

PRINCIPIA

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A Culture of Learning



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President's Message

We took a break with *Principia* last year in 2012 so that we could concentrate on telling the story of the Academy for its 10th anniversary, capturing voices and memories of earlier years when we were separately the Association of Principals of Primary Schools (APPS), the Singapore Educational Administration Society (SEAS) and the Singapore Secondary School Principals' Association (SSSPA) while also remembering the role of the Principals' Executive Centre.

From 2013, we plan to tell the stories of school leaders using themes that encapsulate what leadership looks like in the 21st century.

This issue looks at the Culture of Learning as established by principals at different seasons in their careers. We travel with Michel Saw from his beginning a newly established school and see how he has built his dream. We hear the wisdom of Wong Bin Eng who knows from experience what teachers think and feel especially when change is taking place. Krishnan Aravinthan's determination to lead with trust and to use influence rather than dogmatism wins our respect. We end with the heart, as Kelvyna Chan shows us how she addresses the human need to belong.

A Culture of Learning must begin and end in our vision of what school is for, beyond the textbook, but will only grow as we know the hearts of our teachers and will blossom best when it touches the hearts of our students.

Chan Poh Meng
President, Academy of Principals (Singapore)
& Principal, Victoria Junior College



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Michel uses stories to instruct the heart and influence the mind.

Dare to Dream

Michel Saw

Able One was an old race horse beset by injuries. Undaunted by his younger, stronger rivals, he surpassed all expectations to win the race. The younger horses might have the strength, but Able One had the passion and determination. Stories inspire and teach. And Mr Michel Saw used the story of Able One to inspire passion in his students and teach them the importance of perseverance.

Michel's own passion for education is evident in the way he inspires his staff and students to dream. Innova Primary School is a new school, and Michel is the first Principal – there are no precedents, no boundaries, only possibilities. His perseverance in encouraging innovation is bearing fruit – teachers' observations and anecdotal evidence strongly suggest that his students have become more creative and confident. They have won accolades at the Plain English Speaking Awards and regularly

showcase their talents at platforms such as the Ministry of Education (MOE) ExCEL Fest.

Faced with the considerable task of starting Innova Primary in 2008, Michel has done everything from crafting the school's vision to buying brooms for the classrooms. One significant decision he has made, which has influenced the way his teachers teach and his students learn today, is to make Innova Primary "a home away from home, a place where it

is safe to dream, to strive for a different vision of teaching and learning; and most of all, a place to realise one's hopes and aspirations."

RAISING CHAMPIONS

Michel dreams of nurturing students who are champions of character, change and citizenry. He wants to instil in them the values and qualities of integrity, self-discipline, teamwork, adaptability and respect (ISTAR). He wants his students

to enjoy learning, embrace challenges, and be enriched by varied experiences.

In his mind, every child can be a champion. While some shine naturally, others need a little more encouragement. Once, acting on his firm belief of providing opportunities to every child, Michel went the extra mile: It had come to his attention that the school would not field a team for the North Zone Senior Boys' Volleyball Championships due to a lack of the players' discipline and attendance. Michel felt strongly that giving the boys the chance to represent the school in their final year would fire their purpose and drive. So, he personally went to every player's class to speak to each of them – he would give them a chance to do the school proud if they agreed to pull up their socks. Indeed, the boys brought pride to the school and most importantly, to themselves, when the team came in third place. "I think schooling is about giving people second chances. When we give them the opportunity, they rise to the occasion, and this can be life-transforming."

To transform lives and make learning impactful, Michel exhorts every teacher to make a difference to the lives of the students. To do this, teachers must first be able to connect with the students to understand their fears, concerns, and needs; and then select the best approach to help them learn and improve. Michel's role, then, was to foster a climate of purposeful experimentation and provide the resources for them to acquire a repertoire of teaching strategies to engage different students.

Michel also believes in the power of stories to transform mindsets and change behaviour. "Stories have strong emotional connection with people. Using stories that resonate with students helps them to internalise the lessons and apply them." He regularly shares stories during Assembly time, and encourages his teachers to reinforce the lessons in class. He tells the story of the "healing poison" to teach the lesson of treating people with love and respect;



Michel believes strongly that not only must one aim high, one must also be prepared to act on one's conviction and strive for excellence.

and shares about mountain climbers who are quitters, campers and climbers, to motivate his students to press on in the face of challenges.

MAKING LEARNING AN ADVENTURE

In 2008, Innova Primary applied for and received approval from MOE to be one of the five prototype schools to develop programmes under the 21st Century Skills and Competencies Framework. Michel Saw this as an opportunity to grow the learning culture in this newly instituted school. "For me, this was one of the ways to grow the culture of quality teaching and engaged learning, and a culture of designing thoughtful lessons."

Michel and his core team of key personnel crafted the blueprint for the school. "Right from the very beginning, we believed that in Innova Primary, learning would be an adventure. When we say learning is an adventure, it connotes a journey – students plan and prepare for the journey, experience it, and celebrate the discoveries made."

This journey of curriculum design and innovation was not without challenges. "It was a whole-school approach, and

it was massive, and somewhat painful in the beginning because there was uncertainty." The initial approach of creating resource centres and using scenario-based activities also proved to be very resource-intensive. So, Michel and his teachers changed their approach but stayed the course, and today, the Adventure of Learning Processes (ALPs) has become the mainstay and signature of the school. The school also developed a Teaching and Learning Framework, a cycle of "Plan, Teach, Evaluate" to guide teachers in their lesson planning. Michel ensured that "protected time" was included in the timetable for teachers to meet in their Professional Learning Teams (PLT) to share ideas and develop teaching strategies.

Believing that the physical environment also plays an important role in fostering the culture of learning in the school, Michel fills the walls in the classrooms and around the school with murals, creative art pieces, and motivational words and images. The "learning playground" near the canteen, while providing hours of fun for the students, also introduces concepts like friction and angles of inclination. There is a solar panel with water energy system, a vertical garden, and even a butterfly

trail in the school. Indeed, walking along the corridors is a learning adventure in itself, as the art expressions on the walls instruct even as they add vibrancy and colour to the school grounds.

ENCOURAGING INNOVATION TO ENGAGE STUDENTS

Michel desires to build a culture of learning that embraces innovation. "I want to encourage a willingness to try different ways of teaching and engaging students. We may have the best of plans, but the students may not respond in the way we planned. What then would we do?"

He believes that every teacher must have a "tool box" from which she could select the appropriate method and material to engage students. This repertoire is important because "if you only have the hammer, then everything looks like a nail." Teachers must be equipped to respond to varied learning situations and needs, so that students can learn best.

Hence, Michel led his team of teachers in Innova Primary school to develop TRACCC – Thinking Routines, Avatars, Creative Problem Solving, Co-operative Learning, and Communication Skills – to give the teachers a repertoire of tools and the flexibility to employ the right tools for the right audience, at the right time, to achieve the right impact. "Thinking Routines" are incorporated into the different content areas to nurture thoughtful and engaged learners. These protocols for exploring ideas encourage curiosity and help students make meaningful connections between school and everyday life. In addition, the teachers are trained to use Co-operative Learning strategies to help students to work together, learn better, and remember the learning longer. Creative Problem Solving is also used in the classrooms to enable students to "re-define the problems they face, come up with breakthrough ideas and then take action on these new ideas". The school recently celebrated their niche status for Creative Problem Solving for

the 21st Century Student in the domains of Thinking Skills and Pedagogies.

Unique to Innova Primary are the avatars – the Explorer, the Entrepreneur, and the Orator, each represented by the Eagle, the Dolphin and the Lion respectively. These avatars set the context and provide the "question construct" for the students in different situations, a sort of 'thinking hat' to help focus and redirect students' thinking. Life-size mascots of these avatars are made to help students better identify with them.

A firm believer in building strategic partnerships with industry, parents and MOE to support his teachers' efforts at innovating teaching and learning, Michel also leads Innova Primary on the school's journey in phase 2 of the BackpackLIVE! initiative to explore innovative use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the curriculum. The school is presently prototyping a semantic analysis device that analyses the discourse of student interaction, and provides insights into the learning processes that are taking place in class. Involving two classes during Science lessons, this project has tremendous scalability potential and would help the teachers to devise appropriate interventions to reinforce students' learning.

EMPOWERING TEACHERS TO CREATE

In the story of the migrating geese, each bird flies slightly above the bird in front of it, reducing wind resistance. They take turns to be in the front, falling back when they get tired. In this way, the geese can fly for a long time before they must stop to rest. Michel sees such interdependence as critical for longer term sustainability and success. His approach to leading a school is collegial. As the Principal, Michel involves his teachers, cultivates shared commitment, and appreciates all contributions.

With so much progress and achievements within the short span of five years since the start of the school, one wonders how the teachers feel about this journey. The answers came to light when Michel graciously showed the writer and photographer around the school. Two members of the key personnel team were having lunch in the canteen, and they shared their spontaneous responses. "We really grew together. Mr Saw allows a lot of space for us to explore, and even to fail. He's very encouraging and he picks us up (after our failure)."

They spoke of a steep learning curve, of opportunities for intellectual growth, and of how fulfilling it was to see how



Michel inspires his teachers and students to dare to dream - to push their limits and reach for their goals.

much the school has grown. While they admitted that it was sometimes tiring and things got stressful at times, they remarked: "In retrospect, whatever we didn't do well is helping to pave the way for our future. In fact, we don't want to reach an ideal stage. We don't want to be in a comfort zone, we want to continue to grow."

And growing teachers is something Michel strongly believes in. His theme for staff development in 2013 is "In one accord, we grow and glow." Drawing from his interest in sports and experience in coaching the soccer team in Henderson Secondary where he used to teach Biology and Mathematics, Michel explains what he hopes to do: "Coaching is something we need to do more of. We need to be there to watch what they are doing, to affirm them when they do something right and to tell them what they can improve on." He instituted the "Learning Walk" several years ago, where he would enter a class from the backdoor, observe the lesson for several minutes and exit quietly. The teachers have become comfortable with this approach, and Michel is able to get a sense of the learning environment on the ground. At the beginning of this year, Michel sent an email to all the teachers, inviting them to share their goals and expectations, as well as challenges they foresee and resources they require. Following the GROW model for coaching performance, he would follow up at an opportune time to invite the teachers to reflect upon their teaching journey and to consider what else could be done to help students learn better.

PAVING THE WAY FORWARD

In the story of the eagle, vulture and chicken, the eagle makes things happen; the vulture waits for things to happen; and the chicken asks, "What happened?" Michel encourages his staff and students to be like the eagle, to have the courage to take action, and "not wait for all the pieces to fall into place before doing anything." Yet, even as this pragmatic Principal motivates his teachers to try out new ideas, he is



Michel leads his teachers to design thoughtful lessons that engage students and optimise their learning



Michel desires to make learning a fun and meaningful journey of exploration, discovery and celebration.



Michel dreams of nurturing students who are champions in character, change and citizenry.

equally prepared to abort them if they do not benefit the students. "If we have to fail, then it is better to fail earlier. We are prepared to put in hard work, but we are also prepared to pull out if we realise that it is not worth the efforts."

When asked about his plans ahead, this optimistic school leader shares that his priority at this stage of the school's development is on "streamlining, deepening and strengthening". He is moving the school towards a season of consolidation, to stabilise its processes and to build on successes. The learning culture of the school, in his words,

"needs to be worked on continuously so that it can reach its desired state".

Sprawling across the wall the length of the school hall are the words: "Dare to Dream, Dare to Act, Dare to Achieve". Indeed, as much as Michel dares his students and teachers to reach for the stars and work hard to achieve their goals, he dares to lead them through uncharted waters. Innova Primary is a relatively new kid on the block and the possibilities are endless. Michel, with his team of teachers, is ready to seize every opportunity to chart the course of the school and write its history.



Bin Eng uses the Parable of the Pencil to exhort her students to be the best person they can be.

Walking THE Talk

Wong Bin Eng

In a large room, a candidate sat down for an interview to join the Education Service. For Mrs Wong Bin Eng, who was then teaching in Malaysia and who had applied to teach in Singapore, this interview marked her first step into an exciting and rewarding journey of nurturing young hearts and minds.

"I was like a prisoner under interrogation. They put me in a chair, and quite a distance away there was a row of tables with twelve people. I remembered they asked me this question: Why do you want to come to Singapore and teach? And I couldn't think of anything, I could only speak very frankly from my heart and I said, 'Teaching is my passion. And I just love to do it.' Then they said 'Okay you can go!'"

This passion is what has kept her going over the years as a teacher in Si Ling Primary, Head of Department in Northland Primary, Vice Principal of Jiemin Primary, Principal of Tampines Primary, and now, Principal of St Andrew's Junior School.

Lives are in the making here, Hearts are in the waking here. The very first line of the St Andrew's school song poignantly reflects Bin Eng's belief in instructing the hearts of her students. In SAJS, Bin Eng constantly refers to the school motto, "Up and On", to exalt her students and teachers to continuously strive for excellence, to surpass one's own achievements, and to seek progress and improvement.

"Character education must happen at all times in school." With a glimmer in her eye, and energy that never seemed to wane a tad throughout the 2-hour interview, Bin Eng shared her hope of helping students learn and internalise good values from young, of showing them how to be less self-centred and more others-centred, of teaching them to see that it is not about "how I am the best, but how I can be the best." She firmly believes that that's her mission in life – to make the best of the talents she has been given to help others make the best of their talents. And as she jokingly puts it: "If we educate our students well, in time to come, Principals will have an easier time running schools."

But how does she foster a culture of learning in her school to realise the outcomes she so strongly believes in?

To Bin Eng, one key element is to help teachers improve their craft. Her

rationale is simple: "if we don't grow the teachers, nothing better can happen in the classroom."

RAISING THE QUALITY OF LEARNING

Bin Eng believes in coaching teachers in order to raise the quality of students' learning. And as teachers seek out new ways to teach better, they ought to also share their learning with other educators, so that they can sharpen their skills and enrich others.

As Head of the Mathematics Department in Northland Primary, Bin Eng saw the then Teachers' Network (TN) as a good platform for developing her teachers. She observed her teachers' lessons, coached them to refine the lessons, then encouraged them to conduct sharing sessions at TN. At first, she co-conducted the sessions with her teachers. But as soon as they had gained some confidence, she weaned them off their dependence on her and made them run the sessions themselves. However she was always present to support them, smiling at them from the back of the room, assuring them that they were more than capable of holding themselves in front of an audience of fellow educators. Her teachers took flight.

Her Masters dissertation on Building Teacher Leadership through Collaborative Structures also influenced her approach to fostering the culture of learning in school.

In Tampines Primary School where she was Principal from 2004 to 2010, Bin Eng introduced level meetings as a platform for teachers to reflect upon and refine their art of teaching. In keeping with her belief that leaders must be role-models, she coached her key personnel and Instructional Programme Heads, and appointed them to share strategies on teaching specific topics that students were weak in. The level representatives came on next, and finally all the other teachers were rotated to share during the level meetings.



Bin Eng goes to every extent to ensure that her students are safe and happy.



Bin Eng sees character education as core and believes in role-modelling desirable values.



Ensuring that students are adequately supported and well taken care of is a priority for Bin Eng.



Bin Eng frequently walks the school grounds and looks for ways to improve the learning environment.

As one of the eight Teach-Less-Learn-More (TLLM) prototype schools at that time, Tampines Primary also adopted the Lesson Study model to help teachers improve their teaching skills. Bin Eng was energised by this model of professional development aimed at helping teachers to observe, reflect and refine their lessons to better address students' learning needs. It started with one level – Primary 3 Mathematics – and an area of concern was picked.

Applying the Lesson Study protocol, Bin Eng worked with her teachers to plan a lesson to teach. "Of course, one teacher has to conduct and the rest have to observe. I asked who would like to conduct. Nobody! So I volunteered to teach... I asked if anyone would like to co-teach with me, and one teacher, Ms Amutha, said yes." That first lesson was video-taped and reviewed, and culminated in a refined lesson plan for the second round. This time, two other teachers (Mdm Lee Cher and Mr Don Seah) gathered courage to conduct the lesson for others to observe. The teachers involved in the Lesson Study spoke positively about the experience, and gradually, other teachers got interested and wanted in. Over the next few years, Lesson Study continued to be used as a tool to raise the quality of students' learning in Tampines Primary. The school's Principles of Effective Teaching and Engaged Learning (PoETEL) was eventually crafted to guide the design of lessons and pedagogies.

PRESENCE IS IMPORTANT

To raise the standard of teaching, Bin Eng has no qualms about being the first to get her hands dirty. "My purpose was to encourage teachers to come on board, so that it can multiply. I'm game to do anything to get teachers to come on board."

"Presence is very important because people see that this is what you say you believe in and you want to do it." Indeed, Bin Eng firmly believes that school leaders must play an active role in building a culture of quality learning. For

her, being active and present involves conducting lessons for observation, demonstrating how meetings could be facilitated, setting an agenda, outlining structures and processes, observing teachers, monitoring and reviewing programmes, and celebrating successes.

A COLLECTIVE DECISION

While she takes the lead in spearheading initiatives to help students learn better in the school that she heads, Bin Eng emphasises that she cannot claim credit for everything. "You also have to do it in a way that the people think: 'I did it myself'. You cannot see it as your achievement and something glorious for yourself. You have a part to play, but you cannot claim credit that the whole thing works because of you."

Bin Eng became the Principal of St Andrew's Junior School in 2011. She took time to understand the culture in SAJS, to study the strengths of the staff, and to examine areas for improvement. SAJS had just gone through the External Validation (EV) process the year before, and after studying the EV report, she felt that Lesson Study could be used to build on strengths and also to address the teaching and learning gaps.

Now, more experienced as Principal, Bin Eng took a more strategic approach. She engaged her teachers in dialogue about the school's strategic thrusts and direction, convincing them they could build a culture of best practices for teacher and student learning through Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) and Lesson Study. She helped them to see how PLTs and Lesson Study were not piecemeal efforts, but that they leveraged on the existing level meetings to address areas of concern systemically. "Get people involved, talk about it, dialogue...in such a way that it is not seen as your idea, but more like a collective decision. All of us are for this, we are in this, and this is how are going to do it."

This grandmother of three personally conducts all target setting and appraisal

sessions with all her key personnel. "I don't just leave it to my Vice Principals but instead, I do it together with them, because I see that as a very good platform for exciting them, for growing them, for setting the direction together with them."

She also meets her key personnel in small groups, engaging them at different levels depending on their level of readiness, and focusing the conversations on areas of their interest and specialty. She explains her thinking behind her decisions, and openly shares her concerns, frustrations and challenges. "When I give them ideas, I try not to spell it out to the T. I would probe them for ideas, ask them to consider this and that. Sometimes they take it away and come up with even better ideas. That's my joy! And it's important that when they come up with even better ideas, you praise them and say 'This is your idea!'"

SET PEOPLE UP FOR SUCCESS

To build a culture where teachers continuously seek out new strategies to improve students' learning, Bin Eng works very hard to ensure that any initiative begins with a success. "Such things cannot fail for the first time... because it is very difficult to undo the negative talk amongst the teachers."

And so, Bin Eng personally sees to it that her staff is well supported and provisioned to succeed. "I make sure that it will not fail. That's why when I did Lesson Study, I helmed it, led the team, role-modelled, and worked with them to make sure that it was a success. And because it was a success the teachers talked about it positively, and the other groups wanted to switch to Lesson Study."

In St Andrew's Junior, she continues to keep a close watch on the progress and impact of Lesson Study and PLTs in addressing teaching and learning issues. She is mindful that there will be "ambiguity and imperfections", but when challenges arise, she believes in

nipping them in the bud before they could snowball “You must be on your toes to make sure that you know and you quickly rectify them.”

To ensure that Lesson Study achieves its purpose of helping teachers enhance their teaching competency, teachers are given specific roles to observe students behaviours and outcomes during the lesson observation, so the heat is taken away from the teacher conducting the lesson. “It’s not about critiquing the teacher’s method of teaching, but on collecting data on students’ learning. The objective is to see how effective our strategy is, how we can improve the second lesson, so everyone is very focussed on the purpose.”

She shares her firm belief in providing a safe environment for teachers to grow and to learn from mistakes. One key principle she adopts is that the lesson conducted for the purpose of Lesson Study should never be used to assess the teacher during ranking exercise. “If ever anybody criticises a teacher’s teaching competency at ranking based on the lesson the person conducted, that’s the end. The story will get out, no matter how confidential you want it to be, and nobody will want to conduct the lesson.”

To recognise her teachers’ efforts and to stretch their learning further, Bin Eng encourages her teachers to present papers at international conferences locally and overseas. One such conference which she regularly

sends her teachers to is the World Lesson Study Conference. She feels that the interaction with researchers and professionals exposes the teachers to diversity of ideas and spurs them to think deeper on how to improve their lessons. It also builds their confidence and the ability to think on their feet.

GUARD THE JOY IN YOUR HEART

As the conversation during the interview moved towards Bin Eng’s motivations and personal philosophy, the smile on her face deepened and her voice grew reflective. She spoke of the joys of witnessing her teachers grow in competency, confidence and character. Her eyes brightened when she shared about one particular teacher, Ms Huda, whom she had coached, and who blossomed to be one of her best Math teachers in Tampines Primary, currently pursuing her PhD. “Every time I observed her lesson I could see how she has progressed, to the point where she was the teacher who opened her classroom to other parents to come and observe. To me that was... (breath of deep contentment).”

Her Christian faith has given her a sense of deep conviction to give of her best to serve, to do what she was “made for and called for”. It also gave her the purpose and courage to persevere through challenges. “Even in the most challenging times, or with the most difficult parents, at the point of it going the wrong way, I just secretly breathe a prayer, and I can see the thing go in

the different direction to the positive side. And I know that it’s not by my own power.”

Weekends are always something to look forward to for this dedicated Principal who still spends two hours checking her emails after she goes home. She enjoys having breakfast with her husband, going to the market, and cooking dinner for her children and grandchildren who visit every Sunday.

As she used the word “joy” and “excite” numerous times during the interview, it begged the question ‘why’. “I always share with people: Guard the joy in your heart. If you don’t guard that joy in you, you allow it to be taken away, and very soon you will not like what you do and it will be such a torture to come to school.”

After the interview, one could not help but stay on a little, to catch a glimpse of this gentle lady on a mission. She was trying to solve a problem on congestion at a narrow school gate, and wanted to be there to monitor a new dismissal procedure she had implemented. It was raining heavily, and between “Do you have an umbrella?” and “Walk carefully, it’s slippery”, this caring principal continued to exude an assuring calmness.

Such was her approach to ensuring that her students reach their fullest potential. By the time the writer left the school, Bin Eng was still at the school gate, walking the ground, walking the talk.



Bin Eng believes that her presence signals the importance of raising the quality of students’ learning.



Bin Eng is actively involved in developing strategies to help students learn better.

The Management Committee in Bedok South Secondary School gave Ari a memento before he left the school to head Spectra Secondary.



To Trust & Influence

Krishnan Aravinthan

Once, when Mr Krishnan Aravinthan was walking around the school with the cluster superintendent, a student walked up to him and said, "Mr Ari, I've got something important to share with you. Can I have a meeting with you?" When they met after school, the boy presented his suggestion to start a lion dance club. Even though

the Principal knew that the idea was not practicable, he probed the student to think deeper. Eventually, the boy came to his own conclusion that the idea was not feasible. But more importantly, he left the meeting feeling more confident and more motivated to contribute.

This incident characterises Aravinthan's style of leading a school – No effort too small, no idea too unworthy. In his own words, "the benefit of doubt is always given", the door is always open, and "honest conversations" are always welcome.

As Principal of Bedok South Secondary School from 2007 to 2012, Ari (a short form of his name, Aravinthan) spent most of his time motivating and supporting his teachers to do the "work". "For me, having clarity on what the work entails is critical if you want to influence your teachers. The work is characterised by the progress we have made in developing our students both academically as well as in character... to build in them values, confidence, and positivity." To build a culture of learning to do this "core work", Ari recognises that it takes "mindset changes and not just structural changes".

INFLUENCE CHANGE FROM WITHIN

In his energising, pragmatic and positive manner, Ari talks about how important it is to shape mindsets in order to effect enduring improvements in the quality of learning. "The classroom is the teachers' domain. What he or she does or does not do, is really impactful. So how are we going to influence the teacher to do the right thing?"

"For me, I have a schema of how things should work in classrooms, canteen and practically everywhere else. I try to influence people around this area. It may take a different form because they have their own ideas to add on, but that's fine. In fact, that's better because you have just planted a key idea and influenced people."

When asked how he would influence a resistant or 'difficult' teacher, Ari's response was thoughtful and incisive. His basic assumption is "no one comes to school wanting to do a bad job", and if a teacher is resistant to something, it is likely that the particular task, initiative or approach was "not in sync with his value system". Teachers may be reluctant to do administrative duties, but they are unlikely to say no to putting in extra effort to teach better.

To foster a culture of learning, the students, too, need to be influenced to adopt the right attitude towards new concepts, and to channel their energies towards building up their understanding

Ari believes that as the 'gatekeeper', he has to balance the school's needs with larger organisational goals.



better. When one student had a run-in with a particular teacher and petitioned to have this teacher changed, Ari took the opportunity to reframe the student's outlook to take responsibility for his own learning. "What efforts have you made personally to enhance your learning? Who do you think is in control of your learning? If it is only your teacher, then you have lost all power to influence the outcome of your learning."

TRUST PEOPLE TO DO THEIR JOBS

In Ari's mind, change can only happen if mindsets, attitudes, beliefs and values are transformed. This is more an art than a science, and involves dialogue and support, consistency of words and actions, and "trust" in people.

Ari's personal philosophy is to begin with trust. "Trust is the basic building block for all relationships. When there is a lack of trust, the conversations and actions tend to be superficial, whereas people feel empowered when trusted. Always start with 100% trust." He believes in giving his teachers the benefit of the doubt, and when mistakes happen, he gives them a chance to explain, rectify and make good the situation. His rationale is simple: "I'd rather you come and tell me, and I give you the benefit of the doubt, than you don't tell me what happened."

When asked if anyone has abused his trust, Ari thought for a moment and said, "No. Not measured up, yes. But abuse, no." He believes that most slips are due to a "competency issue, not an effort issue." It is therefore important to continue to uphold the person's dignity, appreciate the efforts made, and focus on helping the person improve.

Ari points out that being consistent in words and actions is important. He is conscious that how he reacts and what he says have an impact on how his intentions are perceived. His key personnel in Bedok South Secondary often wondered why he was never angry, even at serious missteps. Ari confessed that he was incensed on a few occasions, but controlled his

reactions because he wanted his staff to continue to be open to him and to focus on improvements. His teachers were at ease whenever he visited their classes because he never “jumped at noise” and always trusted them to do what was best for the students.

DEVELOP CORE COMPETENCY

To Ari, three things are required to motivate his teachers: Purpose, Professional Autonomy, and Requisite Competency. The purpose of any plan, initiative or programme must be “right” and “clear” – it must benefit and impact the students positively, and the teachers must be clear about the intention. Having the professional freedom to do their job gives the teachers a greater sense of control and the drive to put in the extra effort. On the other hand, autonomy is empowering only if the teacher has the requisite competency, otherwise it would be “preparing the teacher for failure.” Teachers still working to reach their optimal level of performance are given support, trained and mentored to build their competencies.

In Bedok South Secondary, the model of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) was adopted for onsite professional development. The teachers worked in groups that were largely organised by departments, and could re-group after a period of time to work on other topics. Together with his Vice Principals, Ari sat in the PLC meetings and asked probing, critical questions to help the teachers “sharpen their thinking” and to be “more data-driven in their analysis”. He focussed on “quality, not quantity”, emphasised “genuine improvements” and expected actions to be taken “not just for sharing, but for impact”.

When the Skilful Teacher Enhanced Mentoring (STEM) model was introduced by the Academy of Singapore Teachers, Ari seized the opportunity. “The teachers themselves felt that they were well-supported, and that there was a good culture and feel amongst them. So they felt they must keep this culture,

and anyone new to the school must be inducted into this culture.” Initially implemented for Beginning Teachers, mentoring was later extended to other teachers who required additional support. Both mentors and mentees were offloaded from some of their duties to give them space to develop their teaching competencies.

Ari also believes in deploying teachers according to their strengths as far as possible. He once deployed a teacher with a passion in the Arts to a Co-Curricular Activity (CCA) in the Aesthetics area, even though there was a need in the Uniformed Groups. He reasoned that deploying this teacher to an area she was interested and competent in would “immediately bring purpose and engagement” – the teacher would be motivated, and able to contribute significantly.



Ari believes in influencing mindsets, beliefs, values and attitudes in order to effect enduring change in the individual.

Clearly, “not all teachers are built in the same way”. When his teachers made mistakes, Ari saw it as “a process of their development, and not as something they were unable to do.” The key is to support teachers with the right interventions and environment so that they continue to be willing to try and to improve. “Then the teachers will have the confidence to say, ‘I’ve learnt a lot’ instead of ‘I failed in this.’”

PRINCIPAL AS GATE-KEEPER

A member of the MOE Football team who plays regularly on weekends and takes part in Civil Service tournaments, Ari taught Physical Education (PE) in Nanyang Junior College and Serangoon Garden Secondary. He also served as Head of PE & CCA in Deyi Secondary, and Vice Principal in Anderson Secondary and Tampines Junior College.

His interest in football taught him important lessons in teamwork. He said emphatically, “You can’t do it on your own, because the work that you are doing is not transactional work. If you are sitting down, typing out a report, putting together a PowerPoint presentation, then yes. But if you are doing leadership work, you need to influence attitudes, mindsets, beliefs, and values. There is no way you can do

it alone. You have to influence all the people in the community to be able to do this with you.”

On the role of the Principal, Ari sees himself as the “gatekeeper”. In the face of various demands and programmes with “good intentions”, he has to have the clarity of vision and moral courage to sieve out those that will add value and create synergy. “I will look at the



Ari sees the best in his students, and believes they each have something valuable to contribute.



Ari enjoys a close rapport with his staff and trusts them to do what is best for the students.



Ari works with his teachers to improve students' learning.

point in the journey at which the school is, whether we are ready to take this on, whether there is already enough on the plate. It's my duty as Principal to say, "This is good, but it can wait."

THE ROAD AHEAD

Ari is embarking on his next journey as Principal of Spectra Secondary School, a specialised school catering for Normal (Technical) students. The school, sited in Woodlands Drive 64, will open in 2014, and Ari is currently working with his core team of teachers to craft the "collective vision" and design a curriculum that will build confidence and self-esteem in students.

His staff in Spectra Secondary comprises teachers from the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) as well as direct hires. His team of key personnel consists of experienced Heads of Department "who can hit the road running" as well as first-time Heads with a passion for educating students. He selects teachers who "not only can do the job well", but who have convictions and opinions, who challenge norms and make suggestions.

The father of three is excited about what can be done to make a difference for the students who come to Spectra Secondary. He is heartened by the numerous voluntary offers of assistance from people in the community who knew about this school and wanted to contribute to its cause. "The weight on my shoulders feels a lot heavier because of the responsibility and the impact we can make on these kids. That's why I feel humbled to be given this opportunity to serve a special group of students and teachers."

His trust in people is invigorating, and his passion for his cause, no less revitalising. In this season of his life, he is faced with the momentous task of building a school from scratch. And Ari, with his sleeves rolled up, is raring to go.

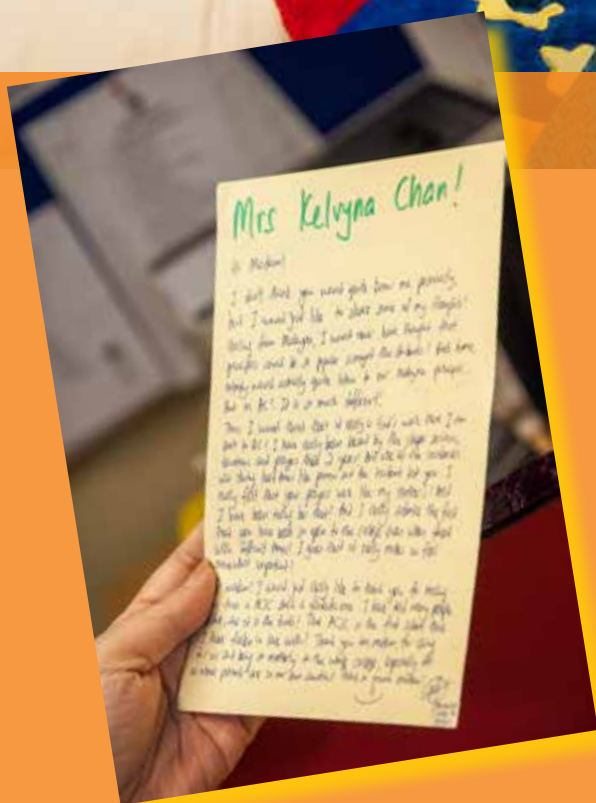
Creating Lasting Ties

Kelvyna desires to create a vibrant learning culture to make college life memorable for her students.



Kelvyna Chan

She keeps a treasure chest in her office. The precious contents bear testament to the lives she has touched over ten fulfilling years as Principal of Anglo-Chinese Junior College (ACJC). Besides the heartfelt thank-you cards and notes, Mrs Kelvyna Chan is also surprised regularly by cookies and chocolates from appreciative students and staff. One such note from a student reads, “ACJC is the first school that I’ve fallen in love with. Thank you, Madam, for caring for us.”



Kelvyna is often surprised by notes of appreciation and gifts of chocolates and cookies from staff and students.

Indeed, it is Kelvyna's desire to make ACJC a nurturing place for students to learn and grow. A place where staff and students feel valued, supported and encouraged; where caring, sincere relationships are formed based on shared experiences and trust. Only in such an environment will they want to come to everyday, will they give of their best, and will they want to belong to for life. And for Kelvyna, this environment of care and genuine relationships is the cornerstone of the culture of learning in ACJC. As the ambassador of this culture, she is prepared to articulate and to actualise it.

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR LIFE

Kelvyna sees college education as preparing students for life. She recognises that there is a "great compression of time" in the final two years of formal schooling, and is not content to simply produce graduates with good GCE A Level results. "If the students only obtained their A Levels

from ACJC, then we would have failed. Because we have not educated them, we have just given them a certificate." Although Kelvyna is clear that the school "must never lose sight of the A Levels", she is resolute that the students who come to ACJC leave the school as better individuals, with a greater understanding of how they can "contribute in service to family, school, nation and God."

With clear conviction in her voice, Kelvyna shares her philosophy for teaching and learning: "We are committed to holistic education." And so, college life in ACJC is busy. "We have a very vibrant sporting culture... a rich, artistic environment." ACJC sends more than 30 teams into the National Inter-school Championships every year. "Every student in ACJC is involved in sports – if they are not participating, they are actively cheering." The college's Choir, Concert Band, and ACSian Theatre, to name a few, are well-known locally and internationally.

social, emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, physical and leadership dimensions of a young person, bolstered by a vibrant, caring and welcoming environment.

BUILDING A VIBRANT, WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

Kelvyna is convinced that a caring and supportive environment sustains the learning culture in a school. She believes that people thrive in a place that looks after them, and encourages open communication and strong bonds between, and among, students and teachers. This atmosphere of care results in enduring relationships and "an affection for the college" that continue well after the students graduate from ACJC, and long after the staff move on to other institutions. "The alumni are always present and play a role in the life of ACJC. They are involved in all our programmes." They organise events, give talks, provide technical support, offer expert advice, and lead Chapel services. "And they come back because this relationship started when they were in ACJC."

As Kelvyna shares more about the thinking behind her approaches, the hallmark of the culture of learning in ACJC becomes clearer – a thoughtful balance between academic rigour and curricular robustness to grow the moral,

To create a vibrant environment for learning, and to more actively engage her students and make them look forward to going to class, she set up Home Rooms for different subjects, and empowered her teachers and students with a budget of \$3000 per room to "do as they will" to turn the rooms into vibrant educational spaces. To foster college culture and school spirit, she continues the heritage of Fun-O-Rama (FOR), a biennial mega funfair



Kelvyna's supports her students to excel and celebrates their triumphs with them.



Kelvyna's students appreciate her for caring and believing in them.



Kelvyna rejoices with her students over their A level results.



Celebrating National Day with members of the Singapore Armed Forces.



Kelvyna works closely with the alumni and friends of the ACJC community.

started by the college forty years ago. She personally joins the countdown to FOR, where she and a few teachers explain the legacy and purpose of the fundraising event, and share stories and reflections on the particular FOR that was especially memorable for them. To Kelvyna, building a culture requires one to be personally involved. Even if this involvement entails her being dunked into a giant container of water during FOR!

When asked about her relationship with her staff, Kelvyna took a moment, and then in a tender voice, she replied, "I really like them." She admits that she "never feels alone" because she knows that she can count on her staff to "do the best for the students." Her "genuine fondness" for her staff is expressed in the way she takes a genuine interest in the person. She personally mentors her Vice Principals, and has breakfast with them in the school canteen every Thursday, so that they "get to know each other in a personal way". Management meetings with her key personnel are conducted with a firm focus on benefitting their "darlings" (the students), characterised by open discussions and respectful feedback, and enriched by light-hearted banter and candid conversations. Her group of 30 key personnel helps her to connect with a teaching staff of 160 and to ensure that school programmes remain relevant and effective. More importantly, to Kelvyna, her key personnel also act as her "mirror", reflecting her actions and the impact of her decisions.

SUPPORTING QUALITY TEACHING & LEARNING

Cognisant of the fact that A Level results impact university admission, Kelvyna emphasises the importance of having a strong instructional programme. Her teachers are committed to helping the students achieve good academic outcomes – they verbalise their expectations of the students to them, provide timely feedback and advice, and find ways to help them learn better. All the staff and students in ACJC take the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) assessment so that they understand their own personalities and how to relate to different personality types. This helps the teachers to more effectively reach out to students and address learning issues.

To "bring students across the finishing line well", Kelvyna ensures that a suite of good instructional programmes, rigorous assessments, and robust monitoring systems are put in place to help students to peak. Tiered approach and differentiated programmes cater to students with varying levels of mastery in subject areas; remediation and supervised study programmes address students who require additional support; and the Co-curricular Activities Peak Season Recovery Programme (CAPERS) help students catch up with their work after competition seasons. Students are closely monitored by their form tutors and subject tutors, and are assigned monitoring Heads from the key personnel team. The various staff members intervene at appropriate

junctures, engaging with students and parents to work towards specific educational goals.

"Mentoring is a key to success. It helps a person to find success and even if it is not found easily, we do not feel that we are boxed in with no options." It is her firm belief in growing people and setting them up for success that motivates Kelvyna to build a strong induction and mentoring culture in ACJC. Every beginning teacher and new staff to ACJC is assigned two mentors – one from their subject area, and another from a different department. Kelvyna explains that these two mentors play slightly different roles, holistically developing the teacher in subject-related competence and social-emotional well-being. Newly appointed key personnel receive guidance from either herself or her Vice Principals, and are also assigned an experienced key person as buddy-mentor. "The idea is so that teachers don't feel alone – they feel cared for. So I try to build a larger support base for them."

To support continuous improvements in the quality of students' learning, Kelvyna initiated Professional Learning Communities (PLC) to develop innovative ideas to help students learn better. One such PLC focussed on helping Science students learn Literature better, and the results were very positive – the Science students easily related to and greatly benefitted from doing character studies using graphs. The best practices for teaching and learning in various subjects are

shared with fellow educators from other junior colleges in a PLC Symposium which ACJC organises annually.

As Principal, she believes in supporting her staff and students with her presence, her encouragement and appropriate resources. She led the school to build a \$12-million Performing Arts Centre with a fully equipped, 480-seater Theatre as one of its facilities, so that her Performing Arts groups have their own performance venue to call home. During the revision period for the A Level examinations, she opens the school up to 9.30pm for students to do self-study, and organises groups of parents to provide home-cooked dinners every week-night. She makes it a point to join the students one night a week, and personally provides a dish for dinner.

This astute school leader recognises that for learning to have a real impact, real needs must be served. She regularly chats with her staff and students to understand the issues they face, and seeks their inputs to major decisions relating to teaching and learning. She values their perspectives, believing that “collective wisdom” brings many advantages. She is prepared to rethink and discontinue programmes that are not critical to students’ learning. “The things that are bread-and-butter we must do – things that are critical for students’ learning, for these things, we must press on. But anything else, we can reconsider.”

CREATING LASTING TIES

“If you want to build a culture, you must be prepared to invest in the people, over a long time.” To Kelvyna, building relationships may take more time and energy, but the fruits last for generations.

She desires to instil in students pride in the school and “a sense of belonging to a larger group than just their cohort”. This is no small feat to accomplish within two years, for cohorts of new students coming from more than 70 different secondary schools. To Kelvyna, the only

way to build strong relationships and lasting ties with the college is to make the students’ experience in ACJC a memorable one, “so that even after they have graduated, the memory of this experience remains for life.”

By involving her students in school-building, she inculcates in them a sense of ownership and shared commitment, and an appreciation of the continuity of efforts to sustain a community. She tells them: “We do not build for ourselves. We always build for the generation that comes after us, because we are currently enjoying what the generations before us have built.” And to lead by example, she ends with a clincher: “I built ACJC. When I was in school, they told us they wanted to build this Junior College. We

walked, we sold food, we swam, and did all kinds of things to raise money. Today, 30 years down the road, I am Principal of ACJC.”

Being appointed Principal of ACJC in 2003 was a homecoming for Kelvyna. She was previously a student in Methodist Girls’ School and attended Pre-University classes in Anglo-Chinese School before the college was instituted. The youngest of her three children currently attends ACJC.

CONTINUING THE LEGACY

The once Deputy Director in the Educational Technology Division in the Ministry of Education headquarters and Principal of Tanjong Katong Girls’



Kelvyna treasures the relationships built and bonds forged with students and staff.



Kelvyna believes in being personally involved in the life of the college, even if it means being dunked at the biennial mega funfair!

School has influenced policies and made a difference in the lives of many students. From the conversation with this articulate and personable school leader, one comes away with the sense that this college has found its unique formula for producing young men and women of distinction. The class of 2011 achieved 94.7% confirmed admissions to the local autonomous universities.

Having met many people in her life who are very affirming and supportive of her own personal and professional growth, Kelvyna has a simple rationale for paying it forward: "Your interaction with people will always make a difference. The choice is whether you want to make a good difference or a bad one." Her hope is that her encounter with people will leave them "feeling better, more encouraged and empowered, like they have grown." She finds strength and purpose from her Christian faith and believes that good works will be multiplied.

Her sense of urgency and mission is evident throughout the interview. "You only have two years with the students.

So whatever difference you want to make to their lives, you have to make it in two years!" She tells her students that they stand tall on the shoulders of those before them. She gives them a holistic education, but more than that, she gives them the legacy of love and lasting ties to a community that stands behind them.

This year, as ACJC celebrates its Founder's Day, her legacy finds its way back to her through an email from a student who joined nine years ago. "I stayed, and let the school mould me. I grew to love it and it loved me in return, and together we built memories which will last me a lifetime... If, on that day in your office, you hadn't reasoned with me with the love you did, I wouldn't be where I am in life today. The road is going to be a long one, but I'm pretty sure that the best is yet to be."

Indeed, as espoused in the motto of the Anglo-Chinese School, "The Best Is Yet To Be" for the students who enjoy an excellent education under the leadership of this God-fearing, people-loving Principal.



1

Dare to Dream

Michel Saw



5

Walking the Talk

Wong Bin Eng



9

To Trust & Influence

Krishnan Aravinthan



13

Creating Lasting Ties

Kelyvna Chan



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