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ACADEMY OF PRINCIPALS (SINGAPORE)

Vision

To excite the human spirit, affirming the thinking, feeling principal who can ignite and sustain passion and transform lives.

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Address

51 Grange Road Block 2 #01-04A Singapore 249564
Tel: 68387337 Fax: 68387339
Email: info@aps.sg Web: www.aps.sg

Texts & photography by Paul FitzGerald
Additional photography by William Oh & Calvin Tan

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President's Message



School leaders' lives are often filled with challenges, many of them unique or, at the very least, peculiar to our profession. Expectations – in seemingly endless supply – come from every quarter, taking every imaginable form, plus a few unimaginable ones!

When Singapore's school principals gather in one place, there is usually a packed agenda. Time for catching up or a bit of relaxed chit-chat can be difficult to find. Opportunities for genuine sharing of reflections, or in-depth exploring of ideas with peers are rarer still, however compelling the need might be. Yet many principals will tell you that experiences retold by one's professional colleagues are not just eye-opening, but can save both time and considerable heartache.

Solving a school's problems is never straight forward. The issues faced are at times ambivalent, complex or contentious and can leave even the most seasoned of leaders flummoxed. Of course there's no substitute for on-the-job learning, but a truly appreciative listener can be invaluable.

The Academy of Principals is dedicated to fostering such professional sharing and it is in that spirit that we are launching our PRINCIPIA Round Table – a forum wherein divergent views can be expressed and examined around matters which are of concern to those leading Singapore's schools. In this issue, we have invited three principals to discuss their views about professional development, a topic of relevance and interest to practically everyone involved in education. While there will be no coffee and cake we nevertheless hope our readers enjoy tapping into the plentiful serving of tacit knowledge. And do pay attention. You may be invited to join the next Round Table!

Prof David Ng of NIE offers a glimpse at the core values which enable the Leaders in Education Programme to equip future school leaders. Our new Past Voices feature turns up two dusty gems from post-war era principals, whose words still carry a distinctly familiar ring. Finally, we feel honoured to have former DGE, Miss Seah Jiak Choo, share candidly her career reflections with a sprinkling of educational philosophy.

I wish you a pleasurable read.

Belinda Charles

President of Academy of Principals (Singapore)

PRINCIPIA Round Table on Professional Development

Miss Tham Yoke Chun of Jurong Secondary School, Mr Satianathan s/o K Nadarajah from Pioneer Secondary School, and Mr Poo Mun Wong [Sam] of Kranji Primary School inaugurate our Round Table discussion series. What follows is a record of their ideas and opinions eagerly shared through the on-line forum we established for the purpose.

“Teacher quality is therefore a critical enabler. We must continue to invest heavily in the professional development of our teachers. We will provide more incentives to encourage in-service teachers to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate studies in areas that will benefit their work.”

From speech by Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defence, at the MOE Work Plan Seminar 2008, on Thursday, 25 September 2008.

The three principals (Ps) at our Round Table were asked: “As principals, do you believe that MOE incentives will make a marked difference to the quality of teachers and of teaching in your schools? How so? Besides these targets set by MOE, what would you advocate as complementary & essential aspects of PD?”



Yoke Chun: I think it will make a difference in the long term because more teachers will be encouraged to go for further studies and this will sharpen their craft. In getting more teachers to upgrade themselves professionally, practitioners will hopefully be better able to ground their classroom practices in theory and research. However, it is important that people pursuing their further studies do so for the right reasons and not at the expense of the students. There must be clear delivery of outcomes and no compromise on the quality of teaching of the existing cohort of students when a teacher goes on a course.

Sam: I agree that incentives make a difference. What concerns me is that these PD opportunities are not nourishing

our most valuable teachers. The quality teachers we have tend to value their pupils over themselves and hence find it very hard to be ‘peeled’ away from their school commitments in order to upgrade and refresh themselves professionally. Instead, we have some teachers who seek to upgrade their portfolio through PD opportunities but don’t actually improve their contribution toward pupils’ learning. I strongly believe in providing incentives that are tied in closely with commitments to quality made by our excellent teachers. This signals clearly to the rest of the fraternity that we are seeking to grow teachers who are deeply rooted in their vocation.



Nathan: In 2008 as part of our twinning programme I had the opportunity to visit two schools in Finland together with two of my teachers and 17 students. During my interaction with the Finnish teachers, I noted that they exhibited true professionalism, had great respect for one another and their students, and enjoyed a high level of

autonomy in the classroom. It’s no wonder the Finns have developed and sustained the world’s best public education system. Teachers need to have a Master’s Degree to join the profession.



I do agree with Yoke Chun that through PD most teachers will be better able to ground their classroom practices in theory and research. Our teachers are the key to enhanced student achievement. The Enhanced Performance Management System (EPMS) work review process creates the opportunity for teachers to identify their own learning requirements and this is supported by their Reporting Officer and the School Leaders (SLs). To remain enthusiastic and committed in their work, teachers need environments that promote meaningful learning.

PRINCIPIA: How do you balance the needs of the organisation against the needs of the teacher and their readiness? As Ps, how do you identify which teachers and when they are ready for upgrading? Yoke Chun mentions “the right reasons” for teachers pursuing further studies. How would “no compromise on quality of teaching”

be addressed in practice when teachers are given time for professional development?

Yoke Chun: Planning in advance who will be going on PD leave helps the organization take care of both the teacher's and students' needs effectively. If a teacher is going away on a sustained fulltime course for a few months, the organization usually takes that into account when doing staff deployment and ensures that there is someone to cover duties or to relief teach the class. The officer away on course also must take the responsibility to ensure that there is proper handing over of duties and good documentation.

Sam: The process of identifying teachers for PD based on the individual's or the school's need is the easy part. To get teachers to take ownership of their professional well-being, this is the tough one. First of all, this demands a trusting relationship between the School Leader/Key Personnel and individual teachers. Teachers are often anxious about what will be expected of them after receiving PD. This common concern can be addressed at the time the learning needs of the teacher are identified using a thorough, honest and well-communicated approach. Very committed teachers often need further encouragement – they feel they must justify to themselves that taking a PD opportunity that's being offered will really be to the benefit of their pupils in terms of teaching and learning. In my school, a 'buddy teacher' as well as a Team Teaching approach

is used to ensure that student learning is not compromised when a teacher is away on PD. This eases teachers' concern about lessons/ learning recovery upon their return.

Nathan: The proper scheduling and timing of the required training is critical for the successful outcome of the training. We must give top priority to the officer's readiness for the training rather than the scheduling needs of the organisation. Such an approach will motivate the officer to learn optimally and he will choose to give of his best on his return from the training.

PRINCIPIA: With 100 hours of sponsored PD allocated per year, Singapore teachers have access to a huge benefit that is the envy of many teachers around the world. What difference can a principal/school leader make in managing this asset?

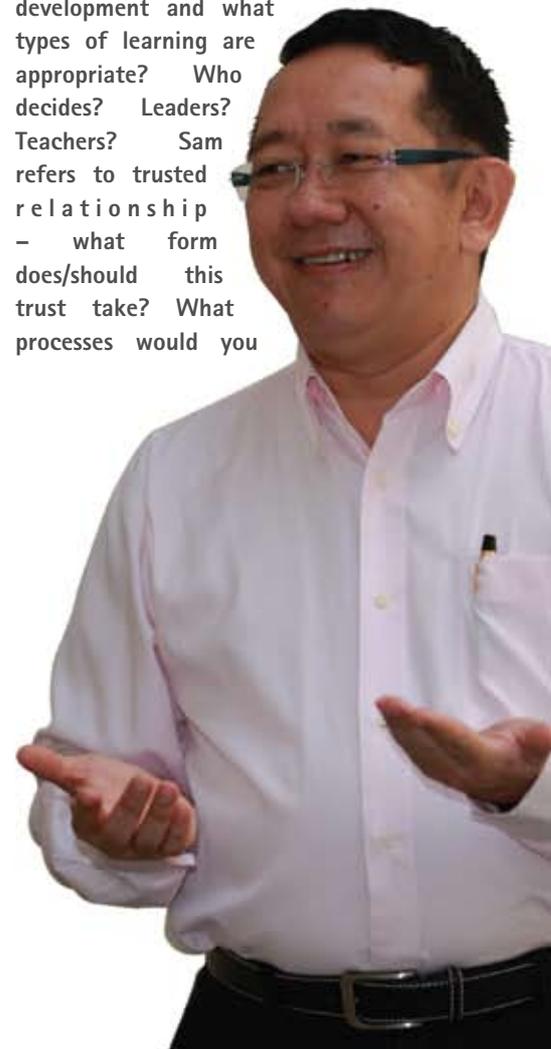
Nathan: As SLs we need to work very closely with teachers through dialogue and observation to understand their current needs and concerns before we decide on the type and nature of PD they need. The main focus should not be to merely use up the 100 hours of training entitlement for the year. In some school years, if the needs can be met with 30 hours of training, that's fine.

Sam: What matters most is how the SL and his core team entice their staff to make use of this asset. We want staff to cultivate and maintain appropriate skills (along with using their tacit knowledge) to optimize the learning and well-being of the students. I do agree that observations and dialogue are important, and especially the trusted relationships between SL and teacher.

Yoke Chun: The 100 hours of sponsored PD for teachers per year is indeed a huge privilege. For some time now, I think SLs have known that it is not simply a numbers game, i.e. it is not about fulfilling a 100-hour quota of training. It is important to work with the teachers to understand their training needs and then to create various forms of PD opportunities. PD can be both formal and informal. For example, workshops, and training courses are formal learning opportunities. But opportunities should also be created for informal learning, such as lesson study teams, peer observation, work attachment, learning journeys, etc.

Nathan: While many outside the profession consider it as an immense privilege, SLs need to keep the teacher at the centre of the design to ensure that teachers derive maximum benefit from this privilege. As illustrated by Yoke Chun, the formal and informal component must be well-balanced. While the organisational needs must be kept in focus, flexibility must also be exercised in determining the timing and sequencing of training so that teachers can balance their family and work needs.

PRINCIPIA: How do principals go about identifying priorities for professional development and what types of learning are appropriate? Who decides? Leaders? Teachers? Sam refers to trusted relationship – what form does/should this trust take? What processes would you



have in place to build this trust?

Yoke Chun: Usually, the school leader will work with Heads of Department to map out the overall training plan for the school based on the school's strategic thrusts. Let's say a school is very keen on inquiry-based learning: related PD opportunities would be identified accordingly. Teachers' inputs are sought. Each teacher will reflect on his or her own competencies and do a needs analysis.

As to whether training needs are being solely decided by those in leadership positions, this is true to some extent. Usually, gap analysis is done and then training needs are defined by the leaders to help teachers "bridge their gaps". Trust as mentioned by Sam is certainly important. This boils down to communication. If teachers can be involved in discussing their training needs, and the rationale or purpose behind training opportunities are conveyed, a trusting relationship can be forged. More importantly, if teachers can see how their own learning translates into better student learning, they will be more convinced. Personally, the experience in my school affirms the importance of having teachers who act as advocates or catalysts. Nothing beats one colleague sharing with another that the new teaching methodology learnt at a workshop is workable and has actually enhanced learning when applied in the classroom. The innovation will spread and diffuse.

Sam: Identifying priorities for PD is a balancing act wherein the views of Key Personnel as well as School Leaders must be placed side by side with those of the teachers. Of course the principal will need to be 'artful' in seeking the sincere views from teachers and in recognising views which are more skewed towards personal interest. Building trust through the professional development process is about reaffirming of the commitments made

by both the supervisors and their teachers. The teachers gather from experience that PD decisions made with their input have been enriching and their well-being has not been compromised. When strategies and learning acquired through PD are shared and applied by a team of teachers, another building block falls in place. If teacher learning is seen to impact positively on student learning, trust in the PD process grows.

PRINCIPIA: Do you find any of the "five foes" mentioned by Hargreaves in his article (ERIC# EJ766688) relevant to PD in Singapore schools? If so, how can that be remedied?

Nathan: Yes, it is relevant. Whatever we choose to do to develop the capacity of our Teaching Team, we must at all times keep the teacher as the central focus: listen to them first to identify their current needs; work towards meeting those needs with inputs from their Reporting Officers and team leaders.

Sam: The "five foes" are actually embedded into our school system's PD infrastructure. "Presentism" is seen more as 'just-in-time' training. After all, addressing immediate needs matters. "Authoritarianism" drives PD when initiatives from MOE divisions require

that teachers be informed and kept in the forefront of the changes. "Commercialism" and "Evangelism" are apparent whenever a new team comes onboard in MOE to drive the tsunami of changes. "Narcissism" thrives in award-winning schools where the reputation of the school supersedes the importance of students' needs. As such, the only remedy I can think of would come from the 'heart' of our educators. While we can't totally disregard the well-intentioned initiatives and structure of the systems around us, we can all fuel our actions with the true conviction that every student matters to us.

Yoke Chun: Some aspects of the "five foes" are relevant to the Singapore's context. It is a matter of degree. Regarding "Presentism" and "Authoritarianism", I think most schools are generally cognizant of the fact that professional development of teachers must be for longer term goals. But we tend to be very pragmatic too. Teachers attend workshops looking for solutions to their practices, and school leaders feel the pressure to measure the outcomes of training. How can we do better? We must be patient and be comfortable knowing that change takes time. For teachers to change their practice or adopt a new methodology, buy-in is important. With regard to "Commercialism", "Evangelism" and "Narcissism", there is certainly a lot of appeal in finding a quick fix and therefore the very real danger that staff development in school depends on readily available, commercial products: books and certain gurus who promise to deliver. It is useful to get expert help and to tap their knowledge and wisdom, but we must also spend time letting the expert trainers know our teachers' profiles in order to customise the training packages and get full mileage out of them. The teachers' domain knowledge must not be undermined. It is always useful to incorporate teachers' sharing, discussion and reflection in any training programme and schedule. I agree with Hargreaves that we must guard against staff development that cultivates "cult-like dependency on other people's ideas". Our Singapore teachers are competent and they need to start believing more in themselves. Leaders can encourage action research more actively. This will encourage teachers to reflect and critique their own practices for improvement. Teachers could



also be encouraged to dialogue and learn from one another. Often, the expert is just in the next classroom.

Nathan: Research on professional learning communities indicates that teachers reap benefits such as a sense of collective responsibility for student success, improved understanding of teachers' roles in helping students achieve, valuable feedback and assistance from peers, and professional renewal. Research also shows that learning in a social context is deeper than independent learning. At Pioneer Secondary we have implemented the Learning Circles concept for our teachers along subject lines since 2006. As of this year (2009) we are using the framework for Curriculum Innovation for Engaged Learning (CIVEL). My staff actively engage in such sessions as there is mutual trust: they are willing to openly express themselves. I do agree with Yoke Chun that the 'buy-in' is critical for any effective staff developmental plans. We had to spend some time engaging the staff in this process before we decided to adopt it. The sense of passion as mentioned by Sam will help enthuse the staff in their Learning Journey.

PRINCIPIA: Regarding the "pressure to measure" training outcomes – what can be done to counter this pressure in favour of more meaningful/significant longer term outcomes? Sam suggests sincerity and putting the students' needs first – 'heart' – as a remedy, but what kind of thinking can school leaders use to be less at

the mercy of these tendencies? Can you identify some principles to guard against the "five foes"?

Yoke Chun: Sure. Have clarity of purpose for each staff development opportunity and always build on the teachers' strengths and experiences. We must also not leave out the critical stage of exploring teachers' existing practices and values. Without this stage, teachers will not fully internalize the new knowledge to transform their practice.

Gunnar Handal and Per Lauvas have developed a model that describes the close relationship between a teacher's personal experiences/core values and transmitted knowledge and actual practice. In this model, we appreciate that a teacher's actions in class are influenced very much by the teachers' personal and educational experiences. Any form of professional development that aims to make a difference must fully engage the teachers' beliefs and value system. If this is not done, the teacher will only make superficial changes to their overall practice and the new practice will not become embedded. Hence, engagement with teachers' existing beliefs and values must be an integral part of any professional development opportunities because we want more than just reproductive learning. I guess this will address the issue of the "heart" as mentioned by Sam.

PRINCIPIA: Yoke Chun points to a process of opening up to peers and fostering

a school-based community of professional sharing/focused problem solving. How much of this (lesson study, action research, peer observation, etc.) is practiced in your schools? In other schools you know of? Have you come across any specific reading that you would recommend to your fellow principals on Learning Circles/Learning Communities that has made a difference to the practice in your school? Have you found the CIEL helpful in identifying professional development priorities? Can you give examples of how this framework has found resonance with the teachers' own needs?

Yoke Chun: Here's my sharing on Lesson Study Teams (LSTs). In my school, Jurong Secondary School, we have been practicing LSTs for the past few years. Every teacher belongs to at least one LST. There are protected one-hour time slots every week for the teachers teaching the same subject at the same level to meet. The teachers come together to design a lesson unit as a group and they then collectively decide on an area in terms of the teaching methodology that they would like to investigate further. Collectively, the teachers spell out the research questions. One teacher will then conduct the lesson while the other teachers will observe and document students' responses to the lesson that has been designed jointly to "study" how effective their chosen methodology has been in addressing students' learning needs. The teachers will then come together to reflect on the lessons, share their observations and improve on their lesson design.

It is about the "study" of the lesson not



the "study" of the teacher. The focus is to gather evidence on students' understanding and not on how well a teacher has taught. This is a paradigm shift. It encourages peer learning and rich discourse on subject matter, pedagogy and more importantly formative assessment. The teachers are now more conscious of the need to embed assessment in instruction. The LST is reaping returns. I find the teachers are taking greater ownership of their own learning and I can also sense the excitement and joy in discovery among some of the teams. It brings us one step closer to realizing our vision of developing vibrant communities of practice.

Occasionally, the LST can also invite a person not in the term to join in their discussions or classroom observations. This person is known as the "knowledgeable other". I have taken on this role before and I find that it allows me to be a facilitator and to provide just-in-time training for my teachers. I have learnt a lot by playing this role, as I refrain from giving answers and focus on engaging the teachers in professional discourse. It also allows me as a principal to participate actively as an instructional leader without being too directive or intrusive.

Nathan: Sonia Nieto in her article, *From Surviving to Thriving* (ASCD Vol.55, No.5) has indicated that School Leaders need to provide meaningful and engaging programmes that respect the intelligence and good will of

teachers and help them grow in terms of knowledge, awareness and practice. In the implementation of the Learning Circle framework along subject lines at Pioneer Secondary back in 2006, the SLs established protected time of one hour per week for teachers to meet. Each group of teachers decided on their Learning Journey for the year which included group discussion, lesson observation and an invitation to a Master Teacher or expert to come and address their needs. I had the privilege of sitting in on these sessions and found that at times even very young teachers were able to lead their more experienced counterparts in areas like ICT integration. In implementing CIVEL in 2009, SLs had invited experts to speak with the Teaching Team as early as Sept 2008, to help address any concerns and create buy-in. At that stage, we were able to set-up 14 teams across subject lines (except for History for which there were insufficient members). Again we set the protected time of one hour per week for these 14 teams to meet. The team decides when to invite expert consultants to guide them. I feel these strategies help us guard against the "five foes".

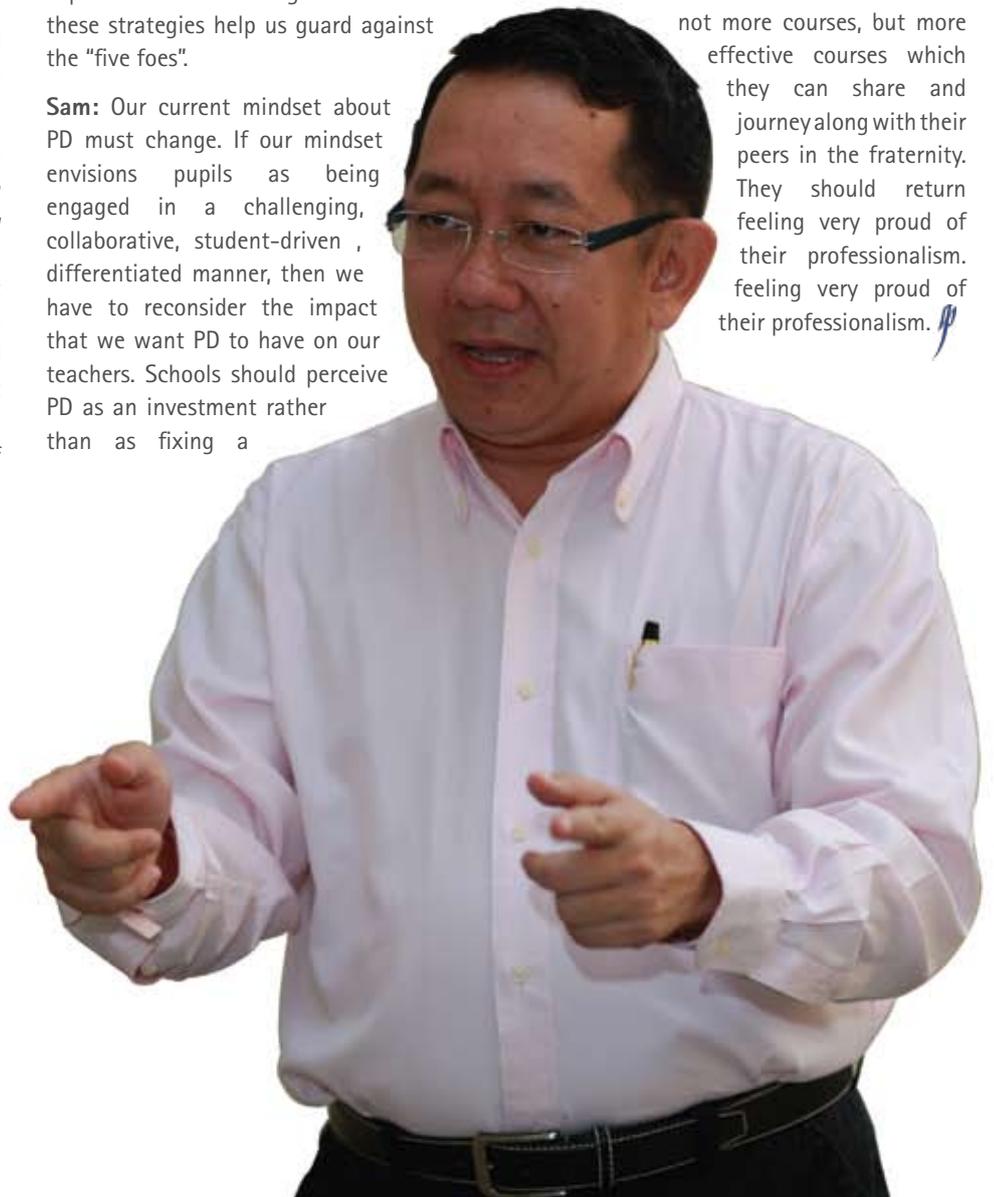
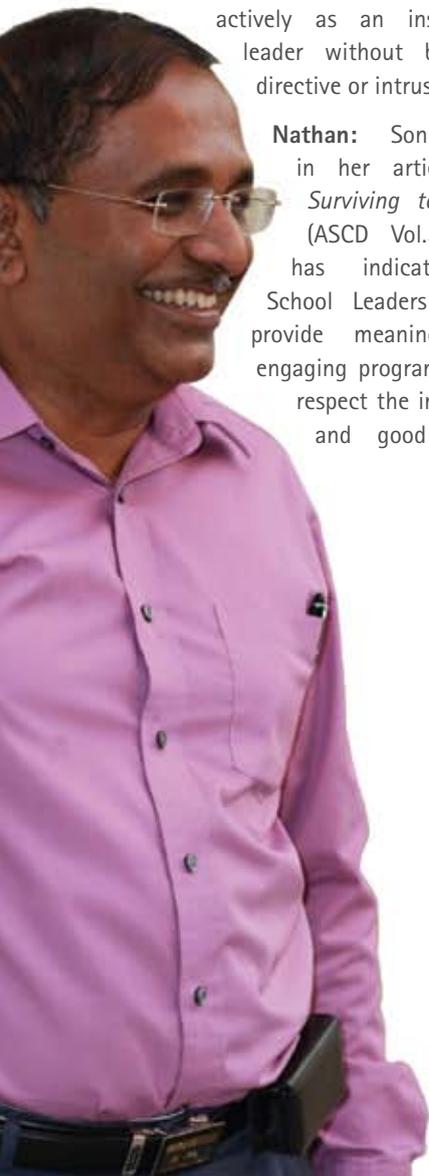
Sam: Our current mindset about PD must change. If our mindset envisions pupils as being engaged in a challenging, collaborative, student-driven, differentiated manner, then we have to reconsider the impact that we want PD to have on our teachers. Schools should perceive PD as an investment rather than as fixing a

deficit. Teachers are adult learners, after all. Professional development that is worth anything (and I'm assuming that the PD we have in mind is of the highest quality) should include implementation, reflection and extension components. The investment should yield a more highly-qualified professional, motivated and excited about not only their curricular content but about meeting the social and emotional needs of the pupils.

Too often professional development occurs on its own island – a theoretical vacuum of flashy terminology and/or idealized anecdotes. Professional development needs to include accountability: specific plans for deliberate implementation, sharing of objective reflections, and proposed avenues for extending their PD; in other words, ownership.

As such, the TLLM (Teach Less, Learn More) approach for our pupils' learning must also be applied to the PD of our teachers. Too often, the overwhelming onslaught of planned courses has blurred our vision of

PD. What our teachers need are not more courses, but more effective courses which they can share and journey along with their peers in the fraternity. They should return feeling very proud of their professionalism. feeling very proud of their professionalism.





David Ng: Growing Leaders

In the 1990s Singapore's political leadership saw global economic trends emerging... with a clear local message: strategic (smart) development of its human capital would be crucial to the country's continued economic prosperity. Realigning the education agenda became an urgent priority.



“ School Leaders who understand the importance of bringing the school's direction into alignment with the nation's needs – economically, culturally, and socially – are better able to educate the child to be a very productive citizen. That's the first thing that I'm exceptionally passionate about developing in school leaders: to appreciate the connection between what he or she does in the school and its impact on the nation as a whole. ”

Read the following sentence carefully:

"Our educators must make it their priority to develop _____, _____, and _____ thinking in our young people, so they can better deal with the uncertainty and ambiguity they will undoubtedly face in the 21st century." Now, can you correctly fill in the blanks with the three adjectives? Did you by any chance choose 'creative', 'innovative', and 'critical'? Bingo! You're doing great. Of course being creative, innovative or critical in one's thinking sounds like it would be useful attributes at any time. But when it comes to education, what do these things mean, precisely? How are these abilities to be developed, and by whom?

David Ng Foo Seong is a man very interested in clarity about such matters. As Associate Professor and Associate Dean of Leadership Programmes, National Institute of Education (NIE), he and his team are deeply involved in helping prepare 'people of promise' to lead Singapore's schools, the very people who must provide leadership in meeting the above mentioned 'challenges' in concrete ways. Ng recognizes that what these terms mean can depend very much on the context in which they are applied.

When David was invited to join the NIE team early in 2001, the ink was barely dry on his Ph. D. in School Leadership. Throughout his academic studies and subsequent work as a lecturer and as a vice-principal, curriculum and instructional leadership had increasingly become his focus. He was ripe for this opportunity and for good reason: everything about his background had prepared him for precisely this sort of challenge.

Ng's first assignment with NIE was to review "The Diploma in Departmental Management", the leadership programme geared to middle-level leaders. With his mind closely tuned to the future scenarios government leaders were anticipating, Ng and his colleagues began with a careful look... at the past – specifically, the design history of leadership programmes. They found that, while leadership training practices had been rapidly evolving, especially over the previous decade, most of the revised models remained theoretically rooted in behavioural



“ As a young Masters candidate in his native Malaysia, David was profoundly influenced by his director, Prof Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid, "... a widely travelled academician with excellent connections all over the world, and also a very active grassroots political leader in Malaysia... someone who had seen the best and the worst, both within his country as well as overseas – really a very fair and broad-minded leader. He would meet our group, all of us young lecturers – Chinese, Indian, Malays and Sikhs – sometimes until midnight or two, three in the morning. He mentored us, mentally, theoretically, to provide opportunities for people to get the best out of their education, and not just for their own personal advancement, but to be able contribute back to their community. Coming from a country where we do have a quota system, where those of different ethnicity must work very hard in order to progress, I found him extraordinary, really atypical; and he had a big impact on me. My interest turned into my passion, wanting to provide the same kind of solid platform to young school leaders – regardless of ethnicity – so that they will in turn be able to extend good educational opportunities to their students.”

sciences – the basic idea being to identify skills and traits of good leaders, and then use various techniques to develop those same characteristics and abilities in would-be leaders. While the merits of this approach seemed clear enough, so did the shortcomings. As David points out, “Our experience told us this sort of understanding was no longer sufficient to prepare leaders to lead and thrive in the new landscape. A fixed set of skills would not prepare them adequately for the challenges they would be facing. Besides, expecting people to alter their personality traits in order to match what we call ‘good characteristics of a leader’ has real limitations, particularly if these characteristics are not aligned to his or her own values.”

FACING DOWN THE FUTURE

As Prof. Ng notes, Singapore has a rather top down tradition when it comes to education. Programmes are meticulously structured and geared to performance outcomes. Not surprisingly, leader education has had a similar competency-based emphasis and letting go of this approach has not been easy. The new generation of School Leaders (SLs) face a world of much greater complexity and ambiguity. Indeed, the one absolutely certain thing about the future is the high level of uncertainty. So coming up with a revised leadership curriculum has meant more than simply replacing one fixed set of carefully prescribed skills with another. “Relinquishing control is a constant learning process for us as well,” says Ng, “...daring to trust the engagement of the LEP participants; to follow the discussion rather than controlling it.”

Of course, as SLs proceed along the path of increased autonomy and independence,



“ One outcome of the quest for a fresh approach by the team was the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP) introduced in March 2001. “We want to make sure that school leaders’ decision making is strongly values-based, so the LEP involves a lot of surfacing of personal assumptions about what good leadership is. First of all, participants must understand clearly the values they bring in terms of making decisions for the school. In Singapore, national values are exceptionally important. School Leaders simply have to understand this and align their own personal values so they are in step with the direction of nation building.” ”

they continue to bear ultimate responsibility for decision making in their schools. There is nothing ambiguous about that part. For Prof Ng and his colleagues, this underscores that values are the foundation of a leader’s decision making and must remain central to the leadership training equation.

DEFINING VALUES

When making statements about social values it can be easy and often expedient to be a little on vague side, especially in multi-cultural societies like Singapore. Yet, according to Ng, national values here are actually quite explicit. One need only keep track of the newspapers to get the big picture. Programmes or policies rolled out by specific divisions or government ministries are, by themselves, not likely to reveal the overall thrust. When taken together, however, the direction government leaders intend for this society – and its education

system – is abundantly clear.

“This translates into a type of practice which both reflects and shapes values,” comments Ng. “To be very explicit, we in education have to make sure that students entering the work force are successful, economically. We are a small nation with no natural resources. The only way we can compete with our neighbours, with the rest of the world, is through the brains of our people: being more innovative; adding value to products our neighbours are producing; attracting investment into our nation. This requires higher levels of both knowledge and knowledge application.”

Ng points at two other national values which go hand in hand with this strong economic imperative: namely, pragmatism and meritocracy. Both are signature Singaporean traits. “The pragmatic value is to think through all the processes, procedures and



“ “There is a strong need for innovative thinking in all aspects of our education,” says David. “This understanding led us to look specifically for tools to enable the participants to develop and test innovative ideas, to collaborate and to challenge conventional methods and understanding.” ”

resources before we embark on a project – whether in business or government – so that the likelihood of failure is greatly reduced. We simply cannot afford that sort of waste. We never could. That's why pragmatic values seem inherent in Singaporeans. This is reflected in the way our schools are run, and in the way students think. One's choice of subjects, for example, may not necessarily be based on which subject you love, but on the best combination that will produce a good result, in order to gain entry into, let's say, a university. And of course the third value, meritocracy, is likewise explicit. If you don't work hard, then don't expect to be at the top of the pyramid. It's as simple as that. You reach the top because you have proven ability that others don't have."

DEVOLUTION

While Singapore's overall direction is clearly coming from the top, control, particularly in education, has been steadily decentralized to the school leader level. This is partly out of necessity: the five and ten-year planning process that Singapore put to such good use is no longer the centrepiece it once was. The world is now much more volatile and unpredictable. Nimble, responsive systems are required for making decisions and allocating resources. At the same time, this devolution is, in part, by design with the expressed intention of engendering high-value traits – critical thinking, creativity and innovation – at the grass roots level of Singapore's schools.

A GROWING IMPACT

Each year, roughly forty candidates graduate from the LEP. It is a very intensive, full-time programme lasting just six months so that graduates can return quickly to the system. A very rigorous selection of candidates helps ensure the Programme's success. Ng explains, "Our candidates go through rigorous tests and interviews and must have strong recommendations and track records in order to qualify for the programme. They should have a Diploma in Departmental Management where they would have learned leadership and management theories. When they come aboard, they are expected to already possess a solid understanding of leadership tools and other key elements. Once they have been selected we don't have to worry about whether they are qualified or motivated."

The LEP has gained attention internationally, leading to the introduction of a two-week international LEP with participants from countries such as Australia, India, Indonesia and Germany. The international LEP has run for three years, and other, more customized LEP-based programmes have been tailored to meet the needs of participants from Abu Dhabi, Germany and the United Kingdom.

"We need to do the formal research into the impact of the LEP and that is getting underway. Anecdotally and from what I've seen in our school leaders, I'm actually quite happy. Many of those who have gone through the programme seem able to combine the economic, the pragmatic, and the meritocratic values together, to strike a balance... between safe and innovative... maintaining the academic standing of a school, for example, while managing to take a more creative, adventurous approach. The LEP is a tool, a channel to develop that kind of school leader."

"I hope every school leader, not only in Singapore but anywhere in the world, sets their goals in relation to the context, to the type of school they are leading... , not measured simply in terms of how well the school or the student has achieved, but rather what roles graduates of their schools are playing in the nation... as responsible citizens, contributing to the growth of the society. That's actually the end purpose of education." 



“ One of the key elements in the LEP syllabus is for participants to lead a major innovation project at a local school to which they are attached for the programme's duration. After looking first at the school's strengths in order to identify a range of innovation opportunities, participants lead teachers, students and parents into 'unknown territory' – all under the support and guidance of the school's principal, of course. The intent is not only to provide LEP participants with first-hand experience in the design and implementation of an innovation project in a real world context. To be deemed successful the project must also have a sustainable legacy and demonstrate that innovative thinking within the school culture has been fostered. ”

Past Voices: The Chinese High School



The Principal's voice is always recognizable: a 'clarion call' that can instill confidence, pride, or strike fear. It may embolden, guide, reassure or even inspire!

In this issue of PRINCIPIA we begin an exploration of principals voices retrieved from Singapore's past. The quest for such records can lead one to unfamiliar locations: janitor's closets, the homes of retired school leaders, a proverbial box in the attic. Innocent probing can trigger stories to fill you with wonderment at the heroic struggle of school leaders who have preceded us. Alas, the search all too often ends in disappointment, reluctant acceptance that any trace of a principal's voice – a speech, diary, yearbook or letter – simply no longer exists.

Hwa Chong Institution (The Chinese High School) stands as one of Singapore's pillars, its history stretching back nearly a century. Tan Hui San, custodian of the school's recently reopened Heritage Centre, turns her key in the small display case and takes out two Yearbooks. We gently leaf through them, each the only surviving copy, one from 1948, the other 1949. Hui San struggles

Principal Xue Yong Li's Contributions (1937-1948)

In January of 1937 Principal Xue Yong Li took office. The Chinese High School had just been re-established so there was a lot of pressure on him. Despite this, he served the school admirably for 11 years. His contribution was immeasurable and commendable.

He adopted a strict style of governance and revamped the school's teaching method. He was kind and caring, earning the trust of the teachers and students alike. In 1937, the Chinese community in Singapore began anti-Japanese activities. Mr. Xue encouraged students to display their patriotism and join these activities, but without compromising their school work.

On January 30th, 1942, Singapore was in imminent danger due to the Japanese invasion. Yet, the Principal stayed on, continuing his work. He even planned for the livelihood of his teaching staff negotiating funds for them from the school board. His compassion and bravery were evident through this period of adversity.

When the Japanese finally announced their unconditional surrender in 1945, Principal Xue took it upon himself to reopen the school. At that time, the campus was in ruins as the Japanese Army had destroyed many of the school's facilities. The Principal raised funds to renovate the school, restoring its former glory.

After the Second World War, the Principal adjusted the focus of the pedagogy used in the school. He encouraged students to be independent learners. In 1946, the school's very first student union was established. Its vision was to promote communication between students and the council, develop student leaders and to help the school administration to improve school policies.

Text of Principal Xue's Speech for Primary School Teacher Certification Course Class 1948 Graduation Ceremony

The post-war social upheaval is a complicated situation. Youths who are distracted will lose their focus and their ability to exercise moral judgment. Youths who are lacking in knowledge, experience and determination will not be able to establish themselves and contribute to society.

Young school leavers are generally naïve, enthusiastic and righteous. They lack life experience and will have difficulties dealing with the crafty, treacherous, and deceitful individuals they encounter in society. Youths may feel depressed as they enter society and find they cannot apply what they have learned in school. Youths who have a strong character will adapt to the situation or even transform their immediate environment. Those who have a weak character may be defeated by the adverse circumstances or succumb to situations and degenerate under temptation. These are common phenomena among school leavers.

As such, youths who enter the work force should not act in a hurry. You should learn and explore continuously. Moreover, you should be humble, realistic and constantly examine your mistakes; take things one at a time, solve real life problems and try to avoid the hidden reef in the adverse environment. After accumulating some experience and an understanding of the circumstances in society, you should feel encouraged to act boldly and with confidence.

Some might consider such attitudes to be indecisive or cowardly and ask "What can these youths achieve, especially in these times?" I appreciate their concern. Each individual is the sum of differences in background, knowledge, experience, competence and courage; thus each individual's approach will be unique. Act swiftly or be slow to react? In the end, it depends on your judgment when making decisions.

Nowadays, circumstances are complicated: the line between right and wrong is quite blurred. What do we expect youths to do? This is actually a very difficult subject of discussion. I will take the liberty of offering a few criteria for your consideration.

First, is the action or viewpoint truly in the interest of the people and the well-being of the majority? Or does it serve the welfare of the minority or the benefit of a single party? Second, those who have approved of certain incidents or endorsed certain views, are they being selfless or selfish? Third, are you judging an incident or view based on your conscience, or on the basis of personal interest and preference? Do such judgments clash with your understanding and reasoning? If you can find sincere answers to these questions, then your judgment will be clear.

During this time of turmoil, the matter of right and wrong is ambiguous. Young people need to think harder in order to judge between right and wrong. One should not follow anyone like sheep as this will pose danger. The responsibility of today's youth is greater and more difficult than at any other period of time. Youths should not allow themselves to live sloppily or be indifferent. I hope that young people will take ownership, make great effort to progress and advance. Before we part, these words are my only gift to all of you. I hope they will be especially useful for you when you are out there contributing to society; let these words serve as a reminder. Last but not least, I wish all of you a bright future ahead!

Text of Principal Zheng's Speech for Primary School Teacher Certification Course Class 1949 Graduation Ceremony

Singapore fell into enemy hands for more than three years in the Second World War. During this period, the Chinese-medium schools were destroyed, closed or allowed to deteriorate. Some teachers were killed; others switched careers. Many children had no school to attend. That was the greatest loss of the Chinese-medium schools. After the victory, Singapore regained its freedom and schools were re-opened; then the most serious problem was a great shortage of teachers. The remedy was to train teachers in the shortest possible time. In 1946, under the advocacy of our school Founder, Mr. Tan Kah Kee, and individuals who are enthusiastic about education, our school established the Primary School Teacher Certification Course which was fully funded. The course admitted young people, both male and female, who wanted to contribute in education.

The first cohort graduated in 1948: there were 37 graduates; all of them joined the teaching profession. This year's graduates, the second cohort, will also be the final graduating class. This is because the Office of Education has decided to close the Primary School Teacher Certification Course and is organizing a teacher training college. This year, there are forty-four graduates. Within four short years, although we managed to train only eighty-one teachers, we have contributed our part to promote education and make education accessible to the children of overseas Chinese. This is a time worth remembering in the history of Chinese High.

Since you have chosen to receive teacher education, you would have set being an educator as your goal. Thus, you have determined to become a good teacher marked by persistence and practicality.

A good teacher, first of all, has to recognize the meaning and essence of education. In a nut shell, education is about nurturing an individual's character; it is about inspiring the mind to acquire knowledge and skills, to adapt to any new environment and solve new problems, so that the individual may co-exist harmoniously in society. Only when we recognise this, will we be able to understand our educational objectives and strengthen our determination in our careers as educators.

Secondly, education is a career rather than a job. Teaching is not a leisure activity. It is a task that requires hard work with mind and body. Teaching is a sacred duty that promotes culture of mankind. With this in mind, your interest in teaching may grow; with such interest, you need not be afraid of difficulties and will be prepared to work hard to achieve the core business of education.

The third thing is to educate with love. Teach with daily life examples; build a good rapport with your pupils. Teaching in real life means showing that you care and are able to touch your pupils deeply, and reform them with love. Even when you are punishing pupils, you have to make them feel that it is for their own good. In this way, you can enlighten them about the meaning of life. This is the beginning of education.

Fourthly, we should place equal importance on teaching and learning. Knowledge is endless. Society changes constantly. New knowledge emerges all the time. On the one hand, we have to teach while on the other hand, we have to learn. Constantly examine your mistakes; learn modestly, enrich yourself; learn as you teach; teach what you have learned. This is what it means to grow while you teach. In this way, we improve on a daily basis, as does the development of education and society.

Finally, good teaching means being responsible. Education is not about giving lip service. We have to be serious about our job, be responsible and implement with practicality. One should not work in a slipshod manner as it will only bring failure. Since we choose to bear the responsibility of education, we should not be afraid of going through untold hardships to fulfill our mission. This will be the most fulfilling life.

All these comprise the basic requirements of a good teacher. You are on the point of leaving the school, entering the embrace of society, working in the real world. I wish you all the best in your future endeavors.

bravely to translate the traditional Chinese calligraphy. There is a quality immediately recognizable about the words she is voicing. Both these speakers are principals, addressing graduating classes. In this instance, the graduates are from the *Primary School Teacher Certification Course* which The Chinese High School had established soon after the Japanese Occupation ended. In those tumultuous years, it was the only teacher training of its kind to be found in Singapore, plugging a significant gap and reflecting the achievements of two principals who rose to the task of educational leadership and reconstruction. ¶

Special thanks to Tan Liang See for her translation of these texts from the original Chinese. Members of the APS fraternity who may have access to other interesting 'voices' of past school leaders are invited to share materials from formal archives or personal memorabilia.



Principal Zheng An Lun's Contributions (1948-1968)

Mr Zheng was appointed the Principal in 1948, a time when the school was still struggling to rebuild itself from the ashes of the World War II. At first, there were concerns over his lack of administrative experience in managing a school as big and complex as Hwa Chong. However, his devotion and excellence in the job soon dispelled those fears.

In order to effectively manage the school with its sizeable compound and its boarding students, Mr Zheng moved his family into the Haw Paw Building. In the mornings, he would patrol the school compound, brainstorming for ways to improve and expand the school. During the evenings, he would supervise the boarding students before he rested.

As the student population increased rapidly after the war, there was an urgent need to expand the campus to accommodate them. To raise the funds needed, Mr Zheng tirelessly went round convincing businessmen to contribute to the cause. Between 1949 and 1953, the school successfully built 28 new classrooms, a field, a science building, a library as well as a staff hostel.

During his tenure, Mr Zheng was more than once invited to join the Ministry of Education. However, he was never swayed by the offer and instead chose to continue his services with Hwa Chong. In 1965, when Mr Zheng reached the retirement age of 55, the Board of Directors decided to extend his contract till 1968, in view of his excellent health condition as well as his outstanding performance during his 17-year leadership.

Mr Zheng was a man with vision and zest – he successfully rebuilt Hwa Chong from its post-war ruins and transformed it into a premiere institution of its time. Having served Hwa Chong for his entire life, he has the school's eternal gratitude.

Seah Jiak Choo: To A Higher Purpose

This past April, her term as Director-General of Education (DGE) complete, Seah Jiak Choo retired from Singapore's Education Service. During a career that has spanned more than three decades, she has seen education in her country grow from wobbly independence into a fully fledged system that commands respect the world over. For much of that time (and often to her own puzzlement) Jiak Choo was called upon to lead in various roles. At each successive pinnacle, the strength of her leadership has been affirming. During her tenure as DGE, a period of transformation and changing direction in education, "... her leadership has provided a steady and calming force that enabled our school system to smoothly shift gears..." to quote Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defence.

Education in Singapore is an integral part of who Jiak Choo is, and vice versa. Stepping down from what has undoubtedly been her most demanding post, she will continue to contribute as an advisor to MOE, chiefly on professional and leadership development. She clearly relishes the prospect of once again being 'close to the action' and helping to nurture Singapore's 'people of promise.'

While demurring about the significance of her own role, Jiak Choo believes 'the sense of contribution' is at the crux of educational

leadership. It is an absolute cornerstone of her own philosophy and she remains bullish about fostering conditions which help create that feeling in all educators.

For Jiak Choo, teaching blends her natural inclination and a strong 'calling' which emerged at the point of graduating from University of Singapore (SU). Ironically, that conviction was in part the result of a lacklustre performance during her honours year. She wrestled from that a valuable lesson about just how important the role of a teacher can be.

Normally reluctant to be interviewed...



("I prefer doing things in the background..."), Jiak Choo accepted PRINCIPIA's invitation to be featured, sensing an opportunity to share her reflections with Singapore's principals. "If they pick up on one or two things which are helpful to them, it's good." Our conversation begins with what drew her in the first place to a career in education.

THE CALL TO TEACH

"From a young age, I found it very gratifying to teach others. In primary school, in the 50s, I would often be seated with children who were really struggling with their school work and I would help them. Later, at Methodist Girls' School, some of my classmates from wealthy families who had private tuition would say, 'You make it so much clearer!' As an undergraduate staying in Eusoff College in University of Singapore (SU), I was always very curious about other students' problems, wanting to help people get clarity – a bit too much, at times, because I neglected my own studies in the process. Just a natural ability, I suppose; I never found it a chore. Yet I never actually had it in mind then to become a teacher."

As her final year at SU was coming to a close, Jiak Choo, unlike her schoolmates who were all worrying about what they would be doing next, was serene. "I didn't have those problems because I was on a scholarship. I would be placed wherever the government decided I was needed. It was then that I literally experienced a call... to teaching. I told myself, 'Yes. I'm going to be a teacher.' In fact, there was a shortage of teachers, but I didn't know it at that point."

Jiak Choo recalls, "I had done very badly in my honours year. Interestingly, that experience helped prepare me to be a good teacher. My maths course had been disappointing – full of rote memory work. Most of us weren't getting much from it, or at least that's how I felt. It wasn't the end of the world, but I was quite badly shaken by my results. That taught me a very valuable lesson: students who are quite good can actually be turned off – by the instruction! Many teachers think it's the kid who's to blame: 'You are poor; you are bad; you have a good foundation but you're just not interested!' I realised that a lot rests on the teacher. Nobody would wish to do badly in order to learn that,

but very often in life that's what happens. You go through some huge crisis which shakes you up – and then, if you learn something, it stays with you because you've been so deeply affected. So as I began teaching mathematics I held to this conviction that I would help students believe in themselves. They can do it! I have often shared this with beginning teachers, 'You must above all be filled with this belief that you can make a difference to students' learning!'"

"Teaching was great. I taught in classes where the kids were... not great students; always wrestling with this or that in their lives. As teachers, we can absolutely help them. It was a fantastic experience. Teaching also gave me time to pursue my other interests. Some struggle with teaching – partly because they either expect too much of themselves or they haven't gotten organized. A teacher needs to be very organized! Although it was challenging, personally, I could do it without overstressing myself. Besides, the satisfaction more than compensated. I never thought of doing anything else."

THE POWER OF PEOPLES' STORIES

"More and more, I discovered that when you allow people to tell their stories, they begin to clarify their own strengths and values; to see what they really want to do in life. I'm just wondering about the power of stories because... we get so busy dealing with students, telling them everything. Yet once we allow them to talk about their own struggles and they've got it out, students are often more open, more willing to let you interpret and say, 'OK, from here then, where do we go?' The trouble is we human beings have a need to systematise. But such stories are not systematic. You don't draw principles or formulae from them. You're really supposed to think about it, like with parables. You learn maybe one thing. I find it very interesting because this goes against the grain of what we normally think education is all about: systematising things so they make sense to the student.

If you want to go beyond self and see what you can contribute, you first have to know and be comfortable with yourself: your likes and dislikes; your reactions. You have to understand where you come from; to tell your 'story'. You may be delighted, or depressed, but if somebody acts as an echo or mirror to you, that person can interpret and reflect what interests you or affects you. I find that when I speak, people will pick up on unexpected things – a side remark. People often learn from things that weren't even your main points."





A PATH WIDER THAN MATH

Some six years into her career, Jiak Choo felt another calling: this time to furthering her own studies. She applied for an MOE scholarship. At that point the Ministry was under the direction of Dr. Goh Keng Swee, Minister for Education, who believed the teacher's mandate extended beyond the mere teaching of knowledge. He was intent upon injecting solid character development deep into the foundation of Singapore's educational system. Miss Seah's application revealed her 'other interest' was in theology, a fact which was seized upon instantly. Before she knew it Jiak Choo was being packed off overseas to study Moral Education (ME), with the stipulation that upon completing her Masters she would take up the role of Curriculum Specialist and proceed to implement the ME programme. Jiak Choo was taken by surprise. The scholarly retreat into reading maths or science which she had envisioned for herself had suddenly morphed into a 'career move' – the furthest thing from her mind!

"What's more, Dr. Goh Keng Swee, an extremely bold, daring leader, decided that courses in Religious Knowledge would be compulsory – in a secular system! He believed moral education couldn't happen without presenting an authoritative system of values. 'In the secular world,' he argued, 'everything is relative! Let's teach moral knowledge by drawing from all great religions.' It was a huge plan; to be delivered in both English, Mandarin, and Malay!"

Before she had even seen her desk at HQ, Jiak Choo's in-tray was full to bursting. She discovered that her job included coordinating Bible Knowledge. What had previously been the purview of Singapore's various Christian schools (as well as a specialized Cambridge exam subject) was to be recast and available for every interested student in every academic stream. From the Ministry's point of view, Bible Knowledge was in effect an

existing subject hence requiring little by way of curriculum development. In reality, what few materials existed were inappropriate for students with no previous background. At their first meeting, Jiak Choo entered a room full of disgruntled Bible Knowledge teachers faced with a major challenge and no resources. As Coordinator she lobbied the Permanent Secretary to approve a revamp. He agreed, with one proviso – zero budget: no additional staff; no financial resources. This challenge was taking on biblical proportions! Jiak Choo went to task. She broke the project down into a framework of specific tasks, put up five sheets on the wall and said, 'Sign-up. Anybody.' Her sense of mission and determination must have filled the room.

"I realised right away that I would have to engage the willing, ones who believe in the purpose. Did I ask "Are you suitable? Can you do it? Can you even write?' No! I

couched it as 'Do you believe in this?' People just signed up. Even the external agents who were training our Bible Knowledge teachers, committed to writing the textbook (but only after I had agreed to contribute a portion).

I learned a few things. When people are driven by a purpose and to put it crudely, they're willing to get off their butts to do it, you've got a chance to make things happen. The result was not perfect: our material wasn't glossy, but it was good, useful material. Bible Knowledge attracted a very significant number of students – as big as the other subjects.

"Sometimes, you just need to create an insight. When there is a clear need, when people believe in something and they know how to fulfil that need, they will get going and feel better about themselves. You've got more of a chance to work effectively with them."

THANK YOU FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY SOCKS!

"As a teacher, I had students who would say, 'Oh, don't bother with me. I will sit quietly in class. Don't disturb me and I won't disturb you. I'm only in this class because I have no choice. It's part of the total diet! We'd have a big argument: 'I've been failing and I'm going to fail! I'm quite willing to accept that.' I would insist, 'No! You are going to pass! Do you know why?' 'Why?' 'Because you've never had me as a maths teacher!' 'Yeah! Right!' I would say, 'Look. Let's do this together. I have a method of getting you to learn. If you co-operate with me, I assure you, you will pass!'"

I was acting totally on faith; and because I had said these words I had to make it come true. The boy who insisted I leave him alone? He passed! But I felt certain that he could have done even better. He said, 'Miss Seah, I know you are disappointed that I didn't get a higher grade. But to me this is a huge achievement!' He sent me a card, saying, 'I thank you... from the bottom of my socks.' He was a cheeky boy, you know. He once rushed into class at 11:00 a.m., panting and sweating. 'Please don't scold me! If it were not for your maths lesson I wouldn't have come to school today!'"

THE CALL TO HIGHER OFFICE

"Later on, for big projects at the Ministry, I always asked myself, 'What is the purpose? Do you think people will believe in this purpose? Will they think 'I've been waiting for this to happen!' Sometimes I challenged project proposals the way the Perm Sec challenged me: 'What if you've got nothing? Would you still do it? Can you get peers together who believe in this and will volunteer?' That is the acid test. The point isn't just that you've got to get people moving. As a leader you must believe they have good solutions within them. If you are so focused on your own answers, people don't like it: that answer may be different to what they had in mind. So you're already starting with discord. 'I thought my solution was good. But now because you're the leader, I've got to follow your solution...'

"When I was interviewed and the panel asked me why I wanted to become a principal, I think they nearly fell over backwards. 'Truly speaking, I don't want to be principal...' They began exchanging glances wondering if this candidate was mad! I said, '...but if I were principal I would know what makes a good one!' Leadership really boils down to one

When SARS showed up in Singapore Miss Seah was serving as Director of Schools. She presented the problem to staff, shared the available information and gave a simple clear direction: "We must keep SARS out of the school environment." She then asked the question, "How do we do that?" Quite deliberately she chose not to impose an arbitrary set of tactics. Sure enough, the best implementation strategies and procedures percolated up from principals and teachers in the classrooms. People knew what to do because they understood the underlying purpose.

thing: knowing & believing in all the things you want to do. If there's no clear sense of higher purpose, there's nothing that will pull people out of their self-centredness – nothing to drive them. If I am asked to lead a school, I have to get people leaping up to say, 'Exactly! This is why I became a teacher.' 'I want to do this!' 'This is what teaching and schools are all about!'

I think that in leadership you have to know yourself to be firm; and so long as you're not doing things for your self-interest or for your ego you should not be afraid. The reason a lot of leaders don't do a good job is because they are afraid, maybe of what their boss will think. What's the big deal? Believe in yourself! If you lose this job go get another job!

Most important of all, if you care for the teachers, the teachers will care for the students. It will be automatic. This is not always the thinking. Some principals see the teachers as paid employees first: supervising; making sure that they do a good job. I prefer to approach them as people who want to do a good job but sometimes find it very difficult. So I like to help them to do a good job. Of course, some difficult teachers will take advantage of you if you don't know where to draw the line. Principals must have certain beliefs and those beliefs must be right and honourable. Otherwise everybody will be imbibing the wrong thing. But you must have certain beliefs that are good for the system, good for the kids, and good for the teachers. And you should not be shy about that."

VALUES-BASED LEADERSHIP

"Because I always got absorbed by the challenges of a job, I was never eager to leave any job, except perhaps the one I just left, the Director General's job. It has an extremely wide scope. You are expected to contribute on all kinds of areas, not just schools. You have to meet Ministers and work with a very diverse team. You are supposed to be the role model for all educators, the 'most senior professional'! Of course, I love to teach and to communicate, so I never found it a burden having to speak or to take the stage.

As much as possible, I have tried to let people tell their stories, so that I can hear what things are painful, what things are good. But, you need time to build relationships where people can really tell you the truth. Honestly, I found that very difficult in the Director

General's position: you are absolutely required at meetings, and are always doing things in a rather remote way – which is not my style. I prefer to be in the thick of things: in touch with the nitty-gritty to figure out what should be done; to laugh and to cry or just to be part of the action.

"I did persuade quite a few people to work in headquarters which is very important. I would tell them, 'Look. We absolutely must have teachers working in HQ, people who are able to cross over easily from one job to another. Ask yourselves, as educators, as professionals: if you don't want to do the administrative side, do you expect non-teachers to do it? Are we better off? Or do we believe that teachers are adaptable and are competent to do the work? So for example, the Director General's job: if no teacher wants to do that because it's 'very hard', then who's going to do it? Somebody from another Ministry?' This influenced people because it makes sense to them. We have to tackle these challenges ourselves. We have to support the people who do that work."

In my time at MOE, I tried to promote a culture of "we" because frankly, a lot of emotional and nervous energy can get wasted: attack; defence. Actually, right now, I think that there is a lot of good positive energy. Sometimes things go wrong – MOE can be quite baffling – then we try to explain, to rescue the situation, but always on the basis that we are in this together... we can sort these things out."

CONCLUSION

From classroom teacher to Director-General Jiak Choo has always found true leadership to be unambiguously rooted in values. To some, this may sound formulaic but it's an equation that has not only worked for her but has inspired many other school leaders to rediscover courage in their own convictions.

Now, with so many pinnacles in her wake she will once again have time to venture up new mountains (outdoor trekking is a great love of hers) and pursue what is perhaps her one defining passion – learning. With her signature grit and quiet determination, Seah Jiak Choo is heading back to school to resume her own studies. Subject? Theology. "I just want to satisfy my desire, my urge to know the scriptures better." 

PRINCIPIA

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Sam Poo Mun Wong

Principal: Kranji Primary School

Mr Satianathan s/o K Nadarajah

Principal: Pioneer Secondary School

Miss Tham Yoke Chun

Principal: Jurong Secondary School

PRINCIPIA Round Table

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David Ng

Associate Professor & Associate Dean,
Leadership Programmes, NIE

Growing Leaders

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Principal Xue Yong Li

Principal Zheng An Lun

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Seah Jiak Choo

Advisor, Ministry of Education

To a Higher Purpose