

# Principal's

Vol. 1 No. 1 July 2007 | Academy of Principals (Singapore)

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Moliah's Learning Journey 01

A Call to Adventure 04

The Good Ship *Mentor* 09

The Principal Who Couldn't Stop 14





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ISSN 1793-4699

# President's Message



## *Principia* is the name of our new publication.

**Principia**, n. pl. (Latin) – <sup>1</sup> first principles; fundamental elements or basic truths: *the principles of democracy*; <sup>2</sup> standards, especially of good behavior: *a man of principle*; <sup>3</sup> essential qualities determining intrinsic nature or characteristic behaviour

**Principal**, n. – person in charge of public school (Latin – *prīncipalis*, from *princeps* - leader, chief, emperor)

As the name suggests, we intend *Principia* to reflect the first principles of being principals. Society anywhere expects from its school leaders the highest standards of conduct. However, the ways we live out these principles or embody whatever essential qualities that make us leaders, are as different as we are one from another. Therefore, even as we are only too aware of our noble burden, this publication is designed to be a platform for sharing OUR STORIES, whether these be of our successes or of our struggles. It is meant first and foremost to encourage one another, in our own diverse voices, to continue to do good work.

The first issue features the stories of three colleagues who have earned our respect and friendship. Their stories convey personal convictions and styles. Ek Piang's story reveals a man who took up the challenge of starting 'a school with a difference' with great aplomb. While Carmee continues to inspire us with her inimitable flair in retirement, Moliah shares the vulnerabilities and humble victories of a relative novice. What emerges from their reflections is the energy and the intrinsic love of the job – we are reminded: it's important work, and in doing it, we can remain true to ourselves! Also, true to our calling is our belief in nurturing those newly appointed to take up the mantle. We are pleased to feature the launch of the good ship *Mentor*!

**Belinda Charles**

President of Academy of Principals (Singapore)



# Moliah's Learning Journey: Learn as you Lead



Empathizing. Making meaning. These come as naturally to Moliah as, well, talking. They are the yin and yang of her professional process, expressions of her core values. 'Connecting' is Moliah's one-word description of her job. It expresses succinctly the aspirations she has for opening up her school community to the world. Connecting is likewise the mortar she uses to build relationships, resolve conflicts and model leadership. She leads by listening.

"I'm not a 'visionary' leader. I don't have quotable quotes, frameworks, theories or dimensions that show how innovative or successful I am in leading change. I do what I do because I love making connections for students, for teachers, for parents. Connecting them to the world around them..."

That little nugget took just under nine seconds for her to say. I now understand the nicknames people attach to Moliah: 'bullet train' - 'live wire'. During a brief visit, Malaysia's Minister of Education referred to her as a 'tornado'. "How do you talk and breath at the same time?" he wondered. My tape recorder had better keep working.

But 'motor mouth' metaphors aside, there's another image that has stuck - lighthouse - "because my teachers say that I am always telling them about things, updating them with events; sharing, 'beaming' with the knowledge and insights. I love to explain things. I like to just let people know my

thinking, my comments. I always have something to say about things and people. That comes so naturally to me."

"I love my job. It calls for what I'm good at. A teacher comes round to talk about difficulties in rolling out a programme - I find a lot of satisfaction in being able to work it out, *together*; or helping parents who are worried over their special needs children - being able to share my own experiences of dealing with my own son, my own daughter. I'm able to help those parents to make meaning of their experiences. It's the same with the children, too. The students connect with me so quickly and so well. Even though I can be very 'fierce' when I'm upset with them, they know that as a person, I'm caring, that they can approach me. How do I know that? Because their parents tell me, the teachers tell me; because they tell me."



"If I wasn't a teacher, I think I would make a 'helluva' tourist guide! Geography is my passion. I started bringing students on field trips in 1988, to Bali. I was in my element talking about the volcanoes, about streetscapes."



### THE LEGACY INERTIA EFFECT

During her 6-year tenure at Northland things were not always so cozy. As a new principal, she had to struggle long and hard to gain the acceptance and trust of her people. "I had a very hard time when I took over the school. I was told 'This is a good school; you had better maintain the results.' In my first encounter with the School Advisory Committee, that first night, I was told that 'We don't really want our previous principal to go. We're writing to the Ministry to keep her in our school!'

**Below right:** In 2006, Moliah took students to India as part of a school twinning programme. To their surprise, the host class had managed to get an audience with the President of India, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam.

Everybody was on tenterhooks. "Ma'am. What would you like? We used to do this. How do you want it to be?" Their first staff meeting minutes reflected the uneasiness: 'Principal said this', 'Principal said that'. Moliah protested. "Hey! We had a *discussion*. It's not about what *I* want. It's about what we want in *our* school." Clearly, she would need to get her people expressing what *they* think is not working out, and coming up with their own initiatives.

### BUILDING TRUST

Having never worked in a primary school – Northland was her first – Moliah had zero familiarity with the curriculum. What's more, for a variety of reasons almost all the Heads of Departments that had 'made' Northland, in terms of its excellent PSLE results, were gone. She had to identify, appoint and groom a whole new team. "I'm sure it was very difficult for them. They were also trying to maintain the results. I was

“ I OFTEN ASK STUDENTS, 'WHAT MEMORIES DO YOU WANT TO CREATE FOR YOURSELVES AT NORTHLAND? IF YOU WANT TO CREATE MEMORIES, THEN IT IS ABOUT YOUR ENGAGEMENT; REACTING, CONTRIBUTING, TRYING! IT'S ABOUT MAKING FULL USE OF ALL THESE WONDERFUL THINGS THAT WE WORK SO HARD TO GIVE THEM. ”



▷ Tellingly, Moliah was the only one of the children who wasn't scared silly of their father's Olympian temper. On those occasions when he wasn't working the late shift she would spend entire evenings on his lap discussing the stars, learning Orang Asli language or mapping out the future.



'We don't want the school to go down and down and down.' I cried on the way home that night, you know; because I was feeling so rotten, really so rotten."

That was just the beginning. When this effusive new leader arrived – talking and laughing with the children – staff had to rethink their own ideas about what a principal was or was not. Of course her friendly, energetic, enthusiastic style was met with smiles; but behind those smiles lurked plenty of apprehension. Will discipline go haywire? Are the teachers going to be fearful enough to do their work well? Are the results going to plummet?

The challenge was that her predecessor had done such good work, putting in place a culture of solid academic achievement. The principal's firm leadership and direction were unambiguous. People understood exactly what was expected of them. Moreover, for much of the staff, that was the *only* style of leadership they had known.

new; they were new; and I had to depend on them for their curriculum expertise." Grades being their strength, strategically it wasn't a time to take risks by tinkering with the instructional programme.

"I knew I wanted to open up Northland to *more* things, to make better connections... especially with the stakeholders, the parents." Moliah noticed that, apart from dropping off and collecting their kids, and occasionally registering or receiving a complaint, parents' connection with school life rarely went beyond volunteering to baby sit. "Why should that be? I'm not competing with the parents for their children. We want the same things from the school. Or do we? Maybe there's a different expectation. Let's clarify that."

She signaled to staff her interest in starting up dialogue sessions with parents. The feedback: staff felt 'queasy' and 'uncomfortable with the idea.' Translation: teachers feared a harvest of complaints



◀ Although the second to last child of 7, when playing 'schoolhouse' or 'aunties' with her siblings the role of teacher would always fall to Moliah, dishing out explanations and instruction to her older brothers and sisters and settling disputes with equal confidence.



that would be turned back onto them. Moliah simply wanted to explore how the school could work with parents. "I told my husband, 'Why do I expect them to trust me immediately? Of course not!' So I knew that I had to abandon the idea. I didn't do it; not until the following year."

Of course, complaints arose regardless: from parents; from teachers; from unexpected quarters; even those aimed directly at the principal in the form of an anonymous letters. Moliah steels herself to confront the difficult situations, without letting the hurt or sense of betrayal become an obstacle. She often employs 'mental models' to engage teachers and parents in understanding and resolving their conflicts. "What we do and how we decide on things and conduct ourselves really stems from how we look at the world; our mental models – they are powerful things that shape our behavior and our belief systems." She is never too proud to adopt a conciliatory tone when required, or to apologize that "things didn't work out," or undertaking to "make better of that."

"You have to acknowledge the person. 'I know you are angry. I can understand that. But it will not bring us any good if we're not able to talk about it. I don't need you to be screaming at me or my people. Let me hear what you have to say first.'" Staff observed the resident 'tornado' diffusing tensions – without ever stinting on support for her teachers. That built trust. "They saw how I handled these things and then slowly were able to trust the parents as well."

#### PARENTS: THE BEST MARKETING AGENTS

Parents talk to parents. They make comparisons: of schools, teachers, classes, worksheets, everything. When it comes to advertising, word of mouth *rules* – for good or for bad – and parents are the most effective marketing agents a school has, like it or not. Involving parents in the school's life is the best way to prevent misperceptions. "It's only natural that if parents know what is going on in school, if they have a good insight, then they would be the agents of clarification and bring the perceptions of the school nearer to the truth."

Moliah worked closely with her stakeholders to extend the role of the Parents Support Group (PSG). She attended their meetings and social nights. She even included them in a 'Habits of Mind' training course. "We established that relationship and we could talk about things; about what kind of mental models parents have of the teacher – and

teachers of parents. I was able to balance perspectives through that conversation."

In due course, the PSG took charge of Teachers' Day celebrations; "One hundred percent! Auditioning and working with children; it was lovely how they celebrated the teachers – very creative ideas. And that was the way I wanted to show the teachers that, 'Hey! These parents are *here*'"

In 2005, the PSG tackled the School Diary, designing in items that both serve them well and facilitate communication with teachers. "They were so good at it! The 'Habits of Mind' model that I introduced in the school two years ago? They incorporated that framework into the School Diary because they like it for their children; they believed in it. That's how lovely my parents are; I've got a fantastic group of parents! The teachers now know what the parents are all about, and how they want things to be."

#### JOURNEYS WITHIN JOURNEYS

As my conversation with Moliah draws to a close I find myself reflecting on all the differences and commonalities I've encountered in preparing profiles of these principals. Each one is a natural educator, each with strong personal convictions that drive their educational priorities, yet each with their own distinctive style. Moliah sums it up nicely.

"I have a very important job. If I *don't* do it right, I have in any one year more than 2000 children not having the opportunity to learn about themselves and about the world and about people around them. At this level it is so important to get the basics right. I think that my belief system and the values that have served me, should also serve them: my belief in people, my respect for people, and my belief in making connections. It's about that; it's the skills for life..."



“NORTHLAND STARTED SCHOOL COLLABORATIONS WITH JAPAN IN 1993. IT WAS REALLY IN THE FOREFRONT. I WANTED MORE EXPERIENCES LIKE LEARNING JOURNEYS FOR MY CHILDREN. WE EXPANDED OUR PROGRAMME WITH JAPAN; STUDENTS HAVE NOW BEEN TO NEW ZEALAND TWICE, TO AUSTRALIA, TO THAILAND AND INDIA. PEOPLE FROM THE MALDIVES, THE UK, FROM USA, MALAYSIA, THAILAND, FROM INDONESIA HAVE VISITED OUR SCHOOL. THAT'S ONE OF MY WAYS OF OPENING UP MORE EXPERIENCES FOR THE CHILDREN, AND THE TEACHERS.”



# A Call to Adventure

Late in 1997 Goh Ek Piang was invited to join some 400 educators in a service-wide think tank; a "visioning" exercise to reflect on Singapore's education system and ways to make it better. This four-day retreat at the Pasir Ris resort heralded a sea change. "It was a fantastic session that we had," Goh reminisces, "really no holds barred. Of course it hurt some people; but at the end of the day, what we got was something very revolutionary, very different. And that was the beginning of the BIG change in education."

The upshot of this retreat was captured in *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation*, a new policy direction with a shift in emphasis: from the top down, HQ driven model of education to one that placed unprecedented weight on in-school leadership. For Goh, this retreat was pivotal. After a long stint as a curriculum officer with the Ministry, he was ready for a change; and so, it seemed, was Singapore. Sensing an opportunity to make a genuine difference on the front lines by providing an innovative approach to school leadership, Goh asked for and was quickly given a VP placement. Within two years he was offered the principalship of the soon-to-be-opened Hougang Primary School. "I was lucky!" comments Goh. "When I came in, I'd already had a lot of opportunities to work with principals and those experiences gave me a very clear picture of what I wanted to do, and how I wanted to go about doing it."

## UP THROUGH THE SYSTEM

Goh had taught four years in primary, eleven in secondary school, two at the junior college level plus a year of overseas training. Then Goh spent thirteen years at HQ as a Physical Education Specialist, working with school teachers, HoDs and

principals, helping them to build their programmes. "That role gave me a clear idea: where the great schools are; what did they do; why are they like this, and so on. So I was very clear when I was given this role as a principal. Of course the two years as vice principal also opened up a lot of things for me; I did not come in... blindly!" Goh laughs softly. Looking forward, he already knew the approach he wanted, how to push the school. And he knew where to find the support. "All the experiences I'd gone through gave me a lot of confidence; confidence in executing projects, in seeking help from superiors, from industry partners, community leaders, and so on. I had no problem, no problem at all. I just walked in and asked."

So in 2000, Hougang Primary School and its principal were both new; neither had any history to be measured against. From a bare-walled shell Goh and his team quickly built up the school facilities and programmes to an enviable level. Hougang PS is now widely perceived as the premier model for Outdoor Adventure in Singapore. Its unorthodox, innovative approach to primary education has attracted the attention and support of parents, other schools, industrial partners, even the Minister of Education.







Above: Goh Ek Piang proudly shows off Hougang Primary School's latest addition: a 'state-of-the-art' climbing apparatus.

Above right: Putting their tent pitching skills to the test. Next year: real outdoor adventure!



In January 2000, the school's construction was actually still 'in progress' – for another year. A nearby abandoned school was provided as a stop-gap solution. Its leaking roof, faulty wiring and total lack of furnishings made it more of a stop-gap problem. But Goh was not easily deterred. With his characteristic resourcefulness, efficiency and thrift, he managed to have everything up and running in 6 weeks – without once dipping into development funds allocated for the new school. There were bigger dreams to protect. And he was already marketing those dreams to the local MPs and community leaders. At their monthly council meeting, his 5-minute presentation window expanded to nearly 30

minutes as soon he mentioned his plans to share the new school's badminton and other recreational facilities with the community.

As a PE teacher, Head of Department and then Curriculum Officer, Ek Piang had accumulated a lot of experience, both on his own and through helping others. His network extended to the Sports Council, contacts in industry, the People's Association, various ministries, as well as community and government leaders. Hougang PS was his opportunity to put to use all those lessons learned and connections built over his 30 year career. Here was the chance to create a truly unique, and most importantly, a sustainable institution. Goh's vision was in place.

#### A NATURAL START

So where does a kid from a poor kampong background pick up the chutzpa to dream so big? Well, from the kampong, of course. "...as a child I grew up in what they call the kampong: out back, the village area, where nature was just everywhere. And we had the freedom to explore, to play around the area. So as a child I spent a lot of time learning to swim in the rivers, in the drains. We'd spend a lot of time in the bushes catching spiders, fish, frogs,

“SO AS A CHILD I SPENT A LOT OF TIME LEARNING TO SWIM IN THE RIVERS, IN THE DRAINS. WE'D SPEND A LOT OF TIME IN THE BUSHES CATCHING SPIDERS, FISH, FROGS, AND CRABS. AND SO... MY 'INTRODUCTION' TO NATURE, THE OUTDOORS, IT WAS NOT A SURPRISE. I EXPERIENCED IT AS A CHILD.”



and crabs. And so... my 'introduction' to nature, the outdoors, it was not a surprise. I experienced it as a child."

With his brothers and friends Ek Piang taught himself to swim in the dirty Whampoa River and the storm drains behind their housing block, learning to gauge the force of the current in order to reach his destination – with precision. Goh's childhood was marked by the ebb and flow of seasonal play: from tag along the zinc rooftops, to rubber band games; then running bicycle tire rims would give way to neighborhood battles armed with swords carved from the nearby bushes.

While hardly the focus of his childhood energies, school had nevertheless been a strong positive for Goh. "In primary school I was given leadership roles: like being the prefect, being a class monitor, being someone in the soccer team; and when I went to secondary school it was the same.

show itself that evening, that was really something; in terms of organizing big events, getting people together as a team and all that. School provided those kinds of opportunities."

### A NECESSARY ADVENTURE

During the period 1963-5, due to the 'Confrontation' with Indonesia when Singapore was still part of Malaysia, his father's import/export business was lost. Commercial ships from overseas stopped coming. So wholesalers like Mr. Goh – who would collect rice, sugar, etc. in their bumboats, from the ships to the godowns, and then distribute the goods to all the markets and shops sellers – suddenly had no work. "So that put the urgency for my eldest brother and myself to start work quickly; and so I jumped into teaching."

At Teachers Training College (TTC), thanks to a new outdoor leadership programme led by Mr. Lau Teng Chuan, Goh found not



Although I was not a prefect, I was a good athlete and I was also in the historical society where I got the opportunity to organize things for the rest of the students." Rather than dropping out – like some of his peers, at age fourteen or fifteen simply to find some sort of job – Goh was one of those few who completed his 'O' levels. Of course, his most important learning was less academic. "I still remember, in my final year, I was in the main committee that organized a public performance – very rare in those days. I didn't spend much time studying. I was organizing the event. We had to book the Singapore Badminton Hall at Guillemard Road. We sold tickets. We *negotiated* with the different performing groups. We had to sign a *contract* with them. We had our teacher-adviser, but most of the things were done by the student body. That gave me the opportunity to organize things on a larger scale. Then managing the

merely a job, but his calling. "I think one of the first major influences came when I was introduced to outdoor camping in the 1960s. That's when I first discovered sailing and canoeing, map reading and hiking, outdoor education and outdoor adventure. I spent ten days as a trainee at one of the offshore islands; and this was run by the Teachers Training College. From there my enthusiasm was fired." Mr. Lau asked him back as an instructor. They began introducing the programme, first to the National Junior College, and then to more schools, mentoring other teachers. Over the next few years, from schools across Singapore the enthusiastic team of 'believers' came together and took up the torch as instructor-leaders.

From his new mentor, Goh absorbed many seminal ideas that really stuck, especially the powerful links between outdoor adventure and character development. He observed





how Lau and his TTC team were generating a new and sustainable culture – and they were *quite* resourceful. “They networked with the British forces and the British forces were very supportive. They provided the three-tonners, and the coaches to transport the campers. They provided the boats – huge, they call them RPLs – that would take all the campers from the main island to the offshore islands. All the camp equipment, from mess tents to water bottles to camping tents, ponchos, belts, everything to do with camping, was supplied by the British forces. So we were able to run all these camps thanks to them. That gave us ideas: *you could get a lot of things done if you build your network well*. Today we do have quite a big network at Hougang PS.”

#### PLANTING THE SEED

It would seem that good learners make good leaders. From the outset Goh applied these ideas to his team development at

Hougang PS. Developing the confidence and skills of his teaching staff was his primary focus. He felt that the building up of the school's programmes, its infrastructure, and its relationship to the out-of-school communities, all that would flow from an empowered staff. So, rather than *talking* with his teachers about ‘holistic education’ and ‘character development’, he took his whole start up team on a three-day outing. Naturally enough, “...so that they have an idea of what ‘outdoor’ is all about. We organize many trips for teachers, and many programmes for them that are related to the outdoors... trips to neighboring countries. They go and enjoy themselves. And they learn from each other, in groups from 2 to 10, up to 20 or 30; so that helps to carry the people along. For example, we conduct kayaking courses for the teachers. So they come along, they enjoy the kayaking, and they get hooked.” He laughs. “And that’s how the culture develops.”

network and confidence. I tell them, ‘When you are out there presenting, *you* are the expert. We do not know what it’s all about. We don’t have enough information, so we have to consult you for info!’ So, that gives them more courage to speak in front of the whole group; even more confidence. It’s not easy for the young beginning teachers. But it reinforces the open culture; and creates a sense of ownership and being empowered.”

The sense of an open culture means teachers are not afraid to come up with new ideas; or to try finding ways to integrate mainstream subjects like math, science and humanities with outdoor education. They don’t feel threatened, because they know the tolerance level for mistakes, for genuine errors, is very high. “So even if they make a mistake, they know they won’t be bashed up! We will explain to them and they will know where they’ve gone wrong and how they can improve in

“ ALL THE CAMP EQUIPMENT, FROM MESS TENTS TO WATER BOTTLES TO CAMPING TENTS, PONCHOS, BELTS, EVERYTHING TO DO WITH CAMPING, WAS SUPPLIED BY THE BRITISH FORCES. SO WE WERE ABLE TO RUN ALL THESE CAMPS THANKS TO THEM. AND THAT GAVE US IDEAS: YOU COULD GET A LOT OF THINGS DONE IF YOU BUILD YOUR NETWORK WELL. TODAY WE DO HAVE QUITE A BIG NETWORK AT HOUGANG PS. ”



Nowadays, staff plan and organize their own “teacher-only” adventure outings. Those new to Hougang PS are immediately included, swept along by collegial enthusiasm. They join in; they become ‘infected’ – vectors of sustainability.

“The principal alone can’t effect too many things. You can only set directions; and give opportunities, all the resources to your people... and *help* them to make things happen.”

#### PITCHING THE CULTURE

Goh encourages teachers to drive the content side, to be creative, innovative. In the process, their skills develop: from research and marketing, to presenting programme initiatives to their fellow staff. He insists they consult the experts, drawing on Ministry, industry and community resources. “That way they grow; they grow not just in the content area; they grow in terms of building their connections, their

that. That’s why we have teachers – very new to very senior – coming up with a lot of innovative ideas. They’re always wanting to do things differently.” Genuine mistakes are the result of taking genuine risks. This all contributes to the school’s distinctive culture. Teachers embrace the challenge of integrating curriculum. “That’s how you get better buy-in, and greater willingness to integrate; greater understanding as well. I think that’s very important. If you work on your own, you are not going to go very far – you are not able to sustain your programme.”

But isn’t there a real downside to all this fostering of staff development? After all, as their skills and confidence improve, so do their prospects. As many principals know, it’s almost always your key innovators and strong leaders who are being lured out the door by new and interesting opportunities that come along. Doesn’t it amount to a



poor return on investment? Goh's mentors taught him otherwise. And experience has borne out their wisdom. In his eleventh year of teaching, at the time when the secondary school's new principal had just taken up his post, Goh had a chance to become HoD at one of Singapore's premier junior colleges. But he faced a real obstacle. "My principal was just settling in. So he told me "Look, I need your presence in the school because you're one of the key staff here." It was not easy for him – I could understand that – but at the same time, I could not miss that opportunity because you don't get JC postings coming up any time you wish – I *wanted* that challenge!"

#### LET YOUR PEOPLE GO!

"When I was in Raffles Junior College, one thing that I picked up from Mr. Rudy Mosbergen, the principal then, was to *never be afraid to lose your people*. I think that is very important. That is also a message for many school leaders in Singapore that I want to send. Do not be afraid to lose your key people who are so critical to the success of your programme. Whenever they are ready to take on a higher posting or they need to go for further training and may not come back to you, do not stop them. Let them go. Chances are you'll attract similar calibre people. And that's what I'm doing here."

Coming from Goh this sounds like good common sense, not just lip service. Teachers leaving his school really are emissaries of its culture and values, one way or the other. If they feel genuinely supported and empowered by that culture and its leadership, the school's reputation is bound to reach other educators. So, in the long run, authentic support that isn't conditional on selfless loyalty to the school actually contributes to sustainability, precisely because of the sense of shared ownership. And a self-sustaining culture is just about the best legacy a school leader can hope for. *JP*



Goh tours (LG) Lim Chuan Poh, (Permanent Secretary - MOE) around the school's new Centre of Excellence for Outdoor Adventure Education, Sept. 2006.

Morning recess is almost over. The buzz of over a thousand youngsters fills the halls. The canteen is bedlam, youthful urgency everywhere. There doesn't appear to be any supervision, yet nothing appears to be out of control. "I don't impose restrictions. During recess, the children can do whatever they like. Run around, play the piano, computer, whatever they feel like." Three curious Primary 4 girls make a bee line to greet us. "Good morning Mr. Goh! Good morning, sir!" they chime, with a short respectful bow. "Good morning to you!" we reply. And off they go.

Moving through the hallways and common space feels like being in a hands-on science museum. Almost every wall, every recess, every available square foot is being put to imaginative use: murals, exhibit cases, an eco-garden and fish pond, an Olympic gallery, interactive graphics, global maps, even an after-school café run by students.

In the central courtyard a few classes are just about to put their ideas about tent pitching to the test. Next year they will all be doing this in some river valleys or mountains of Malaysia. From the side, Goh quietly watches the youngsters discovering techniques, the need for co-operation and the simple fun.

It's easy to picture Goh some 30 years younger, in much the same mode: following his natural inclination, and helping to put frameworks in place where powerful learning experiences can happen. In one respect the apparent ease he finds in being a principal probably derives from his making the most of his strength; answering to nobody's expectations but his own; staying true to his convictions. He succeeds by simply being himself.



#### TOUCH THE HEART; GET TO THE HEAD.

Probably the most difficult challenge Goh has faced didn't involve outdoor adventure. In a moment of provocation one of Goh's top young teachers, newly appointed as discipline master, had resorted to corporal punishment. A single stroke; it left a mark. The family took exception, filed reports to the police and complained formally to MOE. Seeing the future of a very good teacher in serious jeopardy, Goh interceded, appealing directly and repeatedly to the family for understanding. But this time, his best efforts fell flat. When the teacher was summoned to the police station Goh accompanied and insisted on filing a statement of support. Of course, there was pressure from the Ministry to resolve the issue. Faced with this grim situation he turned to his network. Many phone calls later, Goh found an alternative angle to reach out to the offender's godparent – through a community peer. Contact was made, matters were discussed, issues were separated from people. The heart softened and cooler heads prevailed. The complaint was withdrawn, the case closed. Last year, that same teacher was nominated for best in Singapore in his subject area.

"To my staff my message is: always focus on the issue, not the person. That's point number one. Number two: if you don't touch the heart, you don't get to the head."



# The Good Ship *Mentor*: All Hands to the Helm

The Academy of Principals, Singapore, recently invited school leaders, both seasoned and freshly-minted, to participate in its newly launched Mentorship Programme (MP). The ten plus ten spaces were quickly filled by eager volunteers for both sides of the roster. Since MP's maiden voyage coincides with this inaugural issue of PRINCIPIA, we thought it appropriate to take a look at who's on board and where it's headed.

These days, in professional circles, the word 'mentor' has very positive cachet: "A wise and trusted counselor, guiding one's career..." - an apt definition which points to something that neither high-level schooling nor direct experience can necessarily provide: a guiding professional relationship that is based on personal trust.



Telemachus and Mentor - illustration from François Fénelon's 1899 novel, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, the source of our modern usage of 'mentor'. For the very picky, the student of the 'mentor' should perhaps be called the 'telemachus', but is normally called a protégé or mentoree. 'Mentee' has now become a widely used neologism.

*Mentor* is actually the name of Odysseus's trusted friend who is charged with looking after the homestead while the hero is off to Troy. In Homer's epic story, gray-eyed Athena actually adopts the guise of Mentor in order to help Odysseus's son search for his long-lost father. The goddess of wisdom is a most suitable guide to the young Telemachus, knowing full well all of the perils and pitfalls that may be in store.

While such literary touchstones may not have been the key inspiration of the MP, the mentoring process was seen as a perhaps under-utilized resource well worth developing. During the Principals' Appointment Ceremony in December, 2006, Mr. Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Minister for Education, announced that the Academy of Principals would be partnering with MOE to pilot a 1-year mentoring scheme for newly-appointed Principals. "Starting with those who are newly-appointed today, interested Principals will be paired with experienced school leaders from the fraternity, identified by the Academy."

Mdm Chua Lay Tin, the newly appointed principal of Ang Mo Kio Primary School, reports that she was very excited and relieved that such a programme was going

“ LEADING AND MANAGING A SCHOOL IS A TREMENDOUS CHALLENGE. FOR A NEW PRINCIPAL, HAVING A MENTOR IS A REAL NEED. AS IT IS, ALTHOUGH I NOW CONSIDER MYSELF AN EXPERIENCED PRINCIPAL, I STILL CONTINUE TO LOOK TO EVEN MORE EXPERIENCED PRINCIPALS FOR ADVICE AND GUIDANCE. MENTORSHIP NEVER REALLY ENDS. ”



Chia Soo Keng,  
Principal,  
Nan Chiau  
Primary School

“ I LIKE THE ELEMENT OF CHOICE FROM THE OUTSET. WE CHOOSE OUR MENTORS. I REALLY LOOK FORWARD TO HEARING A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE TO THE COMPLEX EDUCATIONAL ISSUES THAT CONFRONT US. CURRENTLY I FEEL THAT TOO MANY OF US THINK ALIKE, HAVING BEEN GROOMED IN THE SAME SYSTEM THROUGH THE SAME STRUCTURES. ”



Martin Tan,  
Principal,  
Anderson  
Primary School

to be put in place. “As a principal with less than 1½ years of experience as a VP, taking over a school can be quite daunting. Having a mentor to be there as your safe sounding board, to hear you out and point out different perspectives will be useful. As I get to choose my mentor instead of having the mentor assigned to me... there’s a much greater level of comfort which will enable me to share more.”

MOE’s Deputy Director of ELDC (Education Leadership Development Centre), Michael De Silva, was closely involved with the conception of this mentorship initiative. He traces the genesis to various overseas scans that ELDC embarked upon. “During the visits to UK, Australia, NZ, Israel and US, we observed that all of these countries have adopted mentoring as a support system. For example, New York City Leadership Academy (NYCLA) offers mentoring for first-year New York City public school principals to help them transit into their roles as instructional leaders. NYCLA highlighted that mentors should preferably not be the supervisors of the principals in order for principals to share and discuss



Michael De Silva, Deputy Director, ELDC

months in position. At the same time, we recognise that there are experienced principals within the education system with valued tacit knowledge of school management. These principals represent a valuable resource within our system and it would be prudent to formalise a system where there could be an active transfer of this knowledge from one generation of principals to the next.”



“ YOU ARE LIKELY TO HAVE CHOSEN THAT PERSON BECAUSE YOU HAVE SOMETHING THAT YOU DEFINITELY WANT TO LEARN FROM THAT PARTICULAR MENTOR. YOU ARE OPERATING AS EQUALS WITH SOMEBODY WHO IS NEITHER YOUR SUPERVISOR NOR YOUR SUPERVISEE. IT SHOULD BE REALLY VERY USEFUL TO THE MENTEE. BESIDES, EVERY SCHOOL IS DIFFERENT. THIS PROGRAMME ALLOWS YOU TO HAVE AN INSIGHT INTO THE WORKINGS OF ANOTHER SCHOOL CULTURE. ”

Lysia Kee, Principal, Bukit Batok Secondary School

the problems they faced more freely. They therefore employ retired school leaders with current system-knowledge to provide new principals with one-on-one coaching with meetings occurring on average once a month. These retired school leaders, who have undergone training in mentoring, also helped to facilitate leadership development sessions.”

It wasn’t difficult to see the relevance of mentoring to the MOE’s context. “Although our principals would have undergone a six-month pre-service Leadership in Education Programme,” says Michael, “there could be a gap between theoretical knowledge and its application to practice. As with other professionals, newly-appointed principals could further benefit from emotional support and affirmation during the initial

Michael’s analysis resonates with the thinking of many of those principals who are participating in the programme. Chia Soo Keng, principal of Nan Chiau Primary School, comments, “When I first assumed principalship, I had approached experienced principals and sought their advice and guidance, which they gave most generously and willingly. However, it was an *ad hoc* arrangement. Those I count as mentors don’t even realise they are. The APS mentorship programme, with its more structured ‘willing mentor-willing mentee’ arrangement is a little different. Yeow Ling is comfortable with me, and I too am comfortable with him. I believe much mutual learning can take place.” In fact, Ng Yeow Ling, who has taken up the reins at North View Primary School,



had a mentoring connection established with Chia Soo Keng formed at the Cluster level earlier in the year. But, as he told PRINCIPIA, "The APS programme which is based on a certain theoretical framework appears to offer much: a dedicated time for development; a clearer way to view mentorship so as to maximise benefits for myself. Mentorship enables one to reflect on issues more critically and engage in self-clarification with someone who is willing to come alongside our professional development."

One participant, Peter Tan, principal of Anglo-Chinese School (Junior), brings along his own long-standing interest and experience in mentoring. "I have always felt that this was the best way to develop leaders. There must be a discerning of the needs before the appropriate support can be meaningful. As a mentor, you look also at the growth potential of the mentee and suggest growth directions." Peter found most prescribed courses unsatisfactory because they were not flexible in meeting his needs. After reading about 'executive coaching', the business-styled term for



Mrs. Belinda Charles, President, APS

collaboration with the Ministry, the Academy ironed out the nitty-gritty requirements, called for quotations and eventually selected Meta, a Singapore company specializing in leadership training, to implement the structured part of the programme. Belinda elaborates: "The Mentoring Programme as put up by the Academy is based on executive coaching in that it aspires to help individuals ask those kinds of questions about their own practice and the practices of others that enable them to best understand their own

“ THE APS PROGRAMME WHICH IS BASED ON A CERTAIN THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK APPEARS TO OFFER MUCH: A DEDICATED TIME FOR DEVELOPMENT; A CLEARER WAY TO VIEW MENTORSHIP SO AS TO MAXIMISE BENEFITS FOR MYSELF. MENTORSHIP ENABLES ONE TO REFLECT ON ISSUES MORE CRITICALLY AND ENGAGE IN SELF-CLARIFICATION WITH SOMEONE WHO IS WILLING TO COME ALONGSIDE OUR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT. ”



Ng Yeow Ling,  
Principal,  
North View  
Primary School

“ I SEE THE PROGRAMME AS A PLATFORM TO GET TO KNOW AS MANY PRINCIPALS AS POSSIBLE AND TO TAP ON THEIR EXPERIENCE AND EXPERTISE. AS MS LYSIA KEE SO RIGHTLY PUT IT, WE NEED NOT RESTRICT OURSELVES TO OUR MENTORS. ALL THE MENTORS IN THE PROGRAMME ARE WILLING TO SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE WITH US. THIS IS REALLY A WAY FOR US TO FORM A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE AMONG SCHOOL LEADERS. ”

Mdm Chua Lay Tin, Principal, Ang Mo Kio Primary School

mentoring, Peter sought to provide such a programme to HODs with high potential. But even though many other school leaders were keen to join in, the costs estimated proved prohibitive. He even tried drumming up support from the Academy of Principals, whose President, Ms Belinda Charles, was quite receptive: "The Academy of Principals has long been discussing how best to tap on the great wealth of tacit knowledge that resides among our incumbent as well as our retired principals and so we were very enthusiastic about the possibility of having a Mentoring Programme for the new principals with the help of more experienced ones."

The Academy found that the timing was good because MOE was newly interested in supporting an initiative. Working in close

leadership style. In that sense, it can be said to be rather close-and-up-front because it will require both the principal-mentor and the principal being mentored to be honest with each other, to be specific where it helps and to avoid generalities that cannot impact a situation directly."

Belinda notes that, "This coaching model is also somewhat different from other mentoring models which appear to deal more with the daily challenges and the advice that is needed for such crises. This is useful and helpful to weather the immediate and the urgent. On the other hand, we think it would be good to give principals an opportunity to take a broader look at their decisions and their programmes and link these with the values that undergird that thinking."

Belinda stresses, "This kind of a programme requires small workshops and pair work and is necessarily costly. We are therefore very grateful to the Ministry of Education for their willingness to sponsor this."

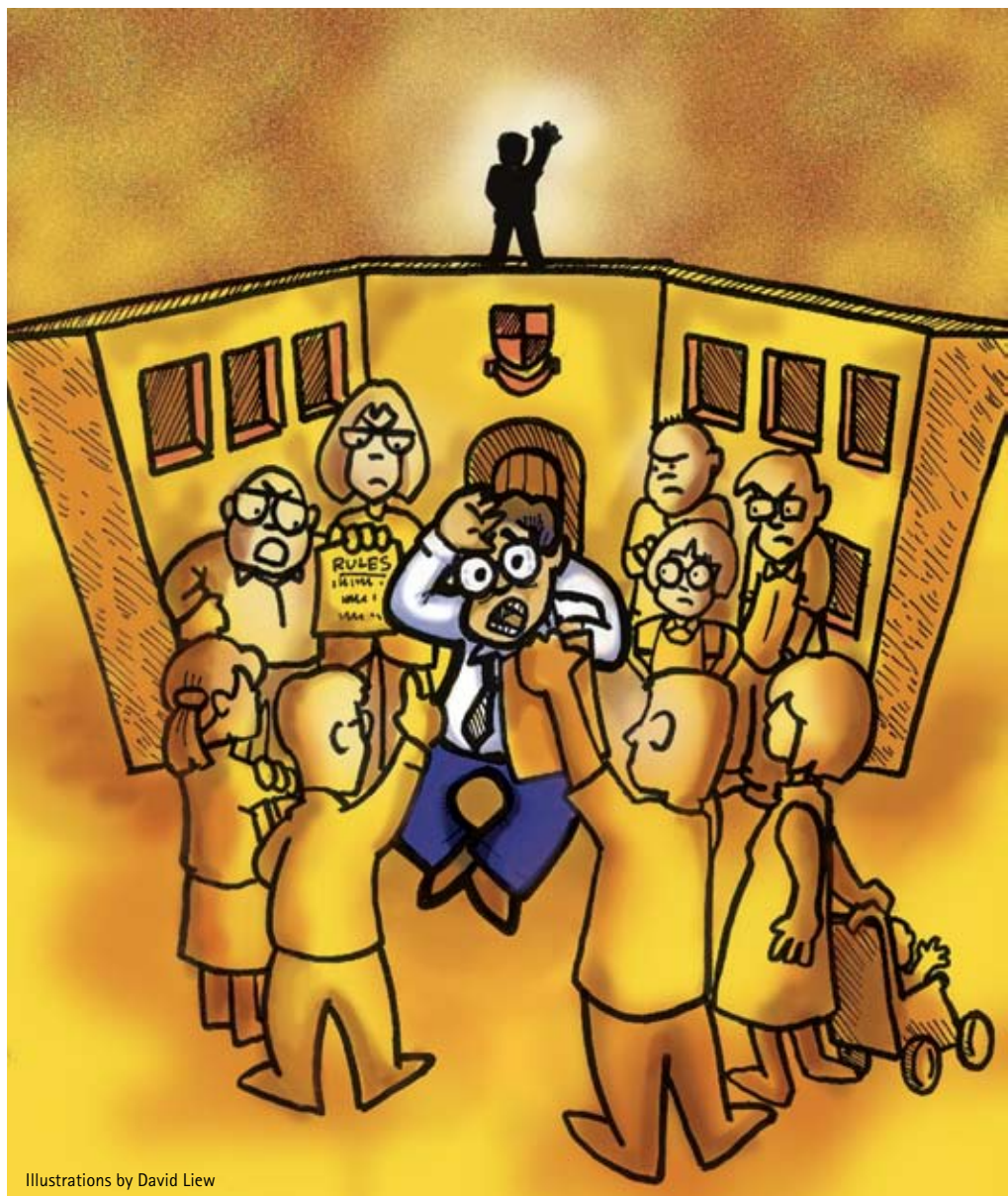
Belinda adds, "The programme is also a long term one that will last over six months as learning and understanding behaviour takes time. We are also looking forward to the initial mentor-mentee relationship evolving to a partnership of different strengths, thereby complementing each other. In addition, we are looking forward to these initial ten pairs beginning that data base on principals' behaviour that will help us as an Academy grow professionally. While this year, we have started with a modest ten pairs, we look forward to each year working with possibly 15 to 20



“ PRIOR TO MY ASSUMING PRINCIPALSHIP, I WAS A SPECIALIST, VISITING COUNTLESS SCHOOLS, AND LOTS OF OCCASIONS WHEN I SPOKE WITH THE PRINCIPALS. I WAS LEARNING ALL THE TIME AND MAKING MENTAL NOTES OF WHAT SORT OF PRINCIPAL I WOULD LIKE TO BE, WHAT SORT OF SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND TONE I WOULD LIKE TO SET. WHEN BELINDA ASKED ME TO MENTOR, I DID NOT HESITATE. BUT IT DOES PUT ME IN A VULNERABLE POSITION AS I DO NOT CLAIM TO HAVE ANSWERS TO ALL. THEREFORE MY MENTEE AND I NEED TO START OFF ON A SINCERE FOOTING - THAT WE ARE HERE TO LEARN TOGETHER. I AM CONCERNED ABOUT THE TIME - WILL I BE ABLE TO HELP WHEN HELP IS REALLY AND URGENTLY NEEDED? ”



Lim Chye Tin,  
Principal,  
St. Andrew's  
Junior College



Illustrations by David Liew

“ DID I HAVE A MENTOR WHEN I WAS NEW TO PRINCIPALSHIP? NOT SPECIFICALLY; BUT THERE WERE MANY PRINCIPALS WHO WERE WILLING TO SHARE THEIR WISDOM AND EXPERIENCE WITH A NEW KID ON THE BLOCK AND I WAS ONLY TOO HAPPY TO LEARN FROM THEM. THERE IS A GREAT SENSE OF COLLEGIALLY AMONGST THE PRINCIPALS AND THEIR ASSISTANCE OR LISTENING EAR IS ALWAYS JUST A PHONE CALL AWAY. THE NICE THING IS THAT HAVING A TRUE MENTOR, YOU NEED NOT FEEL BAD THAT YOU HAVE TO CALL ON THAT PERSON. ”



Peter Tan, Principal, Anglo-Chinese School (Junior)





pairs, depending on the number of new appointees."

Some participants were wondering why a programme that is mentee-driven, based on a relationship of mutual trust, and comparatively free from evaluative procedures and constraints, requires a timetable and training workshops. John Ng, of Meta explains: "This is a peer mentoring programme; mentoring is an intentional engagement and commitment between the mentor and mentee. This engagement is built on trust and rapport between two parties. From prior programme experiences, we've found that meeting less than 6 times leads to higher failure rates, and 6 to 8 times is really the sweet spot for the program to be successful and beneficial for both mentee and mentor. The workshop helps participants appreciate what makes an effective mentor and a good mentoring

candidate. Techniques will be shared to help sharpen mentoring skills. Participants learn through structured exercises and role play."

Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam sums it up nicely "This new way of supporting new principals and passing on tacit know-how will add further to our collective strength in school leadership. The mentorship scheme will build on and augment the practices already taking place within our school clusters. It will involve partnerships, and I'm sure, will involve two-way learning, with ideas and reflections being exchanged between experienced and new principals."



Mdm Chandrika Gopal,  
Principal,  
Jiemin Primary School

“ BEING A MENTEE MEANS WANTING TO LEARN FROM SOMEONE WHOM I TRUST. I AM PERFECTLY COMFORTABLE BEING IN THAT ROLE BECAUSE I CHOSE MY MENTORS (BOTH MY MAIN AND MY RESERVE). I HAVE A GREAT AMOUNT OF TRUST AND RESPECT FOR BOTH MY MENTORS, SO I CAN DISCUSS ISSUES WHICH MAY OR MAY NOT BE MY AREAS OF STRENGTHS. IT COULD BE ASKING FOR ADVICE OR RELATING BAD DECISIONS MADE ON MY PART. I THINK I WILL BE COMFORTABLE EITHER WAY. ”

# The Principal Who Couldn't Stop... Being a Teacher



“THE MORE WE UNDERSTAND THE BRAIN, THE BETTER WE’LL BE ABLE TO DESIGN INSTRUCTION TO MATCH HOW IT LEARNS BEST.”



You can take the woman out of teaching, but you can't take the teacher out of Carmee Lim. Seven years into retirement and she has one M Ed in Early Childhood Education, two educational businesses, seven grandchildren, and eight drums. She writes books, provides professional and personal development workshops on brain-based learning, educational kinesiology and creativity. If the market for learning dries up she's still a Certified Aerobics Instructor. Oh, and her Chinese is improving too.

The screams of delight from the music room at Raffles House Preschool suddenly fall silent. Eight pairs of eager eyes are now gazing fixedly at Carmee, intent on her description. A colourful linkage of plastic ramps, balance beams, bars and bridges snake across the room's padded floor. To the uninitiated this seems little more than a rudimentary obstacle course. "Here you must cross the dark waters without falling. Alligators! After that, you must crawl under this bar - without touching it because.... BzzzzzT!! - electricity!"

Every week Carmee leads four groups of pre-schoolers through these 45 minutes sessions of excitement and physical fun. The activities are carefully designed to

provide multi-sensory stimulation that blends language, music and imagination with motor skills and basic gymnastics. Through her company, Jumpstart Kidsport, Carmee has found a way to weave her interest, skill and experience into a programme that kids simply love.

Well known for her fine singing voice, Carmee's other big passion is music, her most recent enterprise. She has published three songbooks. Her compositions include "Dare to Live Our Dreams" for the International Women's Day and "Read Singapore!" for the National Library Board. Now, through Aoede Music she provides classes that integrate singing, listening, keyboard playing, rhythm,

musical language, and basic improvisation and composition.





About a decade ago, Carmee became fascinated with 'neuroscience' and how the brain learns. She read in *Magic Trees*, by pioneering brain researcher, Marian Diamond, that research shows how numerous environmental factors – emotional state, physical activity, types of stimulus, even diet – have a direct measurable impact on the human brain's ability to learn and remember. Later, she heard educational psychologist Madeline Hunter at a conference talking about 'mastery learning'. Carmee emerged utterly inspired.

Carmee's career as an educator and her personal exploration of teaching and learning seem like two tracks up the same mountain. At times they have certainly overlapped, but these days, in her so-called retirement, Carmee is combining them like never before. "Mountain climbing is my personal metaphor because I love to look at new peaks, new projects and then I move up; and I will never be satisfied with stopping anywhere; but move forward, even if there are obstacles, I will think of ways to go around them and move right to where I want to be."



“ I WANT TO HELP PEOPLE ACHIEVE MIND, BODY, AND SOUL CONNECTION BECAUSE I BELIEVE IF YOU ARE IN HARMONY WITH YOURSELF, THEN YOU CAN DO GREAT THINGS. ”



*"My dad was a big influence. When he came to Singapore, he taught in a Chinese primary school – English and music – for which he actually had no training. Isn't that marvelous? We lived in the school. It was just a one room place, so we all slept on the floor. Every night Dad would go play the keyboard in the school hall to learn his music so that he could teach. It was a honky-tonk with stained ivory keys, but with very good resonance, and we grew up with that piano; that's how I learned my music – no formal teaching, no formal learning." Carmee feels that her dad has bestowed on her the gift of music.*

*"My dad had nine daughters and no sons; this shocks most people. My second sister died of diphtheria after the war; but we still go by our numbers: I'm number three – the outgoing one. I was like a ringleader looking after all my sisters. We'd go and play all the time, games like 'the eagle chasing after the chickens' – the chicks run around so you, the mother hen, have to protect all your little chicks from the eagle."*



*"We were very poor so we used to eat unpolished rice. It was cheap, but it had a lot of little seeds and impurities in it. It was my duty to clean the rice, so every week we'd put a big pile there and pick out all the unwanted stuff. I would get all my sisters to come and I would tell all sorts of made-up stories; they would all listen and by the time I finished my story we were finished!"*

*"I wasn't good in the Chinese school. I would have been diagnosed as ADHD, except that no one had discovered that condition during my time. All I was interested in was beating the boys in games, like five stones. I would challenge them "I'll use my left hand!" and they'd get beaten because... I'm ambidextrous! In the game of chatek (a Chinese shuttlecock for kicking), I could beat the boys with both legs; it was really fun! I was the biggest tomboy until I was seventeen or eighteen. Then I became a little bit more feminine."*



*"At that time teachers were very different. My teachers at the Chinese school, they were very strict. Every day, when the boys did something wrong or weren't paying attention they would be punished. And do you know how? They had to stand on a chair holding out a book in each hand, at arm's length and a piece of tape across their mouths. It was miserable. I was miserable."*



Carmee's career as an educator actually began around age fourteen when she started teaching neighborhood kids how to do their homework – and charging \$10 a month! "I knew them and their parents; so it was more of older sister looking after little ones; like I've always been doing. So at least I earned a few dollars a month."



When the Singapore government began offering scholarships to attract students from the Chinese 'vernacular' schools into English schools, Carmee's dad took his ten-year-old for the test. "Somehow I got the scholarship into Stamford Primary School. I had Miss Lee. She was fantastic; and very patient with us – we didn't know English. I'm not sure what her teaching methods were but we improved very fast because of her care. I remember relating very well to her and that's how we blossomed."

Carmee was more than a little apprehensive about the job. She remembered how the 'old order' principals she'd served under had to handle *everything* administrative – even opening the school's mail. "I'm basically a people person. I like teaching the students, talking with colleagues, running around *doing* things. So I kind of adjusted but I don't know how. Maybe I asked the clerk to open the mail – otherwise it would be stuck somewhere for a long time."

Being principal at Woodsville was her first experience educating boys. "It really opened my eyes. They couldn't even go into a room without giving the door a big karate kick. One boy actually kicked a hole in the bathroom door. I was quite upset. "What am I going to do with these boys?" My husband said, "What do you expect? They are boys!!" But as I grew with them, I got to like them. They're quite straightforward; really very cute."

teach momentum, impact, and projectile. I think that was a powerful turning point in my teaching life."

"Great teachers intuitively know that you can teach anyone anything if you hook it onto something the students already know. I realized that learning is not automatic; it is active, social and creative. Learning only takes place when the students *construct* their own meaning. I want them to *understand*; not just memorize the formula. These boys were constructing the whole thing through their football game in that sense."

After her first stint as principal, Carmee was called upon to be a senior inspector of schools. "Of course I learned a lot about the ministry's view of things; but it just wasn't me. We were firefighting all the time." Being Carmee, it didn't sit right to merely appraise a school. She got *involved*. Her superior told her that her role was to appraise the schools, not run workshops. "How can they

“ A PRINCIPAL NEEDS TIME TO DREAM: TO THINK ABOUT TEACHERS' NEEDS, TO BUILD A SCHOOL'S CULTURE; STRENGTHEN THE DESIRE TO LEARN AND ENHANCE NATURAL CURIOSITY AND CREATIVITY. SOME SCHOOLS ARE SO FOCUSED ON GOOD RESULTS. I'VE HEARD OF SOME PRINCIPALS HAVING MEETINGS RIGHT UP INTO THE NIGHT; I MEAN LATE, LONG MEETINGS; LIKE A MARATHON. I MEAN IT'S PUNISHING. WHAT ABOUT THE TEACHERS' FAMILIES? SO THEY'RE NOT LOOKING AFTER THE WELFARE OF THE TEACHERS; ONLY WANTING THE STUDENTS TO DO WELL. I FEEL THAT'S NOT FAIR. I THINK YOU HAVE TO LOOK AFTER BOTH SIDES. ”



Carmee was amongst the very first batch to take the PSLE. She got into Raffles Girls School, finished her 'O' levels, went to Raffles Institute for her 'A' levels and onto the University of Singapore. "We were still very poor so I had to be sure to get a scholarship; so I took teaching. I mean I never thought of anything else because my dad was a teacher. Somehow or other, my instinct was teaching and looking after people."

From the moment she graduated with her B.Sc. Carmee taught in girls' schools: first Crescent Girls School, then Raffles Girls School (RGS). In her mid-thirties she was 'asked' to be principal of a neighborhood school. Now married with three youngsters (all girls, naturally) she didn't relish the extra demands but she had no option thanks to the bond that accompanied her scholarship.

On top of her principal duties, she taught physics and chemistry to a class in the Normal 5-year stream. Carmee realized that she would have to use different strategies with the boys. So when it came to Newton's Laws of Motion, she decided to try an equal but opposite approach. She took them out onto the sports field, placed a football on the ground and started asking questions. "I said 'Will this ball move by itself?' 'Cannot, Mrs. Lim! How to move?' 'OK, if you kick it will it move?' They said, 'Of course!' 'If someone 'heads' it in this direction where will it go?' 'There! Towards the goal!'" Then, and only then did she explain Newton's Law; and had them repeat it; and repeat it. Somehow, because of the football, it stuck. They could connect. "The kids got it straight away. They didn't know Newton from Adam! But football, they knew. And now I could

When pondering the conundrum of how to demonstrate static electricity in the tropics, Carmee hit upon the idea of placing the gold leaf electroscope in a low humidity environment – she led the bemused class out to her car to conduct the morning's lesson. The gold leaf electroscope which she had kept in the car for a few hours, worked perfectly. Her students laughed... and remembered.



do better if I don't give them workshops; if I don't share other perspectives and new strategies with them? How can I appraise them like that? So, I didn't care, I just went on doing it. 'If they don't like it they can throw me out. I'm very happy! Now, looking back, it was actually quite funny.'

When Carmee heard that the principal of RGS was planning to retire she buttonholed the Director of Schools and asked straight out, "Can I go there?" Unaccustomed to such nerve, but not altogether surprised, the Director said he would need to first ask the Minister. The answer came back 'yes'. Not only that, but she was informed it was the first time in Singapore's history that anyone had actually asked for a specific post as principal.

Away from HQ and back in an all-girl setting, Carmee was in her element. RGS had plans to convert to an 'Independent School' with brand new facilities, a course Carmee

say 'she' because most of the good principals that are confident communicators are women," says Carmee with a twinkle in her eye. "I think empowerment is also very important. That's something that I've always noticed. Where the principal is empowering, you find the teachers working in groups, coming up with fantastic strategies, and in the end it will benefit the students in the teaching-learning process."

#### THE ROAD AHEAD

Carmee feels optimistic about Singapore's educational future. She views the specializing schools - sports, the arts, math & science - as positive opportunities for differently talented students to shine. "Teaching & learning is so complex; no single approach can serve everyone. Recognition of individual difference is crucial." While she finds the current minister very forward-looking, Carmee thinks the education system itself is "moving, albeit a little slowly. But



was only too happy to steer. Her teachers were well-versed in the same pedagogical trends that she found so interesting. "Many were trained for the Gifted Education Programme, so I was really lucky."

"The teacher is not the only person who can teach. The learning process can be facilitated by your peers. In the old days it was 'Sit straight! Don't copy!' But I say, why not? At RGS girls sat and worked together in groups, talking to each other, constructing their own learning together, alongside teachers' input. I'm really glad that we encourage these practices more in school nowadays to get the kids excited about learning. And of course the teachers get excited too."

"The principal should have a clear vision, a vision that is shared with her staff. That's vital. She needs to communicate - I always

then, 're-culturing' is a slow process. There is definitely more flexibility now, but some principals don't know what to do with it because they've been 'clamped down' for so long. They don't know where or how to move. Others take this opportunity to be really flexible and move forward. We need to redesign the learning environment; we need to transform learning in our efforts to prepare today's children for tomorrow's world. We are in exciting times!"

Now, as ever, Carmee's trademarks remain: indefatigable, irrepressible and irresistible. If she wants something she goes after it, with a potent mixture of tenacity and charm. If she doesn't like something she says so, in no uncertain terms. She has always answered to and trusted her own instincts. As Carmee says, "...some people are naturally rebels..." Perhaps society is a little better for that. *P*





# PRINCIPIA July 2007

01



**Moliah Binte Hashim**  
Principal, Northland Primary School  
*Moliah's Learning Journey*

04



**Goh Ek Piang**  
Principal, Hougang Primary School  
*A Call to Adventure*

09



*The Good Ship Mentor*

14



**Carmee Lim**  
Retired from Raffles Girls School  
*The Principal Who Couldn't Stop...*

