

PRINCIPIA

Ever Learning



President's Message

As educational leaders, we have become aware that it is not the skills of yesterday that will be needed in the world of tomorrow. That predictability seems to have gone, possibly for a very long time. But while skills may not be literally transferable, an attitude of mind is infinitely so. As a result, the Academy thought it would be interesting to see what other skills or passion our principals had and what they did with it. We found they did a lot.

You will read how Tan Keng Joo has not just gained skill with his interest but has used it as a useful and extremely telling metaphor about the relationship of learning between teacher and taught. Kiran Kumar Gosian had not thought his age-old total involvement, shaped both by environment and personal skill, could so parallel the responses needed in school leadership. Geraldine See's take off the beaten track has made her unexpectedly relevant and significant with today's concerns over the education of the very young. Similarly, an early hobby became a passion that led to effective leadership communication between Boo Hian Kok and his staff and students.

If it is one thing we learn, it is that school leadership is a multi-faceted affair, sometime elusive, occasionally fascinating and invariably always linked with an understanding of human interaction and how people develop and grow.

As we come to the end of yet another busy year, may I wish every school leader a recharged vision for 2017 as you reach down for those other skills in your portfolio that could well change your school or your team's perspective of what is possible.

Chan Poh Meng

President, Academy of Principals (Singapore)



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TAN KENG JOO

[illegible]

The Potter:

How the Clay Shapes Education

Roll and knead, pinch and pull. Working with their hands, 93 teachers and staff were hunched over their tables focused on moulding the greyish clay. Every few minutes, they would raise their heads to look at the instructor in front, expertly twisting and pressing the soft clay into shape.

Following his every move, they stretched and smoothed the clay until it resembled a house. Many were doing pottery for the first time. But their lack of experience was compensated by enthusiasm. After four hours in the large classroom, there were 93 different clay houses ready to be fired in the kiln. The houses were to be arranged into a village, as part of a project called “It takes a village to raise a child”.

The instructor, clearly proud of their achievement, had a wide smile as he shared this story of the pottery class. “We were using this session for team building,” said Tan Keng Joo, part-time pottery instructor and full-time Principal of Chua Chu Kang Secondary School.

The passionate potter learnt the craft more than 20 years ago, and now teaches ad-hoc classes to students and teachers. He just finished four sessions with students from the Art Club in August, coaching them on how

to make clay houses and tea bowls. “As an educator, we want teachers and students to develop holistically,” he said, explaining how pottery helps to develop students and staff who can appreciate both the academic and the aesthetic.

“Pottery is about patience. You need to persevere, as it can take many tries to succeed in making an object,” said Keng Joo who is also the author of two self-published books. His first, which took five years to complete, is a semi-biography on master potter Iskandar Jalil, and the second draws a parallel between pottery and teaching.

Likening clay to students, he said with a poetic rhythm: “Clay has a certain life of its own. You may want to do it, but the clay may not be able to do it. You have to sense the clay. Push it a bit, and it may collapse. Give the right touch, and you can create something beautiful.”

Similarly, he said teachers have to know their students well to recognise their potential for learning and how much pressure to apply to each of them – just like how the potter understands the clay. “Not all clay is the same, not one clay is better than the other. The important thing is to understand



Courtesy of Tan Keng Joo

the clay and bring out its best,” he shared during the interview in his office that was tastefully decorated with his masterpieces – from simple tea bowls to more elaborate sculptures of sea creatures.

ISKANDAR AND I

As it was the September holidays, the school was quiet except for the whirl of the potter’s electric wheel that Keng Joo was using to spin clay into creations. With his sleeves rolled up, he deftly transformed the wet conical mound into a vase, bowl, and water jug. The ease and speed at which he created each object reflected the seasoned hand of a potter with years of experience.

His path to pottery began more than two decades ago, in 1994. He was then in his second teaching posting, at Guangyang Secondary, as Head of Department (HOD) for Science. He had been teaching chemistry for over 10 years and wanted to “develop in other areas”.

“I’ve always had, from a young age, a certain interest in the aesthetics and the arts, an eye for beauty in design,” he disclosed. It started in primary school, when a crayon drawing was pinned up on the class notice board as an example of good art work and he has since dabbled in designing some logos.

He decided to learn pottery for a “practical reason”. “In Singapore’s environment, paper-based art forms tend not to last so long,” he said matter-of-factly, adding that pottery products can last a lifetime and beyond. But he did not know where to learn pottery. So when he found out that Guangyang’s Art Club had pottery enrichment classes for students, he immediately signed up. He was the only teacher in a class full of students.

Did anyone find it odd? He thought for a moment then shook his head. “I don’t think so,” he said, a little surprised by the question which never crossed his mind. “As an educator, you are learning all the time,” he explained. “Sometimes, you are learning with the students, other times, you are learning from the students as they are way ahead in areas like technology.”

Keng Joo’s never-ending quest to learn extended to pottery. After completing the classes in school, he went on to find other courses – from public workshops in community clubs to private group pottery programmes. He also picked up skills by

attending exhibitions and observing master potters at work.

Over the years, he had been observing and following influential artist Iskandar Jalil and even collected several of his pottery pieces that Keng Joo recently lent to the National Art Gallery for display. On why he admires Iskandar, he said: “I like how he is able to tell a story from the things he makes. He uses his art to express feelings and emotions, including on social issues.”

It was the master potter who inspired his first few pottery pieces. When his brother’s wife was pregnant, he “pinched” a piece of clay into a man leaning over to look at a woman’s bulging tummy. He called it “Boy or Girl?”. When his maternal grandfather passed away, he sculpted a clay silhouette figure of his mother dressed in a mourning outfit. It was a manifestation of grief.

In 2003, almost 10 years after he picked up pottery, he decided to write a book on Iskandar and his repertoire of works as he found there was a lack of literature on the artist. The project took five years to complete, including research and writing.

The hardcover book, titled Iskandar Jalil – Dialogue with Clay, was published in 2008. It included photographs that he took of the artist at the Jalan Bahar Clay Studios, where both go to fire their clay creations, and some of their personal encounters. His passion project spanned his leadership in two schools. It started when he was Principal of Ahmad Ibrahim Secondary, and finished when he moved to Canberra Secondary.

Where did he find the time? “I do things very intensely...I don’t believe in wasting time,” said the soft-spoken and skilled multi-tasker who works on pottery at least once a week, usually over the weekend. It can take a few hours to even working through the night as he “has to complete the whole set”, he revealed.

While he did not want to say which pottery sets made him pull overnights, he has a penchant for creating a series of clay art pieces. In 2015, for instance, he made 50 thigh-high flower vases, of different hues and contours, to commemorate Singapore’s 50th year of independence, dubbed SG50 Ceramic Candles. They were exhibited at the Choa Chu Kang Public Library.

He took out two vases to show during the interview. Slim and sleek, they were individually boxed in custom-made wooden containers – testament to the depth of dedication to his craft.

“The satisfaction comes when a student recognises you and greets you years after you have taught them. They remember you, and you feel that you have touched their lives.”

TELLING A STORY WITH CLAY

Whenever he has to use a metaphor to describe education issues, Keng Joo never fails to fall back on pottery. It got him thinking about his next big project – another book. “As I went about doing more pottery, I began to think more about how each process is like raising a child,” he said.

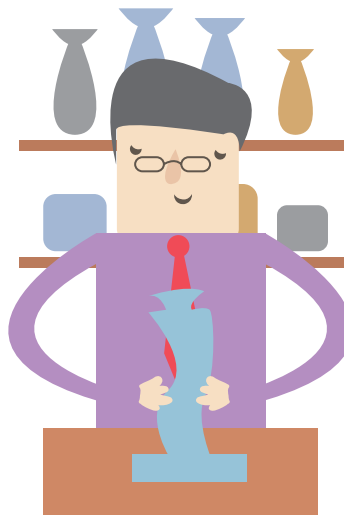
For this second book, the concept took the form of a dialogue between the clay and the potter. “The book explains the process of pottery making, but it’s actually about moulding a child through education,” he said. It took six months to write the book, *What the Clay Asked the Potter*. There are nine short chapters – such as *Understanding the Clay*, *Using the Right Tools* and *Testing by Fire* – and includes discussion guides for teachers, parents and students.

For instance, in one chapter called *Expanding the Capacity*, he deals obliquely with the topic of pressure in Singapore schools. When using the potter’s wheel, a potter holds the wet clay firmly – but not too hard – between his palms to centre it before forming a cup or container. Similarly, in education, “is there a need to apply pressure on children?” he asked rhetorically. “The answer is yes, but how much? The feel is important, and educators must know the right amount of pressure to use.”

To smoothen the process, the potter also uses water to make the clay more malleable and easier to lift on the wheel. The water is like a reward to motivate students, he added. Again, how much water – reward – is needed depends on each student. “Give them too much, and they end up being too soft, like what we call the strawberry generation,” he said with a grin. “But if there’s not enough water, they won’t be able to develop into their full potential.”

This constant search for balance is critical for educators in how they teach and nurture students, said Keng Joo who spent the last 33 years in teaching and leadership positions in various schools.

He started at Raffles Junior College (RJC) as a chemistry teacher for 10 years, before moving to Guangyang Secondary as a HOD where he started learning pottery. From there, he was made Vice Principal of Xinming



Secondary and subsequently Principal of Ahmad Ibrahim Secondary and Canberra Secondary. In 2011, he stopped teaching for four years when he was posted to the Ministry of Education’s (MOE) School Appraisal Branch. This was the time when he wrote his second book, and in 2015, he moved to Chua Chu Kang Secondary.

Summing up his career, he said: “The satisfaction comes when a student recognises you and greets you years after you have taught them. They remember you, and you feel that you have touched their lives.” He recalled how a former student from RJC was loitering outside his class at Guangyang Secondary. “He came all the way to tell me he got a scholarship to study at Harvard,” he smiled at the memory.

These memories and experiences have made his journey meaningful as an educator, a job that was not at the top of his mind when he applied for a degree.

CHEMICAL REACTION TO TEACHING

In 1980, a young Keng Joo was ecstatic at being accepted to read chemical engineering at the National University of Singapore. The Raffles Institution student had also applied for a Public Service Commission (PSC) scholarship to study overseas, but he was given the local teaching scholarship instead.

With a heavy heart, he gave up chemical engineering to study chemistry to



prepare for this teaching career. But since then, he has no regrets, he stressed, as he was still learning and applying what he loved – chemistry.

Along the way, he formed his teaching philosophy that comprises four key points. One, acquire knowledge so as to impart knowledge. Two, pedagogy is critical as how teachers impart knowledge makes a difference to how students absorb the information. Three, teach students not just about the subject but also about life. Four, a teacher has to be a learner too.

“Only then will the student put down his defence and be taught by you,” he said, referring to his fourth point where students learn better when teachers adopt a learning attitude. It creates an infectious learning culture for continuous self-improvement. This is probably why he never thought twice about attending pottery lessons with students.

Apart from science (chemistry) and the arts (pottery), the former school gymnast also pursues two other contrasting passions: stamp collecting and sports. Seemingly at odds with one another, with the former viewed as a hobby for nerds and the latter associated with jocks, he manages to combine both rather seamlessly.

He is, in a way, a perfect blend of brain and brawn. For instance, he continued to participate in international

stamp competitions way after he left school and won the silver medal at both the Asia Pacific competition and the World Stamp Championship in 1994. In sports, he continues to play soccer every Sunday evening with his friends and keeps fit by working out and doing pull-ups. At his best, he could do 33, a feat that is tough for even younger colleagues to follow.

As he talked about his fitness level, he reached for his mobile phone to show a video of his school's Track and Field day. In the short footage showing the teachers' 4x100m relay on the track, the red T-shirt team staged an amazing comeback from behind with the last runner catching up with every other competitor and racing to the finishing line in a flash.

The video image was too small to make out the speedster, but it was him, he pointed out with brimming pride. He was the oldest runner but the fastest among all, surprising many of his colleagues. Such achievements spur him to never stop doing and learning what he loves. “Learn as much as possible, achieve as much as possible,” he said of his motto.

That is why Keng Joo never considers himself as having attained a mastery over his pottery, or anything in life. “I’ve still some way to go,” he demurred.



KIRAN KUMAR GOSIAN

"At 59, why do I still play sports? I play not to get fit. I get fit to play."

The Sportsman:

Why I Keep Walking Around the School

As he lunged forward to kick the football, he heard a soft popping sound and felt his left knee wobble. At the end of the football game, his knee started to throb, slowly swell and eventually, the pain forced him to walk with a slight limp.

After consulting a specialist, Kiran Kumar Gosian was told he had torn a ligament in his knee. The doctor offered two recovery options. "If you plan to lead a sedentary life, you don't need to go for an operation. The ligament will heal naturally. But if you want to stay active and continue to play sports, you will need to do the operation now," the doctor told him.

It was a no-brainer. He opted for the operation. "At 59, why do I still play sports? I play not to get fit. I get fit to play," said the lean and lanky Kiran, with a twinkle in his soft brown eyes that matched his bright smile.

Recounting his injury in October 2015, the sprightly and sporty Principal of Sembawang Primary School added: "I was on hospitalisation leave for over a month, and was immobile – on crutches and a knee brace – during that period. I also had ongoing physiotherapy. Eight months later, I was playing sports again."

That was in July 2016. A month later, he was in full swing, taking part in hockey competitions. The former PE teacher and national hockey coach has been an avid athlete since his school days and continues to be active in sports today.

He competes in annual hockey and football tournaments, including representing the Ministry of Education (MOE) in civil service competitions against counterparts in Malaysia. He participates in football friendlies every weekend, as part of the MOE veterans group, where he is the oldest. He also cycles, jogs and does weight training during the week.

MR WALKABOUT

His sporting drive extends to his role as principal where he is always on the ball – getting a feel of what is happening in school. "I find it rather stifling to be always behind the desk and as a result I do many walks around the school premises and classrooms, not so much to check on the teachers but to be there to give them support and encouragement where possible," he said.

"The walkabouts also give me the opportunity to feel the heartbeat of the school as I am able to sense first-hand the teaching that takes place as well as the pupils' engagement and discipline in the school."

Indeed, he was not in his office when the interview was supposed to start. He was on one of his rounds, usually walking by with a friendly smile for pupils and teachers. As he settled back into his office, he shared how sports has shaped him and his leadership style.

"Coaching and training a team are no different as leading a school," he said. "Both are about leading and developing people. It is about knowing your players, their strengths and areas for development as an individual, and then gelling the players into a team."

How he motivates his teachers and students is similar to a coach prepping his team for the big win – there must be a common goal to achieve. "If we are not going into the tournament aiming to win, it is a waste of time," he added. "But winning is not everything. You need to ensure the team has the drive to win, so that people will give their best and yet accept any defeat that comes along as part of the on-going learning process."

Sports has also helped to ease stress in school. "Keeping fit and playing games is a stress reliever for me. Some people have retail therapy as a form of escape; I have sports,"

"The walkabouts also give me the opportunity to feel the heartbeat of the school as I am able to sense first-hand the teaching that takes place as well as the pupils' engagement and discipline in the school."



he laughed, surrounded by files, folders and sheaves of paper on school matters.

His laughter was short-lived. Immediately after the interview, his composure went from relaxed to rigid as his staff informed him about an impromptu meeting. As he waved goodbye, he clenched his other fist. At the reception stood a skinny boy with a tough-looking man wearing a bandana on his head, presumably his father, who was overheard telling a teacher softly but gruffly: “The next time it happens, someone could get seriously hurt.”

They were waiting to see Kiran who was expected to settle the matter authoritatively yet amicably. Later, he explained about the “highly challenging and complex responsibility” in dealing with tough situations: “While we can never not have accidents nor please all in the organisation, we must hold ourselves accountable to the decisions we make at all times with the premise that we make it with the right intent and the information we have at the time of decision making.

“Safety of our people falls into this category and we must always be ready for emergencies due to the fact that we deal with young lives and that duty of care is a necessary aspect in our work. As the leader of an organisation, this implies that we must sometimes make the quick, but not hasty, decision in dealing with dire situations and

yet face the ‘consequences’ that come along with the stand we have taken.”

He believes sports provided him with the “training” to deal with such situations. “The dynamic nature of sports requires us to make quick decisions based on many aspects of environmental cues – space, playing field, speed, time – and we also then have to be able to react after there has been a response to the decision we make.” His training began in his childhood.

FREE PLAY

Growing up in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Kiran was part of a group of about 15 children in the neighbourhood who could always be found in the fields or open areas – playing. It honed his sporting abilities.

“This was the time when there was more opportunity for free play. We played all sorts of games. It was not structured,” he recalled fondly of his carefree childhood. His friends invented new games, creatively fashioned their playground with available materials, and were adept at playing various sports.

“If it was the Thomas Cup season, we would be playing badminton. If it was time for the Merdeka Cup, it was soccer on some hard sandy ground. If it was during the Olympics, we would get saw dust, sprinkle it on the ground and do long jumps, or grab

some poles and try a high jump,” he chuckled at the memory.

This foundation of play was fundamental in helping him learn the basics of sports – movement, agility, speed, endurance and teamwork. He made the leap from play to sports when he came to Singapore in his teenage years, representing his secondary school in hockey, football, sepak takraw, and later, track & field in junior college. In the military, competitive sports took a backseat but his fitness level was further boosted as a physical trainer whipping officer cadets into shape.

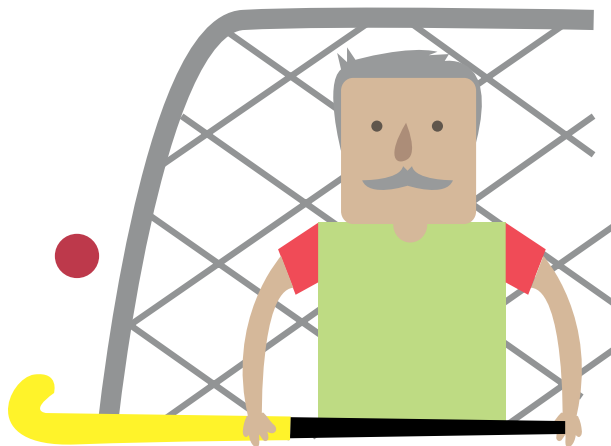
When he entered the National Institute of Education (NIE) to train as a teacher in 1979, he also resumed his athletic activities. He played for NIE in hockey and football competitions as well as trained to join the national track & field team. “I went for a lot of competitions, 400m, 800m, 1,500m and relays,” he said.

His packed sporting schedule continued into his first posting as a teacher at Jurong Junior College (JJC) from 1981 to 1986. He taught PE and English in the morning and rushed off to train at the National Stadium in the afternoon. “I would finish work, finish CCA, and train at the stadium until 8 to 9pm. It was very taxing,” he shared, and that prompted him to scale down on track & field.

But he was still juggling many other sporting commitments, including coaching and competing in hockey and football tournaments. He was also assistant coach on the Singapore women’s hockey team, which took the silver medal during the 1997 SEA games.

In 1987, he left for the University of Oregon in the United States to study for a degree in sports psychology. When he returned, he was posted to Raffles Junior College (RJC) as Head of Department of PE, where he resumed his coaching of hockey, football and track & field. He stayed in RJC for a decade, before heading to the University of Western Australia for his Masters in Education, with a focus on sports psychology.

He came back to RJC in 2000, but moved to the MOE’s Curriculum Planning and Development Division two years later. At that time, another posting came up – as Vice Principal in a secondary school. But he turned it down. “I decided to take up the MOE HQ posting, as I wanted to utilise my expertise for the ministry to look at the PE curriculum,” he said, expanding on what he had done to improve students’ participation in sports.



He did so by introducing new sports. In JJC in the early 1980s, he launched ultimate Frisbee – now called Ultimate – way before the American sport became popular in Singapore. It is now a regular feature, with the 12th Inter-Junior College Ultimate championship held this year (2016). In RJC, he started handball in the late 1980s, a sport that established a national sports association (NSA) in 2008 to compete in regional and international competitions.

But after five years in MOE, the schools called out to him again. In 2007, he entered the then St Michael’s School, now known as St Joseph’s Institution (SJI) Junior, as vice principal, and later became Principal at Xishan Primary and Sembawang Primary in 2011. At every school he joined, he made it a point to give priority to both academic rigour and sporting excellence.

At Sembawang Primary, for instance, he invited Singapore’s greatest sprinter, C. Kunalan, to give an assembly talk about his athletic accomplishments. After the talk, he challenged his students to compete with Kunalan on sit-ups. Within a minute, the septuagenarian did 77 sit-ups – a feat that few could barely achieve.

BALANCE BETWEEN STUDIES AND SPORTS

As the refreshing cool morning breeze greeted them during their usual Friday jog, students and teachers were surprised by an unusual visitor. “They were shocked to see me,” said Kiran who joined them for the 15-minute jog before assembly, the only time in five years that he did so.

It was his way of giving moral support, but he did not want to impose by joining them regularly. Some of his staff are aware of his zest for sports and staying

healthy, including his dislike of junk food. "If they are eating junk food, they get a bit apprehensive when I walk past. I'll give them the look," he said, trying to show his deathly stare unsuccessfully amid laughter.

Diet and exercise are important, he said, as "obesity is going to be a creeping problem". "The amount of time children are sitting down as they shift from playing computers to hand-held games is worrying," he stressed. "We need to give children the time to play during recess, with proper play areas."

Parents, he added, have a role to encourage play, which comes with its share of scrapes and fights. "We have advanced, but the environment has become a bit too sterile. We cannot be too clinical; there will be knocks and arguments. But such free play is important, it builds social skills and problem solving skills," he said.

As he discussed the merits of play, he also weighed in on the balance between sports and studies. As a sportsman and educator, he is acutely aware of the tension between the two seemingly opposite activities. Can a person excel in both, or will one suffer at the expense of the other?

"It's a delicate situation," he noted. "If we want to develop sportsmen of calibre, we need them to be playing more. There

should be longer sports seasons, but there are constraints such as exams and studies."

It is quite different in other countries, he pointed out. "Look around the region, their competition season is much longer at the state and national level. Ours is jam-packed. We start in January or February, and we will finish most games by April or May in time for exams."

"We want a sporting culture, but we need to know how to achieve this while balancing against academic priorities," he said. "There needs to be more flexibility in the development of student athletes, with the NSAs coming in to work directly with the schools."

It is not an easy problem to solve, he acknowledged. But there have been positive developments with the setting up of the Sports School in 2004. Going forward, he believes sports clubs, rather than just NSAs, could play a bigger role in grooming student athletes and providing more pathways into elite sports.

While he does not have to deal with this issue in his school, he remains a fervent cheerleader at sporting events. He also has no plans to stop playing sports. "I do not see myself slowing down. I enjoy sports and pride myself that I'm fit enough to play," he said. Not even an injury could stop this man.



A woman with short dark hair and glasses, wearing a light grey sleeveless dress and a necklace, stands in a garden. She is smiling and has her hands clasped in front of her. The background is filled with lush green plants and trees.

GERALDINE SEE

"Mindfulness is about befriending our minds, being alive and not just doing, doing, doing."

The Meditator:

Keep Calm and be Mindful

After getting into a taxi, Geraldine See told the driver to head to 17 Martia Road in Katong and kept quiet for the rest of the journey. Her eyes were open, but she was not paying attention to where the taxi was going. Instead, her mind was taking a separate trip.

Holding her mobile phone in her palm, she did not check e-mails or messages. Instead, she clicked open an app that helped her to disengage by clearing her mind and meditating. The Principal of CHIJ Katong Primary does this almost every morning on the way to work, a silent 15-minute ride when she focuses on breathing and stilling her thoughts.

“In my job as a Principal, where your thoughts are all over the place, it is a real luxury to take time to focus on the present,” she shared about her meditations in a cab. “I get to focus my attention on present experiences without being distracted by thoughts of the past or future.”

It is what she called “exercising your mind as a muscle”, so that individuals can be mindful in their daily lives. She was referring to the popular self-help movement of Mindfulness, a term coined by scientist Jon Kabat-Zinn from the University of

Massachusetts Medical School in 1979, that is gaining acceptance among doctors, corporate chiefs, educators and more.

In an age of digital distraction, the mental training techniques are intended to help quiet a busy mind, to become more aware of the present moment and to be less caught up with what happened earlier or what is to come. The ultimate goal is to get people to devote their full attention to what they are doing – leading to many mindful pursuits including eating.

This means tasting every morsel of ingredient in the dish, instead of just shoveling food into your mouth and swallowing. “I know, it sounds a little way out,” quipped Geraldine who recently returned from a sabbatical in Rome to learn more about mindfulness. But it is working – the meditating, not the munching.

She has been using this technique to be a better educator. “I’m learning to be a little bit more present with people, with students, with staff, as I talk to them or think about school issues,” she said during the interview in her office where she shared cookies and chocolates in between talking.

The art of mindfulness has also helped calm her down. “It’s easier for me to let go of negative thoughts and things. In the



“In my job as a Principal, where your thoughts are all over the place, it is a real luxury to take time to focus on the present. I get to focus my attention on present experiences without being distracted by thoughts of the past or future.”

past, I would have been like ‘grrrrrr’,” she said candidly, making the guttural sound to denote deep frustration that seemed almost at odds with her elegant poise.

But frustration is universal, so is stress. And she is coping better with these emotions now. “I’m learning to listen to people, rather than reacting and saying “why like that?” she added in a typical Singapore slang. “I’m no longer clouded by negativity, but instead have more clarity.”

She is going to need all the clarity even more now as she just moved to a new posting at the Ministry of Education’s (MOE) Pre-School Branch in December, taking charge of 15 MOE kindergartens and curriculum development for pre-school.

“I’m definitely going to need mindfulness,” she smiled wryly, already stressed by the shift. But she is no stranger to pre-school education, having spent time at the branch almost a decade ago.

CONTINUOUS LEARNING JOURNEY

Mindfulness is the latest addition to her non-stop learning adventure, crafting curriculum for toddlers to teenagers. After 11 years of teaching and developing the curriculum for junior college students, she made the switch to study early childhood in 2002 – way before pre-school education became a hot topic for the ministry.

Her first post was teaching Literature and General Paper at Hwa Chong Junior College in 1991. She stayed till 1997, before moving to MOE’s Curriculum Planning & Development Division (CPDD) to look into a new initiative – the Thinking Programme – that would infuse critical thinking skills into various subjects.

At CPDD, her team spearheaded a totally new subject, Project Work, which is now an examinable subject forming part of the A-Level grade. It is an interdisciplinary learning experience, which gives students the chance to critically and creatively apply their knowledge to real life situations. The initial projects, she said, ranged from academically driven topics like discussing the golden ratio to more practical, even a little off-beat,



solutions such as developing a natural dog repellent.

This was in line with the ministry’s mission of developing thinking schools, a vision mapped out in 1997. But she knows it is not exactly a popular subject, as it requires work of a different nature. Her daughter had to do Project Work recently – raising awareness of challenges faced by single parents – and complained to her mother about inflicting pain on students, Geraldine smiled at the memory.

In 2002, she changed course by taking a Masters in Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in the US. Her family – husband and three children, then aged 4 months, 4 and 8 – moved with her to Illinois for a year. Her husband quit his job to be a stay-at-home dad.

“I like to learn new areas, and I wanted to see the other end of the spectrum,” she explained. Being a mother to young children also further piqued her curiosity. “Looking at my children grow and learn so quickly, I was keen to know more about child development and how their brain works,” she said.

At that time, she also believed MOE should pay more attention to pre-school education, as there was great diversity in the sector – from the expensive kindergarten providers to the more affordable options – without a standard curriculum.

“I felt quite strongly about the disparity. All children should have access to good pre-school education without parents having to pay the moon for it,” she stressed. “There are children who can afford the expensive kindergartens, but what about those who can’t? Some of them require even more help to get a good early foundation.”



She was prescient. Since 2010, there have been rapid developments in the pre-school sector with calls from legislators to standardise the curriculum. In 2013, the Early Childhood Development Agency was set up, serving as the regulatory and developmental authority for the early childhood sector in Singapore. A year later, in 2014, MOE set up 15 kindergartens.

But these changes happened after she left MOE's Pre-School Branch in 2009. Recounting her career path after she returned from her Masters in 2003, she was put on a rapid round of postings, changing almost every two years. She first went to the Schools Division in 2003, before becoming Vice Principal at CHIJ Primary (Toa Payoh) in 2005. Two years later, she finally moved to the pre-school branch in 2007.

Her initial work there, however, was not directly related to pre-school education. Instead, she was packed off on a whirlwind trip to Paris, Dublin, Berlin and London to study total fertility rates. The inter-agency study trip was meant to help policymakers design Singapore's marriage and procreation package then, to boost the birth rate here.

Later, she was also tasked to look at how pre-school curriculum could better nurture early learners. But before she had a chance to sink her teeth into this topic or improve the birth dearth, she got another posting, as Principal of CHIJ Katong Primary in 2009.

She felt a little overwhelmed then. Other than a short stint as a Vice Principal, this was the first time she was in charge of a primary school. "The only experience I had in PSLE was when I did my own PSLE," she

chuckled. "I brought a bigger perspective from MOE, but I needed help in school operations."

In the past seven years, she has learnt a lot on leading a school, dealing with students, parents and teachers. "I've picked up people skills," she said of her time as a Principal. Now, she intends to apply her people and operational skills as Director of the pre-school branch.

"I have on-the-ground experience seeing how Primary One pupils transition into a new school environment. I will try to smoothen this transition process and make it more seamless, especially in the curriculum, from pre-school to primary school," she disclosed.

DISCOVERING MINDFULNESS

On the last day of school in mid-November, she was given a farewell and showered with many gifts. "I'm going to miss the school environment and having direct contact with the students. They are really very cute," she gushed, sharing how one girl offered her 50 cents, all the money she had, as she didn't bring a gift.

She is also going to miss sharing her journey of mindfulness with students and staff, a journey she started in 2012 when she began reading about meditation. It gained momentum a year later when she met parents who shared that meditation helped children with learning disabilities to focus better.

Then, in early 2014, Time magazine had a cover story on The Mindful Revolution, sharing the science of finding focus in a stressed-out, multi-tasking culture. It caught

her attention as the article, in a way, made mindfulness mainstream, said Geraldine who still keeps a copy of the magazine.

It was as if the universe was conspiring to send her a message on mindfulness. So she introduced a 2-minute silence during assembly. "I asked students to think about what they are grateful for, or what they want to achieve," she said. Initially, it was tough to get the girls to settle down. But the more they did it, the easier it was for them to calm down, she recalled.

When she was given the opportunity to go for a sabbatical early last year (2016), she chose to focus on learning more about mindfulness. "As a Principal, you need to be calm, then you can help your staff stay calm; in the long run, I want that to trickle down to students," she explained.

ROMAN RETREAT

Her first stop was Rome. She headed to the ancient capital for the Second International Conference of Mindfulness, held at the historic and sprawling campus of Sapienza University.

For one week in May, she was inundated with information on mindfulness, from the religious to the medical and management point of view. There were experts sharing how mindfulness helped cancer patients cope with pain and regulated the behavior of those with attention deficit disorders. There were workshops by psychologists on mindful parenting to mindfulness in corporations as well as schools.

She lapped up all the "positive psychology". She even attended a 45-minute Tibetan-style meditation. "I thought I would fall asleep, but I didn't. I went away feeling very relaxed," she shared.

Coming back to Singapore, she spent the next few weeks – the first part of her sabbatical – reading articles and watching TED talks on mindfulness. She also began to use apps like Headspace and Smiling Mind to meditate.

She got two of her three children to try the apps too. Once, her youngest son, 13, was being disciplined and deprived of his devices. With nothing to do, she asked him to try meditating. He was disgruntled at first, but eventually became curious to learn more about meditating.

Her second daughter, 17, was also roped in to experiment. After 10 minutes of

meditating, her daughter said it improved her mood the rest of the day. "I didn't feel so frustrated when I couldn't solve my Math problem sums," she told her mother who smiled serenely.

"One of the benefits of meditation is that it helps to self-regulate your emotions. You respond, rather than react to situations," said Geraldine who keeps a journal of her experiences such as how difficult or easy it was to stay focused for the day.

During her eight-week sabbatical, with the second part in September where she focused on the application of Positive Psychology in education, she learnt a few things from the movement's founder, Dr Kabat-Zinn. "Mindfulness is about befriending our minds, being alive and not just doing, doing, doing," she said.

BEING MINDFUL IN SCHOOL

She has been spreading the word on mindfulness and Positive Psychology since returning from her sabbatical.

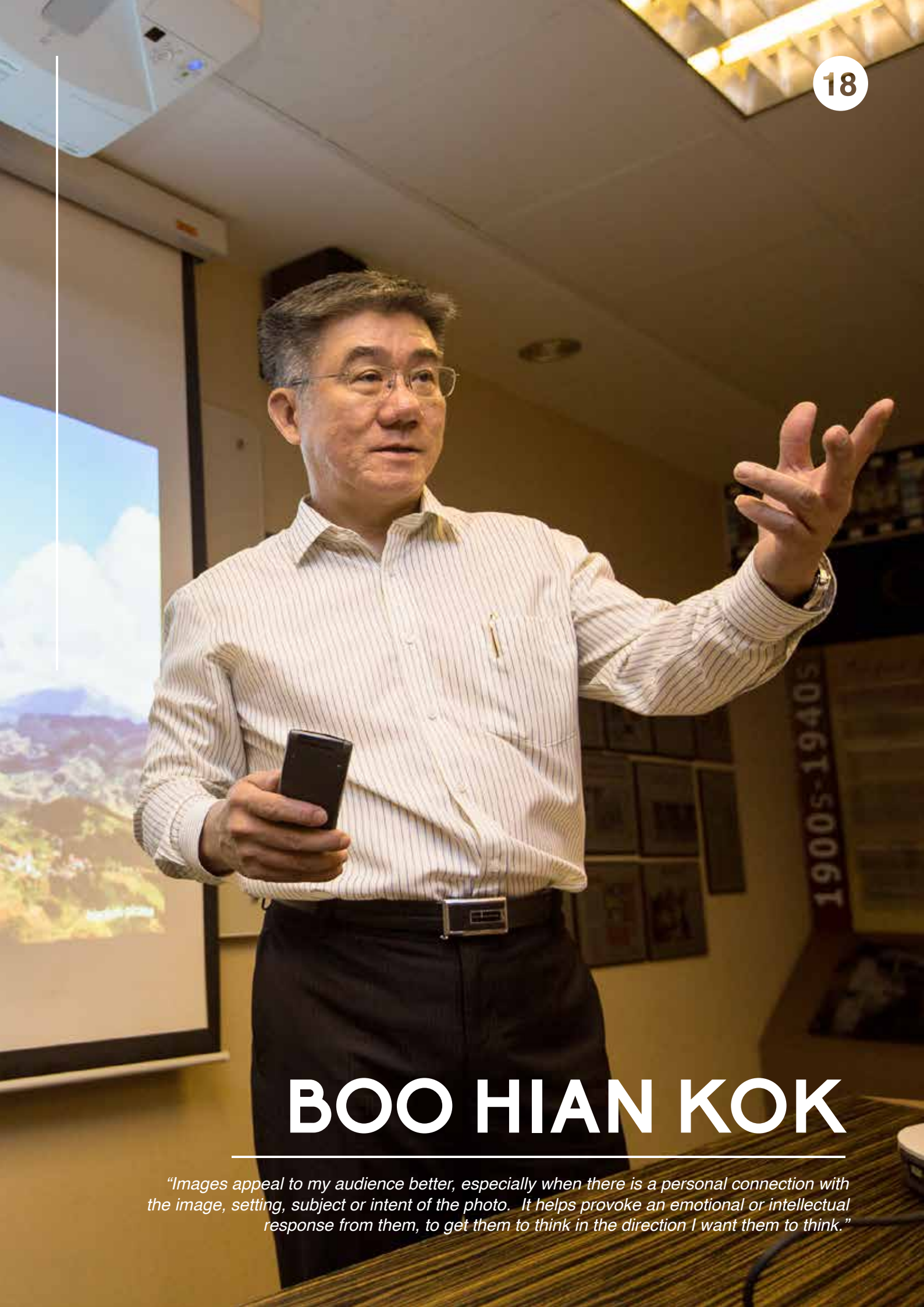
As a first step, she encouraged middle managers in the school to learn more about their character strengths by taking a free online survey on the VIA Institute on Character's website. The VIA survey is a psychological assessment to identify strengths. It is one of the pillars of positive psychology, a shift from traditional approaches that focus on weaknesses.

Then, she recommended that Heads of Department write notes of appreciation to one another. These notes should aim to focus on their strengths, based on the VIA survey, and help them realise their potential. "This helps colleagues appreciate each other better and improve peer relationships," she said.

She hoped all the positive energy would percolate down to students, whom she believed should be developed holistically in a positive environment.

This year (2017), she plans to find time to enroll in the eight-session Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme, which combines mindfulness practices and meditation.

Mindfulness is moving to the pre-school branch too. "For a start, with the branch officers dealing with a myriad of things at the same time, to help them stay calm and focused, I'll introduce them to meditation," she said with a laugh.



BOO HIAN KOK

"Images appeal to my audience better, especially when there is a personal connection with the image, setting, subject or intent of the photo. It helps provoke an emotional or intellectual response from them, to get them to think in the direction I want them to think."

The Shooter

Telling Stories with Snapshots

Boo Hian Kok was keen to join the Photography Club in secondary school, but his father stopped him. “He said it was too expensive a hobby,” he recalled with a wry smile. “I didn’t come from a rich family; taking photos was not part of our lifestyle.”

Back in the 1970s, photo taking was a luxury. Buying a camera was expensive, and developing a roll of film was also not cheap, he shared. The young Hian Kok, then studying in Batu Pahat in Malaysia, obeyed his father and did not pursue the hobby. But he could not resist joining in some sessions to learn about dark room techniques in developing photos, further sparking the shutterbug streak in him.

Shortly after, he shifted to Singapore for his tertiary studies and was recruited as a teacher here. When he received his first pay cheque, he splurged it on the gadget he had been pining for since his teenage years. “Together with my savings, I spent most of it

on a camera. It was a tremendous luxury,” he grinned at the memory, his expression reflecting the schoolboy glee of finally getting what he wanted. He was earning \$440 a month as a trainee teacher, and the camera – a Yashica FR – cost over \$300.

Not surprisingly, he was inseparable from his “new toy”, the camera. Every day, he spent time learning how to operate the fully-manual SLR camera. Eschewing photography courses, he said: “I was self-taught, I learnt by trial and error as I wanted it to be a more natural process of discovery. I built upon the basics I learnt from my Photography Club in school.”

But unlike today when avid shooters take countless snapshots on their smartphones or digital cameras – “shooting from the hip” as how he described it in cowboy-speak – he had to be careful of what picture to take as every photo cost money to be developed and printed in



Courtesy of Boo Hian Kok



the pre-digital era. There were no preview or delete functions to select only the shots to be printed.

“Film was expensive, developing a roll of 36 photos cost over \$20,” he shared of a familiar past that yet seems so distant now. “Because of these constraints, you had to carefully analyse the light and situational conditions in your mind before deciding whether or not to take a certain picture. It trained you to be more focused and to develop sharper instincts of what to shoot.”

He started out taking pictures of things that mattered to him around the home, or in his words, “my parents, my pets and my plants”. He also cycled around Singapore looking for things to capture in his camera, and gradually discovered the beauty of the cityscape and architecture. Just before he went on holiday in New Zealand in the mid 1990s, he bought his second camera, a digital Pentax pocket camera. He now has four working cameras, and a whole host of other equipment.

A PICTURE TELLS A THOUSAND WORDS

Over the years, he has been the “unofficial photographer” at school events and overseas trips, and designated shooter for family portraits and vacation photos. In the process, he has blended his hobby into his work

as a Geography and English teacher and subsequently, Principal, using his photos to tell stories of life, love nature and learning from our environment to students.

“Images appeal to my audience better, especially when there is a personal connection with the image, setting, subject or intent of the photo. It helps provoke an emotional or intellectual response from them, to get them to think in the direction I want them to think,” shared the photography enthusiast who is Principal of Outram Secondary.

For instance, he has built up a picture resource of rivers, waterfalls and rock formations from his travels. He uses them as teaching tools and now shares the photographs, including the more recent addition of basalt columns and many other volcanic formations in Jeju Island, South Korea, with Geography teachers. He also snapped a sign in Chengdu, China, which had mangled English, and distributed it with other similar examples of language misuse to English teachers as additional class material.

But what he is appreciated for are his assembly talks where he showcases his photographs. “I gave an assembly talk once with 178 pictures. No words, just pictures on the slides. It captured the attention of all the teachers and students,” he beamed.

He talked for almost an hour on how photography has built in him a certain awareness – sensing of the environment,

“I gave an assembly talk once with 178 pictures. No words, just pictures on the slides. It captured the attention of all the teachers and students.”

anticipation, predicting ‘serendipitous’ moments, and how it is possible to shift perspectives with the framing of pictures and the treatment of the light-images recorded.

On the issue of perspectives, he shared how he used a sculpture in New Zealand as a prop. During a break on an overseas work trip with fellow principals, he saw a hanging sculpture formed by steel-bars. From one view, the sculpture resembled a line drawing of a 3-dimensional house. Walk around it, and the sculpture morphed into a single dimensional rectangle.

Whipping out his camera, he captured the two different perspectives, which he promptly used as an assembly talk on why people argue and fight and how to resolve conflicts by taking the other party’s perspective. Separating the students into two groups, he showed one group the 3-D house sculpture while the second group was blindfolded. He then showed the second group the 1-D rectangle picture. After that, he asked both groups to say what they saw of the same sculpture. They shouted different answers – a house, a rectangle.

That is how conflicts start; when two people have different perspectives on the same issue, he told them. Both could be right, as shown in the example of the hanging sculpture. The key is how people resolve their disagreements by respecting the other person’s point of view and seeking a compromise. The adage, an image tells a thousand words, is very apt in this instance, he said, adding: “Showing the two photos was the best way for students to understand the full picture.”

SHOOTING IN SCHOOL

His passion for photography is clear when in the midst of the interview, he suddenly spouted: “I’m always trying to compose a picture.” He shared how he was framing, in his mind, a photograph of the interview in his office. “I find that taking pictures creates a greater awareness about people and space,” he revealed, giving the photographer different,



perhaps even deeper, insights into situations.

His keen and quiet observation was honed through years of practice in school and out of school. In school, it started from his first posting at Jurong Secondary where he was in charge of the AVA Club for the first two of his seven years there. “I volunteered to take all the pictures for the school. I was shooting for the newsletters and magazines. I was the unofficial photographer,” he said.

He was also teaching students Photography 101 such as understanding the basic functions of the camera and film, and how to take a good picture. “It was on-the-job training for me too,” he added. In those early years, he had more time for this co-curricular activity, which allowed him to “play with toys”.

When he was promoted to Senior Assistant in charge of the morning session, including curriculum planning and discipline, and later Head of Department (HOD), he was swamped. Yet, he always managed to squeeze in time for photography. “Instead of sitting in the front row with the other school leaders during concerts, I preferred to walk around with a camera to take pictures of the performances,” he smiled.

His next posting was to Bukit Merah Secondary, where he was HOD for Humanities and Discipline for four years. Again, work pressures such as dealing with delinquency

and integrating foreign students – from Indonesia, mainland China, the Philippines and Taiwan – with the local student population kept him away from his shooting lenses in school.

This was repeated in Peirce Secondary. He was elevated to Vice Principal, and was heaped with more work. “I still brought my camera to school, but I shot for personal purposes. I didn’t teach photography, nor did I use it as a teaching tool as much,” he said. During that period in the 1990s, his photographs were mainly of his only child, his son.

It was his next posting as Vice-Principal at Bukit Batok Secondary where he began to build up his photography resource. He started collating his travel pictures as a teaching tool, including joining overseas trips with teachers and colleagues that added to his collection of nature shots from rivers to rocks.

For instance, he has a photo of a trickling tap set against a backdrop of a majestic waterfall. He used this photo to talk about student-teacher relations. The student, he said, is the seemingly small and insignificant tap, supported by the teacher, the thunderous and mighty waterfall behind.

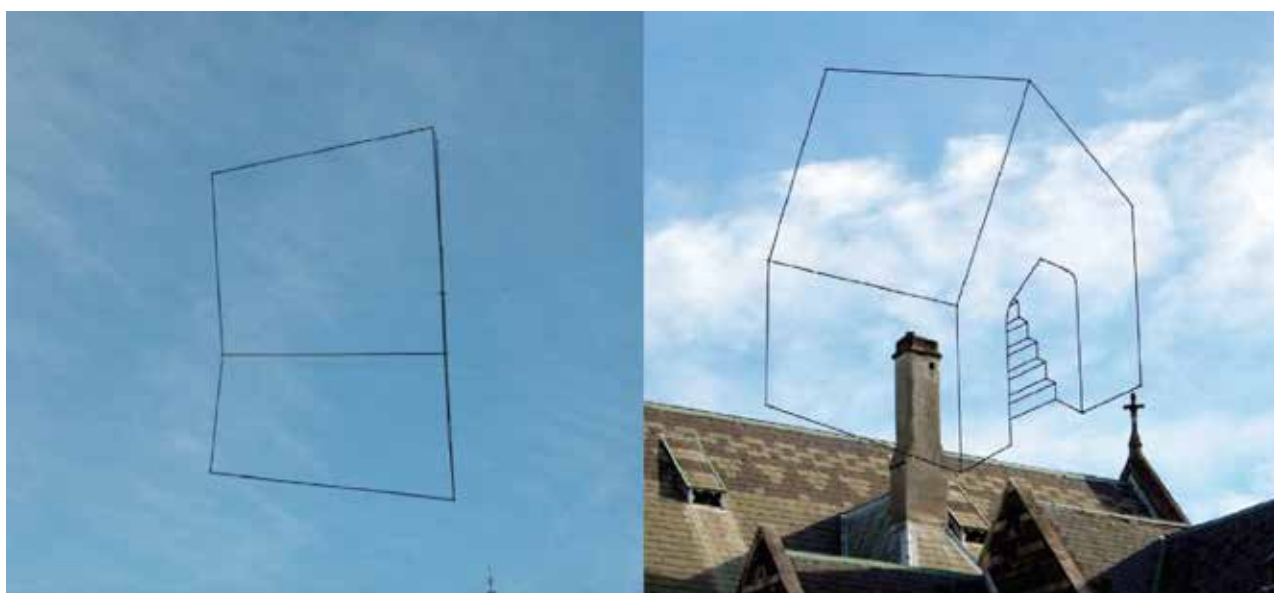
But it was not until his subsequent posting to Beatty Secondary as Principal when he had a bigger platform for his photographs – his assembly talks powered by pictures and even videos. In a presentation titled “*Sow Today, Reap Tomorrow*”, he used not pictures but video clips – from the movie *Coach Carter* – that he collects too. “The videos send more powerful messages that linger a long, long time with the students,” he said.

These photo assembly talks followed him to Dunearn Secondary and now Outram Secondary, which he joined in December 2015. At the latest school, however, he has a slightly different message for students, many of whom don’t turn up on time or even attend school although they live nearby. “My message is tough love,” said the leader who exudes a good mix of firmness and friendliness, traits developed through his years of experience as a discipline master.

“They need to understand the reality: They will be retained or worse, not even graduate with a proper certificate if they continue with their ways,” he said, disclosing that these students – many come from poorer background with many on financial assistance from the state – require both the



Courtesy of Boo Hian Kok



carrot and the stick approach to motivate and discipline them. “But most importantly, they must feel that you care for them. Only then will they change.”

He has been using his podium powered with pictures to seek change, and slowly, improvements can be seen with more beginning to attend school, and on time. What images did he use? Among them are from the movie *Kung Fu Panda*, including quotes from the characters. One is from Master Oogway (a turtle) who told the despondent protagonist panda named Po to seize the day: “Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, but today is a gift. That is why it is called the present.”

Another is from a soothsayer to Po in *Kung Fu Panda 2*: “Your story may not have such a happy beginning, but that doesn’t make you who you are. It is the rest of the story, who you choose to be.” He also used pictures of his travels to ask them to think about their role, responsibility and purpose in life. He gives these talks once at the beginning of each term. “Not too much or they will get tired. You have to know when to pull back before they get *“jelak”*,” he laughed, using the Malay word for being bored or even nauseated by having too much of the same thing.

SIGNPOSTS OF A JOURNEY

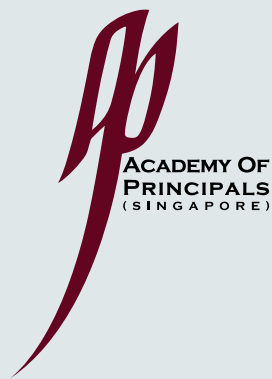
After spending nearly 40 years dabbling in photography, he is modest when asked if he has reached the peak of his craft. “I’m

nowhere compared to people who are real hobbyists or joined photography classes. I’m still learning,” said Hian Kok who spent four hours waiting at a castle ruin in Santorini just to take a photo of the sunset off the Greek Island during his vacation in June (2016). “My photos are not for display or exhibition. It is for me. For me to tell stories with.”


His photos are also for his fraternity of teachers and students. At times, it is used for one-on-one counseling sessions too. He shared one episode where he had to speak to a female secondary student who was becoming distracted from her studies and estranged from her family because of her boyfriend.


Sitting her down in his Principal’s office, he showed her a picture of train tracks he took from his travel in Canada. “It is about making choices in life,” he explained of the tracks that show a train coming to a crossroad. He linked the photo to a popular poem by Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*, which speaks about choices and regrets. “If she wants to be with her boyfriend, her life would go one path, possibly leading to early pregnancy and her dropping out of school. If she chooses her studies and family, her life may be transformed into something else,” he told her.

Like with every student, the choice was hers to make. For him as a Principal, he could only hope that his photo and pep talk had piqued her interest to find out more about the other path to take and the potential she could reach. Images make words linger longer.



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