumultuous times of change even as Chinese schools were gradually integrated into the mainstream English medium schools. As a teacher and a Teachers’ Training College lecturer, I had the privilege to teach in both the Chinese and the English language as I am bilingual in Chinese and English. I was educated in Chinese schools and learnt English in these schools in Penang. I was privileged to be the first student educated entirely in a Chinese school to be enrolled directly in the University of Malaya, an English medium university, which subsequently became the University of Singapore. It was quite a transitionary period for me to mix with students from various schools and different ethnic origins – a sort of culture shock, so to speak! However being young, I was able to adapt myself rather well, realizing that we must progress together, make changes together and live together”.*

### The Rapid Rise of Junior Colleges and CDIS

*“Among the more rapid changes in the education scene was the setting up of Junior Colleges in Singapore. The first one to be established was the National Junior College in 1969 and thereafter, there was a rapid proliferation to 8 JCs by the time I retired. I thought this move would be very beneficial, as it’s an excellent way to bridge the wide gap between secondary schooling and university. My team and I set up the programmes and curriculum to cover 8 hours of daily training at JC level, but these days most JCs have longer hours. My grandson currently studies at a local JC and puts in more than ten-hour school days. To some extent, it’s tough, but good as a preparation for university”.*

But while getting students ready for university, Mr Chan also had to get teachers ready for the burgeoning number of students and schools. This was an enormous challenge especially as the graduate pool was limited and some teachers had to teach in English when previously their language of instruction had been the mother tongue. *“To address this, the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS) within MOE was set up to establish Singapore’s own curricula and syllabuses in secondary schools, bearing in mind that we also prepare students for tertiary education overseas. Our specialists in academic subjects would put their heads together and set up the framework for curricula and syllabuses for our schools. Thus we developed Singapore’s very own subject programmes, content and curriculum.”*



School Speech Day 1977



Mr Chan Kai Yau (centre) speaking with Deputy Prime Minister S. Rajaratnam (left) and UN Official Dr Wu Teh-Yao (who co-wrote the Fenn-Wu Report) (right) at a seminar





Mr Chan Kai Yau (in the middle) with Mr Kwan Sai Keong (to his left) in 1973/74. Mr Kwan Sai Keong was the Director of Education and Permanent Secretary, Education, before Mr Chan Kai Yau took on the post in 1975.



### A Satisfactory Career... and Now

*"My work at the Teachers' Training College (TTC) from 1956 till 1965 was profoundly satisfying as I undertook a myriad of roles – as a Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and held positions as Vice-Principal and Principal, as well as conducting courses for the Diploma in Education of our University. Also I was privileged to serve in every possible position within the Education Service, from a school teacher at the beginning to the Director of Education at the end."*

These days, walking through the Botanic Gardens three or four times a week is the highlight of his routine. For this sprightly 80-something retiree, time comes to a standstill as he meanders through the spectacular foliage and tropical flora set in a stunning verdant landscape. It may be more than 150

years old now, but the very picturesque Singapore Botanic Gardens possesses an array of botanical and horticultural attractions with a rich history and a wonderful plant collection. *"I live in a small estate called Kimlin Park, off One Tree Hill and I often wander through the greenery, sometimes for almost an hour, watching nature develop and blossom as the years pass."*

### Blessed with a 3-Generation Legacy of Love

The mere mention of his three grown children and five grandchildren brings a sparkle to his eyes. He and his wife spend their days interacting with them and really enjoy watching them grow up. He and his wife were themselves hands-on parents and shared the roles of child-rearing equally – such that even

now his 20 year old grand-daughter and 17 year old grandson in Singapore share a special closeness as an extended three-generation family living happily under one roof.

### Parting Words

Seeing himself as somewhat of a mentor, Mr Chan seeks to give others the benefit of his lifelong knowledge and vast experience. An active Christian, he has been the Chairman of the Seniors Fellowship/Glowing Years ministry at Barker Road Methodist Church for about 40 years now, setting aside time in giving practical advice and counsel to some church members in their 50s, 60s and 70s. He teaches the Bible regularly and guides young Christians in their walk with God. *"It's a way to act out my Christian faith and I find joy in doing my share for society."*



**ALWAYS LEARNING**

*DGE Ms Ho Peng  
(2010-2015)*



**ASCENDING  
THE HEIGHTS**

*DGE Ms Seah Jiak Choo  
(2004-2009)*



**EDUCATION IS A  
LIFELONG JOURNEY**

*DGE Mr Wee Heng Tin  
(1996-2004)*



**THE TRUE VALUE  
OF EDUCATION**

*DOE Mr John Yip  
(1987-1996)*



**YOU REAP WHAT  
YOU SOW**

*DOE Mr Chan Kai Yau  
(1975-1982)*

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