

PRINCIPIA

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The **Language**
of Leadership

President's Message

We are beginning a new series about the Language of Leadership and the language of leaders as we have become more and more aware that much of leadership lies in communication and in the type of language the school leader chooses to use.

People frequently use metaphors, sometimes without even knowing the unspoken images that are being employed. When as educators, we talk about what we want to put into a lesson, then the lesson is metaphorically a box or container with clearer boundaries than we had realised. When we talk about building up our students and proceed to describe the tasks we plan them to go through, it may reveal an assembly-line process instead of the constructivist approach we thought we were using.

It was with this awareness that Principia began interviewing principals to see what they say and how they say it and how this has impacted the kind of leadership they have developed.

You will read that Pamela Yoong was a gangster girl of sorts and how it served her well in understanding students; yet she would need other kinds of language to understand her teachers' needs. Shawal Hussin will show that an apparently easy-going manner with students had to have an intention beyond just being friendly; that not sweating the small stuff needs a far more deliberate effort to think through to what really matters. Learn from Peter Tan's seemingly *faux* steps and the courage it takes to do the right thing. You will then be ready to hear about Daphne Sing's journey with positive education and how it has to start with self-belief.

School leadership is indeed a multi-dimensional affair; it has to do with what you say and what you don't say. It has to do with managing the expectations of others while standing for what is right. It has to use a language that is ready to admit a mis-step and a language that is ready to put the mis-step right.

As we begin the second semester, may I wish every school leader a renewed vision for the rest of the year as you hone your ability to say and do what's best for your students and your teachers.



Chan Poh Meng

President, Academy of Principals (Singapore)

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PAMELA YOONG

Principal, Tampines Junior College

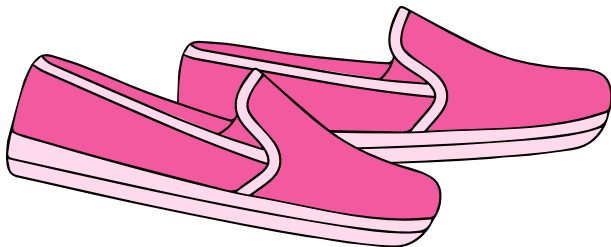


“I’M JUST A GANGSTER GIRL”

Why students cannot get away with misbehaving

In junior college, Ms Pamela Yoong was a rule-breaker. She never tucked in her uniform blouse, wore pink moccasins instead of the stipulated canvas shoes, frequently skipped classes and took five Extra-Curricular Activities (ECAs) rather than the usual one or two.

“I thought pink matched the grey uniform much better than boring canvas shoes,” recalls the former National Junior College student with a lilting chuckle as she explains her rationale behind her teenage rebellion. But her characteristic bubbly cheer fades a little as she reveals how her heavy involvement in ECAs came with an equally heavy price – her A-Level results were so bad that she could not enter local universities.



She had to retake the examination as a private candidate, spending the next year studying on her own and watching wistfully as her female friends went on to university. “It was such a humbling and painful experience,” says the Principal of Tampines Junior College (TPJC) who has shared her anguish with students to caution them against following in her footsteps.

Having gone through these experiences, from rebel to detainee, she knows the mischief that students are planning even before they do it. More importantly, because of these experiences, she believes in being both firm and flexible with students. Too harsh and they may recoil and revolt; too soft and they may run riot.

One episode clearly showed how she struck the right balance. When she was in charge of discipline at Nanyang Junior

College (NYJC), her first school posting, a teacher caught a student for wearing shoes that did not adhere to the school rules. The shoes had to be totally black, but this student was wearing a pair of black Nike shoes with a white swoosh logo, she explains.

The student was defiant, insisting that the shoes were black. This infuriated the teacher. She had to step in to calm things down, telling the teacher that she would resolve the issue. When the teacher went off, she admonished the student for challenging authority but at the same time, suggested a creative way to solve the colour conundrum – paint the white swoosh black with a marker.

“Really, will that work?” the student asked, amazed that she offered this idea. “Of course,” she replied. “As long as the shoe is totally black, it doesn’t matter how you do it.” The student smiled in appreciation at her ingenuity, went home and did exactly as was told. Problem solved.

But she will suspend flexibility for firmness when the situation calls for it. As a trainee teacher at a secondary school, she recalls one incident when a recalcitrant student forgot to bring her textbook. Pamela told her to sit at the front of the class as a form of punishment, but the student refused to budge.

“The girl stared at me. I stared back. She eventually dragged her chair to the front and sat down,” she says, relieved that the student blinked first in that act of brinksmanship instead of defying her. “You have to be firm, as students read your body language. I held my ground and that sent a signal,” she adds.

How did she know what to do with misbehaving students? Without hesitation, she replies with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes: “I’m just a gangster girl.” Any student who tries to challenge the statuesque educator, who stands at 1.73m, should know that her alter ego is Xena, the warrior princess from the famed television series in the mid 1990s. She even dressed up as the heroine once for a school performance, she reveals with a gleeful smile.



Fellowship time: Pamela loves to catch up with her teachers, chatting about work or life in general.

Communication skills 101

Her height has not always worked in her favour. For instance, she has learnt that it is not ideal to stand and talk in some situations. At NYJC, she was placed in a leadership position in her second year and one colleague told her that she can come across as rather intimidating, especially to male teachers who were shorter. “You are very tall. When you talk to men, they will feel that you are encroaching on their space,” her colleague told her.

“So I changed and started to sit down when I talked to my male colleagues,” she says. The strategy seemed to work. One 1.6m tall male teacher used to be less cooperative until they had sit-down discussions, she recalls. They got along so well that they eventually became good friends.

These early lessons on communication have stayed with her through the years. Other tips she picked up at NYJC, where she stayed for seven years, were: Do not be afraid to ask for help, learn how to delegate work and being “bubbly” helps to get people on your side.

On the first point, she was tasked to take minutes of a staff meeting that lasted six hours. She panicked a little, and sought help from a colleague who obligingly said ‘yes’ to being her back-up note taker. Together, they submitted a detailed 32-page report.

On delegating work, she discovered the lesson too late. She was chairing the Staff Wellbeing Committee when someone told her that one toilet bowl was missing a seat. She rushed

out to get the seat and fixed it herself, but a colleague told her: “You should have told the Operations Manager. You cannot take over other people’s job, as it is very disempowering.”

Apart from engaging colleagues, she also learnt how to connect with troublemaker students. In her fourth year at NYJC, she became Discipline Mistress and was in charge of students who were sent for detention. While these students were punished with chores such as cleaning toilets or dirty tables in the lecture theatre, she also bought food and drinks for them and started a detention walk around the athletic track.

During the walks, she asked them to reflect on their actions as well as their aspirations. “Why do we have to clean the dirty tables,” they asked her. “Then it is your job to tell the people who are dirtying the tables not to do so,” she reasoned. Over time, these students built strong bonds with her, leading some teachers to comment that students seem to be enjoying detention, she discloses with a grin.

While she had a good rapport with students and shared freely with them, there were times when she was misunderstood. During a class on General Paper, she discussed the issue of race relations and whether Singapore society was at a level of tolerance, acceptance or embracing of people of different ethnicity and religion. A few days later, a student’s parent complained to the school that Pamela was a racist.

She was shocked. How did an honest discussion on race get so misconstrued, she wondered. Her Vice-Principal told her: “No matter how close you are to students, they may not fully understand you.” After that incident, she says: “I learnt to be

more cautious about what I said, and to always explain clearly why I said certain things.”

Learning on the job

This habit of offering clarity and context followed her to other postings. It came in very useful after she left NYJC and spent a year at the Ministry of Education’s (MOE) headquarters as a Special Assistant to the Deputy Director for schools in the East Zone in 2001. While there, amongst other responsibilities, Pamela was involved in the training and development of the Executive and Administrative Support staff. In this, she had the opportunity to understand the different challenges faced by this group of colleagues and she remains in touch with them till today.

In 2002, she was posted to Paya Lebar Methodist Girls’ School (PLMGS) as Vice-Principal. She vividly remembers her first announcement to the school. It was a rainy day, on the eve of Chinese New Year, and students were standing in the shelter along the quadrangle in the courtyard. She explained why they should not be seen in shopping malls in their school uniform. If they really had to follow their parents for last minute CNY shopping, go home and change first, she suggested.

“I thought I did very well,” she recalls. But one senior teacher thought otherwise. “This is a secondary school, you don’t need to explain. Just tell students not to wear school uniform in a mall,” the teacher told Pamela, before shaking her head and walking away. While she appreciated the advice, she preferred

to explain more than less so that teenagers will be more inclined to obey rather than dismiss the rule as silly.

Yet, in a seeming contradiction to her belief in offering explanations and reasoning, there are also times when she believes the law has to be laid down with no ifs and buts. She calls it playing the “good cop, bad cop” routine. As Vice Principal, she played the bad cop while the Principal was the good cop. Her reason is simple: If she played the bad cop by scolding students or checking on staff, they could approach the Principal, the good cop, to mitigate the issue. But if the Principal were the bad cop, then unhappy staff, students or their parents would have no choice but to complain to a higher level – MOE. That was not ideal.

She shares one example of how she played the bad cop – enforcing the dress code for teachers. The Principal had very firm ideas on what should not be worn, such as no trousers or open-toe shoes for female staff. Pamela made sure teachers followed the dress code and those who did not were asked to return home and change to the appropriate attire. But she found herself in a tight spot when she took over as Principal eight years later in 2010.

Teachers came up to her to remove the no-trousers rule. “They told me we have a premier example to follow – Ms Ho Ching who wears trousers frequently,” she chortles, referring to the Prime Minister’s wife. But she did not want to unravel rules that were from the previous Principal, especially a rule that she herself had enforced.



Party time: Pamela joins the fun and festivities with TPJC students during the school party to celebrate the release of the A-Level results in 2017.

Principal's Message 2017

The new year of 2017 has just begun.

Are you one who likes to set goals for yourself at the end of the previous year, aspiring to make the coming one most memorable and most significant? This is certainly laudable except if you are one who either sets unrealistic goals or one who loses steam along the way and when discouraged, would allow yourself to spiral downwards like a high speed train.

But the start of a new year is always a lovely time to reflect on that which had happened the year or years before and to consider deeply the new opportunities that may arise or could be created with effort. The thing you have to bear in mind is your own gifting and strengths and to build on these. And just as you are building on your strengths, you will need to know your weaknesses too, especially what would derail you so that you can proactively make the effort to prevent that from happening.

To the JCs, it seems only yesterday that you were wide-eyed and lost as you walked around this campus wondering what JC life would be like for you. And now, a year later, you are walking down the corridors of the college purposeful and driven, and confidently leading your peers and the in-coming juniors, assuring them all's well.

Yes, all would be well as we press on, working consistently and diligently towards the goal(s) we have set for ourselves. But is that all to life?

TPJC is not just a college. This is a place where you find life and the meaning of living and working together as a community.

<https://mibc-story.blogspot.sg/2009/06/lesson-on-gratitude.html>

A story was told of a young man who while roaming the desert came across a spring of delicious crystal-clear water. The water was so sweet and he filled his leather pouch so he could bring some back to a tribal elder who had been his teacher.

After a four-day journey, he presented the water to the old man who took a deep drink, smiled warmly and thanked his student lavishly for the sweet water. The young man returned to his village with a happy heart.

Later, the teacher let another student taste the water. He spat it out, saying it was awful. It apparently had become stale because of the old leather container.

The student challenged his teacher: "Teacher, the water was foul. Why did you pretend to like it?"

The teacher replied, "You only tasted the water. I tasted the gift. The water was simply the container for an act of loving-kindness and nothing could be sweeter."

I chose to share this story for a few reasons.

Firstly, TPJC is 31 this year. The college has been standing on these very premises since the start. Some people may see this as a minus point especially when they compare us with the newer campuses. But if you take a closer look at our facilities, I dare say we have just as many, if not more, state-of-the-art support for teaching and learning. We all know resources are not unlimited and as good stewards, we would have to prioritise. But TPJC has been unsurprisingly in our effort to provide our students with the best of resources because we believe all these matter to our students' learning. That said, the exterior (the old leather container) remains superficial. You have to experience and "taste" for yourself this "gift" - TPJC as a human community. In TPJC, you find people who genuinely care for each other and trust me, it is infectious. Just ask any of our alumni members, parent support group members, even the chance encounters. If you give yourself a chance to be involved, you will find that strange attraction that keeps you coming back. This is what makes TPJC special. We are serious about our people business. We are TPJC.

Secondly, I speak now to my kiddos. I will be truthful. The road ahead will be very much desert-like. It will be tough. For some, it will be tougher than for others. But don't give up and keep walking. You will reach that oasis of delicious crystal-clear water. And I know amongst you are the many young men (and women) who would save that delicious crystal-clear water and bring it back to your teachers in appreciation for all that they have done for you. We see that in your seniors. This is TPJC. But there are also some who would be like the second student needing the enlightenment to understand the true purpose of our human connection. That's why we, your teachers, will keep working with you and walking this journey with you as far as we can go with you. We are TPJC.

My dear TPJCians, at this start of a new year, as you go about deciding what you want out of 2017, may I ask you to add loving yourself and loving others to that list? You see, when you love yourself, you will make sure you look for and do things that are good and healthy for you physically, mentally and emotionally. When you love others, you would do likewise to and for them. And because your heart is always looking for the positive, you will become a happier person. The focus is on the actual Gift, and not the superficial container. So yes, my dear students, take good care of yourself and those around you because that's what TPJC is all about. And remember, you are TPJC.

I wish everyone the very best in 2017 and may it be filled with wonderful and loving experiences.

Ms Pamela Yoong
Principal

Pamela's annual message to TPJC students where she shares stories about life's lessons.

She did the next best thing, by seeking the majority view through a survey. Most teachers had no issues with overturning the rule, but she still decided to opt for incremental changes. She instituted a dress-down day where trousers would be allowed for female teachers every Friday. It went on trial for a 6-month period before becoming permanent. "The school culture is bigger than all of us. Don't be in a rush to change things, as you need to have a good sense of ground sentiment first," she notes.

Sharing with Stories

For the past eight years, since she became a Principal, Pamela has set a special task for herself every December – finding a good story to share with students in her welcome message at the start of the school year. She scours the Internet as well as books in search of an appropriate anecdote that will speak to students.

It was a tradition she started at PLMGS and continued when she went over to TPJC in 2015. She has shared stories of how an eagle became a chicken, how a sunflower was given its colour and name, and most recently, how a teacher tasted foul-smelling water and said it was the best thirst quencher ever. Each story held a lesson – to show how people should not be constrained by circumstances (eagle story), everyone is special with different talents (sunflower story) and the importance of being grateful (water story).

“The school culture is bigger than all of us. Don't be in a rush to change things, as you need to have a good sense of ground sentiment first.”

“Speeches can be very boring,” she notes. “I wanted something that would resonate with students and stories seem to do that. Students pay attention to stories, and I enjoy looking for stories to share.” Some of her students evidently remember the stories so well that they identify themselves as the “apple tree” or “sunflower” batch, according to her story in the year they graduated.

Some of the PLMGS students have followed her to TPJC after their O-Levels, so she still sees some familiar faces. When asked if there is any difference between leading an all-girls secondary school and a co-educational junior college, she says in jest: “Yes, there are boys who sweat a lot.” On a more serious note, she shares that there is limited time - just two

years - to turn students around in a junior college, compared to four years in a secondary school. “The runway is very short and tight,” she says.

But wherever she goes, her leadership philosophy remains the same. She lists some of her key mantras: No one is indispensable; develop a team; deploy based on strength; ensure continuity; responsibility and accountability are a pair; the buck stops with me; and solve problems together.

“Don't feel that you have to carry the burden on your own,” she tells teachers on the need to share their troubles and the importance of working as a team to resolve issues. And it is important not to keep secrets from the Principal, she adds, explaining: “As my head is on the chopping block, don't let me die without knowing why.”

SHAWAL HUSSIN

Principal, Orchid Park Secondary School



“MADE A MISTAKE? IT’S OK”

Learning lessons from failures

Dripping with sweat after the cross-country run, exhausted students of Orchid Park Secondary School (OPSS) were looking forward to head home. But there was just one more thing to do before dismissal – the “Olympic” electric fire torch that was lit at the start of the race had to be put out.

The student organisers invited their Principal, Mr Shawal Hussin, to extinguish the flame. But nothing happened. Someone had forgotten to bring the small but critical cap to put out the flame. There was a flurry of action with students crafting a cap on the spot, fashioned from a few pieces of wood. They quickly passed the makeshift cap to Shawal who finally snuffed out the flame.

Recounting the incident that happened last year, he says with a smile: “The students were looking at me, I was looking at them, and then they realised they forgot to bring the cap. So I told them I could not possibly blow out the flame.” It was up to the students to improvise and come up with a quick solution, he adds.

Shawal is a firm believer of learning through experiences and failures. This is why he insists on handing big jobs, such as organising school events, to his teenage students. “We want to empower our students. We want them to have a sense of ownership and responsibility. We are mindful that the students may make mistakes and we are prepared for it,” he shares candidly.

Schools, he adds, must be safe spaces for students to make mistakes and fail freely. In fact, he has a collection of funny stories on the ‘boo-boo’s his students have made, which he delights in sharing during the interview. In previous cross-country runs, student organisers have forgotten to bring



stopwatches to record how fast their schoolmates ran. They have also once flagged off the race before the Principal could give his opening speech.

There was a hiccup at the school’s Speech Day this year too, during which students had suggested taking aerial videos and photos of the event with a drone camera. As OPSS did not own such a device, Shawal called the Principal of Bukit View Secondary School and borrowed the gear two days before the event.

His students, who had no experience flying drones, crashed the device the very next day. “It cost \$4,000. The students panicked and the teachers panicked even more, because Speech Day was just a day later,” he recalls.

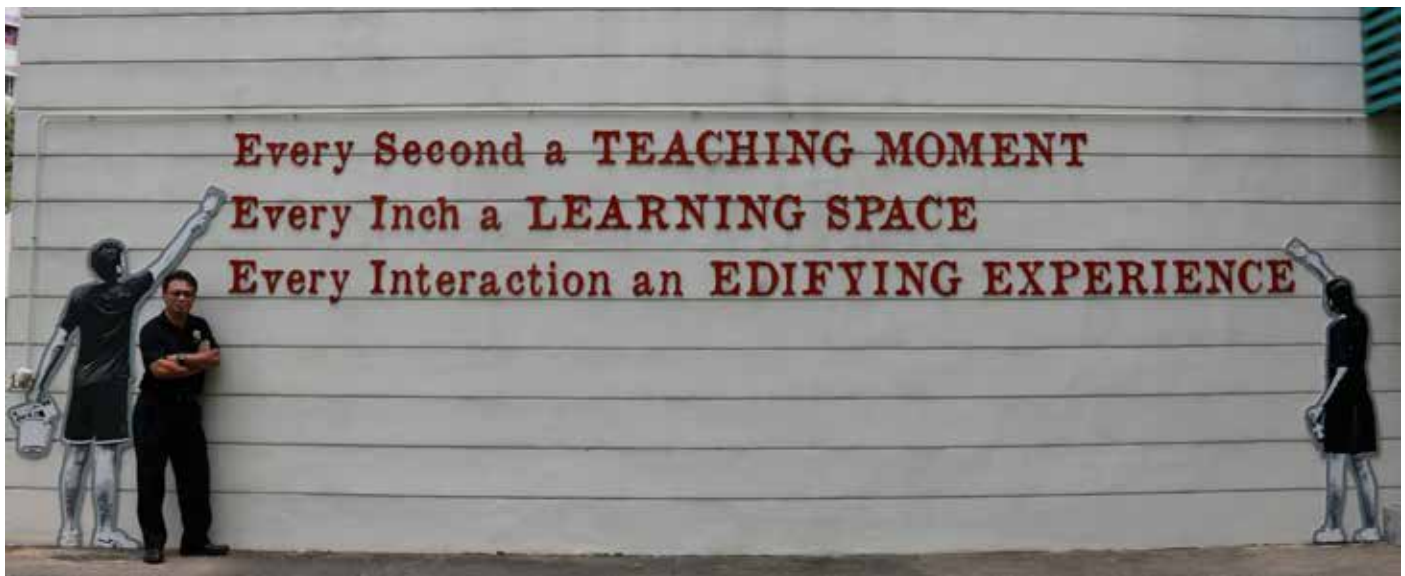
The students braced themselves for a severe scolding. But instead of lashing out at them, he offered to get more drones for the students to tinker with. He also told them to check out the cost of fixing the drone and even bought another drone as a replacement, “because we can’t possibly send back a drone with a roll of tape to Bukit View,” he explains with his usual deadpan humour.

“We kept the old drone, so we now have a badly flying one. They have learnt from that episode and they now know to be mindful of things like wind direction and the amount of weight the drone can take,” he adds.

No shame in coming in last

The phrase “Every second a teaching moment, every inch a learning space, every interaction an edifying experience” is scrawled across a wall in the school near the entrance, visible to anyone walking in. It reflects Shawal’s belief that learning comes in all shapes and forms, and is not bounded by the classroom and textbooks.

He repeats several times during the interview that his ultimate aim is for students to be exposed to different experiences, which are valuable teaching tools. There is no point in bubble-wrapping the teenagers and protecting them from the real world. But this also means the school must stand by the students and support them when mistakes happen.



For Speech Day, students are tasked with presenting the school's results to the audience, usually made up of parents as well as principals and teachers of other schools. "When our students present to the audience, they fumble, mispronounce words, and have pauses here and there. But it is OK, they are learning. And the learning experience is as rich as it can get," he notes.

It is this same approach that has led him to allow students to sign up for inter-school competitions in track and field, bowling, and taekwondo, even though the school does not offer such Co-Curricular Activities (CCA). "I don't want to stop the kids from going out there to see what the competition is like just because our school does not have the CCAs," he explains.

The students typically return from competitions without winning any medals. At times, they even come in last. "But it is OK," he says. "When the kids represent the school in any competition, I tell them that there is no shame in coming in last as long as you display sportsmanship and learn from the experience."

This was also his leadership approach back in Jurongville Secondary, where he previously served as Principal for seven years until 2014, before joining OPSS. "Back then, we had a group of students who were interested in bowling but the school did not offer it as a CCA. The students trained on their own and went for competition. They got hammered! They came back and said they would never want to go through a similar experience again," he recalls, laughing.

But more importantly, they learnt three things from the episode. One, they should have checked out the competition in advance; two, their training has to be a lot more intensive; and three, they need to be more disciplined if they are serious about competing.

For activities not offered as CCAs, students have to put up proposals to run them as interest groups. But the groups have

to be wholly managed by students, who will need to draw up a training programme and even convince teachers to help them out. These have to be done before the school considers students' requests to participate in competitions.

Over the years, students have set up niche interest groups such as an anime club and a Japanese language club, to more popular sports clubs like track-and-field, football, and netball. Some have become full-fledged CCAs, such as netball and football. He is now monitoring two new interest groups set up this year, touch rugby and tchoukball, to gauge the level of participation among the students.

He admits that some teachers find it hard to understand why he sends students to competitions when they are clearly ill prepared. "Some teachers believe that you should only go for competitions when you have a realistic chance of winning. If not, why bother?" he shares. "To be honest, it does take a while to win these teachers over. I had to assure them that as long as students have done their best and they can tell me what they've learnt when they come back, then it is OK."

While Shawal knows the usefulness of trophies as a visual sign of what the students have accomplished, he tries not to emphasise the trophy so much as the achievement behind it – the hard work, grit, and teamwork that students exhibited to get that trophy. As a result, he places more importance on the journey than the gold medal at the end of it.

"Of course, it is nice to go out there and win trophies. But how long can a trophy last? Can the students bring their trophies to interviews in future? The experience of representing the school and participating in the competition, and what they have learnt, is way more important," he says.

"I tell them that there is no shame in coming in last as long as you display sportsmanship and learn from the experience."

On the ground guy

Shawal has always been based in schools since he joined the teaching service 21 years ago. He started out as an English language and humanities teacher in Queensway Secondary School, before moving to Zhenghua Secondary School and Outram Secondary School as Vice Principal.

The school environment is also where he feels most comfortable. “I’m a people person. I like interacting with my students, my staff, and parents,” he says. “As someone on the ground, you get to see first-hand how the students grow up, and the impact of your actions on them.”

When he found out that some students were interested in playing the piano and were teaching themselves by watching YouTube tutorials, he directed his music teachers to look into getting a professional piano teacher to coach them. Most of the students did not come from well-to-do households and were not able to afford piano lessons formally.

“If we see the students showing an interest in an area, we try our best to support it especially if we know about the students’ backgrounds,” he says. “But the school will not allow them to use their backgrounds as an excuse to not reach certain expectations we’ve set for them.”

Right on cue, the sound of piano playing filled the air. It was recess time, and the tune was coming from the canteen where there is a piano for spontaneous performances. Next to the canteen was a group of boys playing sepak takraw – an interest group.



Shawal with the new drone the school bought for students to experiment with.

The boys spotted their Principal watching them from a few floors up and waved to him. He called out to them to watch the time – reminding them that they can continue to play the game only if they return to classes punctually when the recess ends. When the bell went off, they are gone and the courtyard was silent again.



Students playing sepak takraw during recess. The sport is one of the interest groups that was formed under Shawal’s leadership.

The relationship he shares with his students is one based on mutual respect and trust. “I make it clear to them that I’m the authority figure and I set the tone and rules of our interaction,” he says. “But I also want them to not be afraid of approaching me when they have issues, doubts, or just need someone to talk to.”

His unconventional style and humorous streak also means students warm up to him easily. His language may be unpolished, according to him, but his genuine interest to connect with people and his down-to-earth demeanour endears him to students. He has an open-door policy, and encourages students to pop in to his office for a chat if they have ideas for the school community.

Students often knock on his door during the recess period to present their proposals to him, he adds. Several interest groups as well as changes to school policies have germinated from such discussions.

During one of these discussions, shortly after he joined the school as Principal, students told him that the school uniform could feel stifling when the weather turns hot. A compromise was reached: Students will be allowed to report to school in their PE T-shirts when the weather gets too hot. Students also have to wear the school tie on Mondays. But instead of wearing the tie for the entire day, the school rule was tweaked to allow them to wear it just for morning assembly.

A first-choice mentor

He has also been mentoring the Principal of Jurongville Secondary School, Madam Flora Ong, for more than a year now. The mentorship programme, under the Academy of

Principals, pairs first-term Principals with veterans. It is generally not encouraged for new Principals to get former Principals of their current schools as mentors, but Flora says Shawal was her top choice.

“He is always asking ‘Why not?’ and challenging the current thinking of the students and the staff in order to stretch them further,” she shares. “He is a passionate teacher at heart and that is something I want to learn from him.”

Due to their busy schedules, the duo does not meet up as often as they wish to. But Flora says she has called Shawal a few times to seek help when she had to deal with emergency cases. In all those times, he answered her call and offered thoughts on how the issue could be handled. “He would always try to help. I’m really grateful for that,” she says.

But Shawal is mindful not to direct Flora on what she should do. Instead, he gives her advice on what she should not do. Just like his philosophy of giving students the freedom to explore and make mistakes, Shawal is well aware of the need for certain boundaries, to give Flora time and space to find her own leadership language and style.

Elaborating on it, he says: “I refrain from giving my mentee directions or instructions because I’m not in her shoes. The context and the people in the school might have changed too. I can tell her what I think of the situation, what the various possibilities are and the things she should look out for. But I won’t tell her what to do.”

“As principals, when we leave our previous schools, we try not to go back or talk to teachers and staff who are still there. The new principal must be given the space to lead the school.”



Shawal with his mentee, Flora Ong, Principal of Jurongville Secondary School

PETER TAN

Principal, Anglo-Chinese School (Barker Road)



“I WILL SAY WHAT I WILL SAY”

How to be upfront and yet not upset people

No one can tell from the way he strolls effortlessly around school that Mr Peter Tan is legally blind. He walks unaided, in confident strides and comfortably climbs up and down stairs without holding the handrails. The only visible sign of his impairment is when he talks to you, as his eyes do not always focus on your face.

The Principal of Anglo-Chinese School (Barker Road) has retinitis pigmentosa, a disease that causes retinal degeneration and leads to a gradual loss of sight. He hasn't driven in the last 12 years and some individuals who suffer the same affliction can't really work anymore, he discloses.

Yet, he has managed to run two schools, with support from staff, students and technology such as voice-assisted typing functions. He tells teachers to identify themselves before speaking to him as he is not able to see them clearly, even though he can recognise people through their voices.

He also shares with students about his eye condition. Some do not believe him, he remarks, recalling what they told him. “Are you sure?” they asked him. “You are still able to catch all our misdemeanours.” While he may have an uncanny ability to spot misbehaving boys, some things elude his sight – like a person waving at him.

This has led to people mistaking him for being aloof as he does not wave back or acknowledge their presence. The real reason is because he can't see them. “Some parents misunderstand and think I'm stuck up,” he reveals. Once, a parent waved at him with both arms and still, he almost walked into her.

Communication minefield

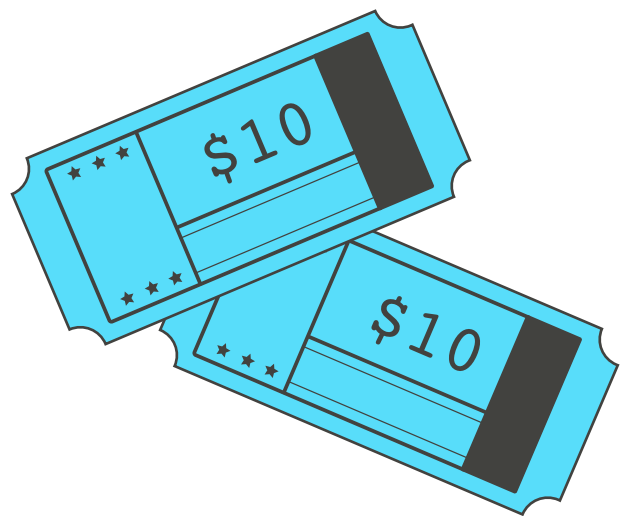
Similar to the misunderstanding that happens because of his poor sight is the miscommunication that occurs because of misconstrued messages. One “communication minefield” he stepped on exploded from a letter he sent to parents to update them about the once-in-four years ACS Carnival in 2015.

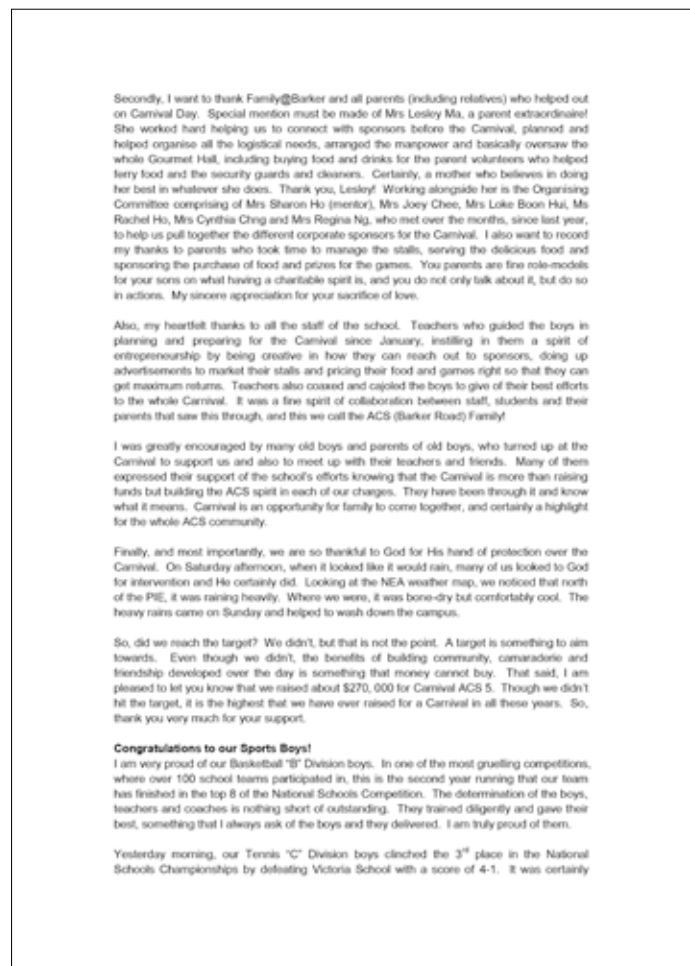
He generally writes letters to parents, which are emailed and placed in the school's web page, once every two weeks to share

about school events or parenting tips. In the week leading up to the carnival, he told parents to encourage their sons to put in more effort to sell their carnival coupons. He cited two examples – students who do not come from affluent households but still sold over \$600 worth of coupons and an enthusiastic parent who offered his Ferrari and Maserati to add to the carnival atmosphere.

His three-page letter was posted on Stomp, a citizen journalism website, and netizens slammed him for being elitist as well as putting undue pressure on students to sell their carnival coupons. The mainstream media also followed up on the controversy. “I kena hantam left, right and centre,” he recalls, laughing now even though he was not smiling then.

His intentions were good. He wanted to persuade students to do their best to sell their coupons as he found out from some boys that they didn't even try. “Effort is important. Without putting in the effort to achieve things, what sort of young men will they turn out to be?” he wonders aloud.





Peter's letter to parents and students after the carnival, thanking them for their support and encouragement.

While he was hit by a wave of negative news, there was an equally strong counter from his supporters – old boys, staff and parents. They spoke up for him on social media and bought the coupons. He was touched when he saw some old boys at the carnival. When he asked them to use up their coupons, they told him: “Sir, do you think we are here to spend our coupons? We came here to support you!”

The bad publicity turned out to be good for the school's fund-raising effort. They had never collected enough to hit the target, but that year, they surpassed the target of \$300,000 due to the generosity of supporters, he shares. “I even had e-mails from parents and old boys who said, if you don't hit the target, tell me,” he adds.

Did the episode change the way he communicates now? “When I reflect on the way I worded the letter, it may have come out rather strong and forceful. Maybe that's why people reacted that way,” he acknowledges. “The message is important, but it is also important in how it's crafted and put across.” But it does not stop him from saying what needs to be said, albeit with greater finesse. “I will say what I will say, but I will also couch it in a manner that is not too offensive to people,” he maintains.

“Integrity is more important. If we can't be upfront, we would have lost it.”

A straight shooter

His straight talking ways may have thrown him some communication curveballs, but it is a characteristic that defines Peter who appreciates the value of honesty. In his first posting as Principal, at Anglo-Chinese School (Junior) [ACS(J)] in 1999, his leadership was tested immediately. A teacher had keyed in the wrong results for three Primary Four classes, and it affected the whole cohort's promotional results and the classes assigned for the next year.

While all the teachers involved were grim-faced at the extent of the ‘damage’, some thought it was better to cover up the mistake as it was not obvious to students. He was stunned. “Whaaaaa?” he recalls exclaiming, dragging out the single word in a long drawl. “Sorry, that's not me. Integrity is more important. If we can't be upfront, we would have lost it.”

He decided to take responsibility for the mistake without naming the teacher, which helped him win over his staff. “It gave them a lot of assurance that I would take the hit first and not put them in the line of fire,” he explains. “The teacher was very grateful that I didn't hang her out to dry and made efforts to improve her checks and accuracy.” Her willingness to learn from the mistake was good enough for him.

On his part, he wrote a letter to parents explaining the mistake and offered to meet those who had questions. “I went through hell,” he declares, as some parents were angry about the mix-up that affected their son’s grades and class assigned. As a new Principal, it was a rough initiation. “Parents must have thought, what a silly Principal who can’t even get student promotion right,” he chuckles, with a self-deprecating sense of humour.

A few years later, in 2003, he faced another public relations crisis. It started ominously on Sports Day, when he fell and hit his head on a railing as he accompanied the Guest-of-Honour to the prize presentation table. As he was giving his speech, the Head of Department of Physical Education (PE) rushed up to tell him that he was bleeding from his brow. His wife had to send him to the hospital to stitch up the gash.

It was a Friday, he recalls vividly. In the afternoon, he received a call from a doctor friend that one doctor and his son were admitted to Tan Tock Seng Hospital as suspected Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) cases. The doctor’s son was a Primary 5 pupil at ACS(J). Peter immediately informed the Superintendent in charge of his school, but the instruction was to hold on – for now.

Singapore was then gripped by the SARS epidemic, which began in February 2003 when three young women who had

been infected while holidaying in Hong Kong returned to Singapore. One of them set off a series of transmissions that spread the virus to 238 people, 33 of whom died. It was, till then, an unknown virus, so procedures to deal with it among big groups like schools, were still being refined.

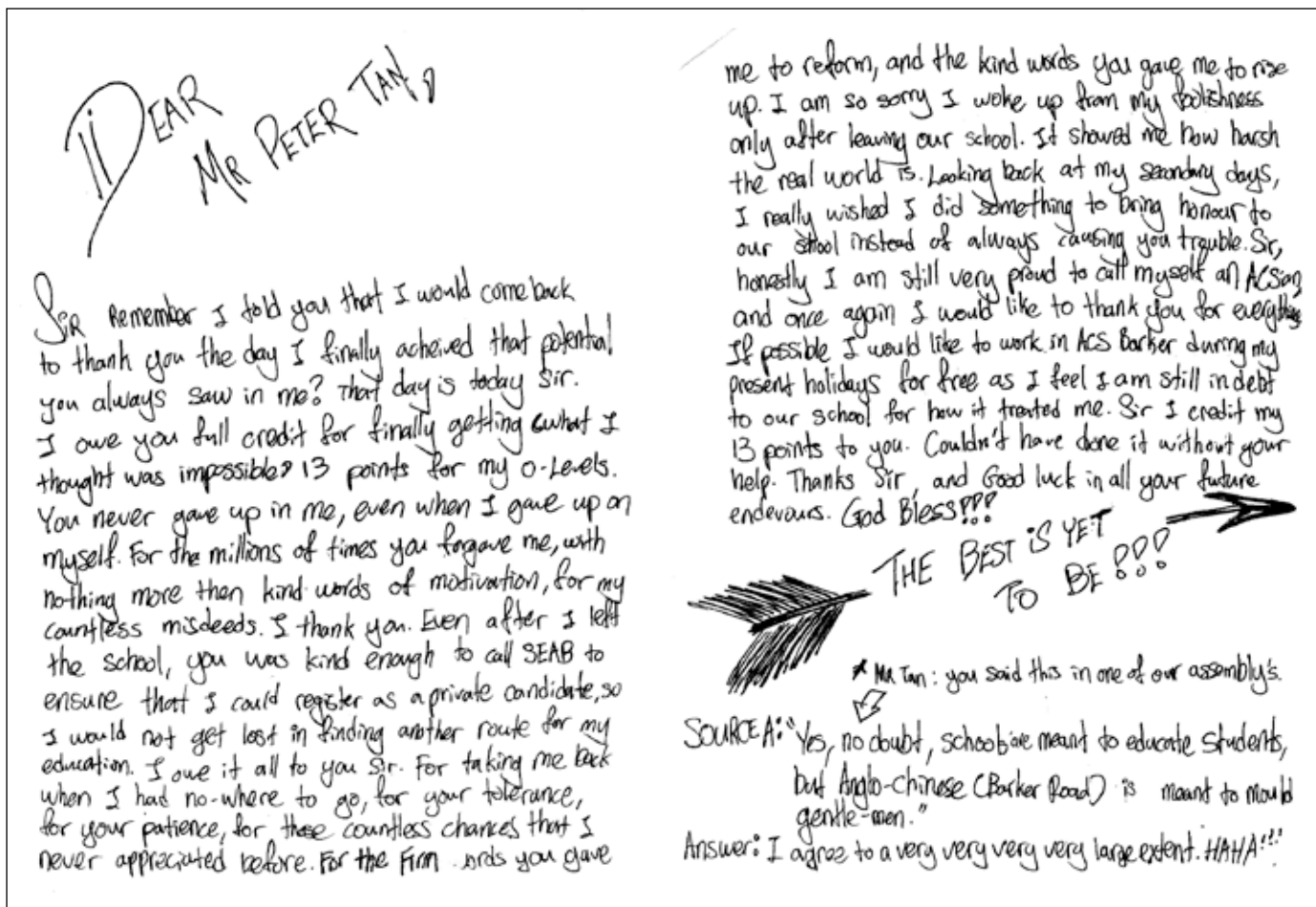
Nearing midnight, on the same day, the Superintendent rang him. “She said, “OK Peter, it’s confirmed. Activate your staff to go down and clean the school,” he remembers her telling him. With a swollen eye and headache from his earlier injury, he and his staff trudged down to the school and disinfected the entire place till dawn. “It was an ordeal, but the greater challenge was after the clean-up,” he notes.

He was keen to alert parents and students early, as he did not want to hide the issue, but he was told to hold back for a while. “Meanwhile, parents were calling me to ask why wasn’t I telling people about this and how it was very irresponsible,” he says. A few days later, on Tuesday, he was given the official nod to share the information. He promptly did, which led to the media turning up in the school.

“My eye was still swollen,” he says, but the media insisted on getting comments from parents. His Operations Manager followed the news crew as they spoke to parents waiting for their sons’ dismissal. After the media left, he asked the



Peter spends time talking with students, who like his fatherly and sometimes firm ways.



Peter will always remember this note from a former student, who changed from his ways and eventually did well for the O-Levels.

manager for an update and was assured, "It's all OK, only two parents were not too happy about not being informed earlier." But when the television news came on that night, "they only showed interviews with those two parents," he sighs.

Yet, he was heartened that the school spirit stayed strong. Some parents even brought food for the teachers every day, he shares. On Thursday morning, he received the news he most wanted to hear. The mother of the pupil who was a SARS suspect said her son tested negative for the virus. He announced it on the Public Announcement system, to loud cheers from the entire school.

Firm yet fatherly

Growing up, Peter always knew he wanted to be a teacher. During school holidays, he and his cousins spent time at his grandparents' house where they loved to play classroom. As the eldest, he was usually the teacher and his younger cousins were the students.

The former ACS boy was inspired by his A-Math teacher in Secondary 3. "I was disastrous in A-Math and she helped me turn around my grades from F9 to A1. She was firm and patient, and would find different ways to help students understand the subject better," he says of this teacher, now in her 70s, whom he persuaded to return to ACS (Barker Road) to teach part-time.

When he received his first teaching posting in 1984, back at his *alma mater*, he offered to teach the weaker classes. "The good students will naturally do well. For the weaker students, if the teacher cares enough, they will work with you and want to do well," he reasons.

"Practically every night, I'd be with a group of students helping them with their studies. Many of them could not afford tuition," he adds. Back then, he taught almost everything including Music, but his strongest subjects were Math and Science. His favourite class, however, was PE, which he went on to specialise in for his degree.

He still bumps into some of his previous students, who never fail to let him know that he was their best teacher. "That's the magic teachers have that, as a Principal, you won't have – that opportunity for such close interactions with students," he shares with a hint of wistfulness.

In 1985, he left for the University of Texas at Austin, then University of Oregon, to obtain his Bachelor of Science in PE. When he returned to Singapore in 1988, he was posted to Anderson Junior College where he taught PE and was also the teacher-in-charge of Rugby. In his three years there, he brought two teams to the Singapore Cricket Club 7's Finals, though most of them had never played Rugby in secondary school.

He went on to the Ministry of Education's then Curriculum Planning Division (Sciences Branch), where he stayed for the next eight years and had the chance to visit every school to shape PE curriculum. In between, he did his Masters of Arts in Curriculum Design at Ohio State University.

But his heart was still beating for teaching. He never quite returned to that role though, as his next posting was Principal of ACS(J) in 1999. So he turned his attention to motivating teachers. He made it a point to meet teachers regularly to find out their passion and what they hope to achieve. "It was great to see the light come on again for some teachers," he shares.

Eight years later, in December 2007, he moved on to be Principal of ACS (Barker Road) where he honed another skill – how to be fatherly yet firm with the teenage boys, some of whom constantly ignored school rules with inappropriate hair styles, not wearing their uniforms properly or not bringing their books to school.

For the lanky leader who looks more genial than grim, it seems hard to imagine how he strikes fear in his students. But he is a firm believer in setting boundaries and enforcing them. For instance, in his first year at the school, one teacher suggested that it would be a good idea to insist that the students collecting their O-Level results turn up in school uniform or they will not receive their results.

He thought they would probably ignore the directive, as he was never their Principal. To his great surprise, when he walked into the school's Auditorium to announce the results, the majority of students were in school uniform. Some parents told him that their sons were frantically trying to borrow school uniforms for that day. Sometimes, the less said is more impactful.

But there was one student who stood out. He was a troublemaker who was smart but refused to study and did poorly for his O-Levels. He had to repeat the examination, but

some teachers said 'no' to having him in school again. "Despite the protests from some teachers, I told the boy that I'm willing to give him another chance," he shares.

However, he made an agreement with the student and his father that if he did not abide by the school rules, the father would voluntarily take him out of school. Nothing happened in the first five months, until the June holidays when supplementary classes were ongoing. A teacher noticed that the student and some of his classmates were missing from class, and started searching the school compound. They were eventually found hiding in a corner gambling.

"I told him, I gave you a chance but you squandered it," says Peter who had to make the tough decision. He called the student's father who apologised for his son's behaviour and took him out of school. But he also helped the student register for his O-Levels as a private candidate. When the results were released, the teenager visited him in his office. "For the first time, his hair was not dyed but black in colour, and he was not wearing any earrings," he notes.

In the teenager's hand was a handmade card that he told his Principal to read after he left. But Peter said: "You know I have bad eye sight so you read it to me." The boy read: "I owe you full credit for finally getting what I thought was impossible, 13 points for my O-Levels. You never gave up on me, even when I gave up on myself. For the millions of times you forgave me, with nothing more than kind words of motivation, for my countless misdeeds, I thank you."

Curious, he asked the teenager why did he change? "I know I messed up," the boy told him. "The day after I left the school, I realised I had nowhere to go. So I decided to study." For Peter, it was an affirmation of his firm yet fatherly ways. "Students know I am tough not because I don't like them. They know I care and love them," he says.

DAPHNE SING

19

Principal, De La Salle School



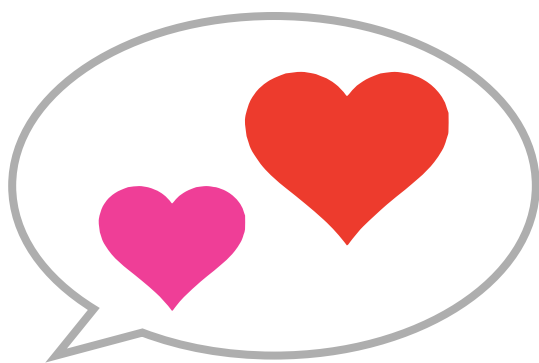
“WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS.. BE GRATEFUL”

Why it is important to have a positive school culture

Mrs Daphne Sing looks forward to her weekly breakfasts at the school canteen. There, the Principal of De La Salle School gets the chance to chat with staff and students in an informal setting. They warm up to her easily as no one can resist her gentle smile and genuine interest in finding out how they are coping in school, or what they are interested to pursue.

These breakfast sessions not only help her build rapport and connect with students and teachers – including the shy ones – they are also a powerful morale booster as it signals to them that she truly cares. “I want to know and understand the person whom I work with, not just the person on the job. So I don’t just talk about work. I ask them about their family, their interests, their worries and their aspirations,” she shares.

She is now a familiar figure in the canteen, a routine she started when she became the school’s Principal in January 2012, as part of her push to foster a more positive school culture. Spending such pockets of quality time with teachers is, in fact, what they want. On a notice board in the Staff Room, teachers placed their votes for their love language – gift giving, words of affirmation, acts of service, physical touch or quality time. “Among the five, quality time was the most popular,” she shares.



Getting teachers to choose their love language – a concept by American author and counsellor, Gary Chapman, who said a person has a primary love language although all five are important – was one of several strategies she adopted to build closer and stronger relationships in the school community. To speak in the other person’s love language enables her to affirm and relate well with the person.

Other than having meals together at the canteen, she shares quotes and stories with teachers to inspire them and carries out mindfulness practices when they meet for their weekly contact time. During a mindful walk around the school, also known as walking meditation, she encourages teachers to relax their minds and focus on the greenery. This, she believes, helps to improve teachers’ well-being – an important part of developing and maintaining a positive school culture.

When she first joined the school in late 2011, her priority was to learn more about the teachers and how they related with one another, as well as with the school management. “Relationship is key in culture building,” she emphasises. To do that, she spent her first three months studying email exchanges among staff and reading school documents and past surveys. She also talked to teachers to assess their feelings and attitudes towards their work.

“In those three months, I had one-on-one conversations with just about all the teachers in the school,” she discloses. “Teachers said they were pressed for time, their workload was too heavy, and they were getting dumped with more work. It was very clear that the teachers were frustrated and disengaged from their work.” The email exchanges that she studied shed more insight. “I was concerned when I read the emails among the staff because the tone and words used were not very pleasant and could be easily misunderstood,” she says.

Parents, too, had grievances about the school. It was perhaps due to a lack of communication between both parties. “But parents won’t tell you that. They would just come in and tell



Breakfast chat: Daphne spends time with students during her usual morning routine in the canteen.

you that this teacher is not treating my child right or that the teacher shouts at my child unreasonably... It was not easy to seek good partnership with parents," she adds.

"Let's be grateful"

In a corner in Daphne's office is a tall bookshelf packed with books on human psychology and behaviour. She has been collecting these books in the last 15 years, to help her make sense of people, organisations and culture.

So when she had to deal with unhappy teachers and parents in DLSS, she turned to her library of resource and found a solution in two titles written by psychologist Martin Seligman. He is a thought leader in the field of positive education, which believes that individuals can develop positive attitudes towards their experiences. He also created the concept of learned optimism – the idea that happiness and joy can be cultivated.

"It got me thinking that optimism and happiness is a choice and it can be learnt," she says. "Seligman also has a framework to develop positive well-being," she adds, referring to his PERMA model. The acronym stands for Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment – the five elements to develop positivity and well-being.

For a start, she decided to introduce activities that would generate positive emotions in the school. But instead of getting people to do something new, she got them to build on existing

practices. "As a new leader, it is important that you don't rush to change things until you know the school well enough. Instead, work on the good that you see around you, and build on them," she shares.

Since students already set aside time to show their appreciation to staff such as support officers and cleaners in the school, she continued with the theme of gratitude and asked teachers to reflect daily on three good things about their day.

Soon, teachers were leading students in the same daily reflection during the school's morning prayer. Once students went back to their classrooms, they wrote their reflections down in a journal. They also selected one of the three reflections and showed their gratitude to the person who had made their day, based on the five love languages.

"This activity doesn't just look at the positive things. It looks at negative situations too, but the individual instead chooses to look at the silver lining of the dark clouds and draws strength from there," she says. "That is the idea of resilience."

She also invited parents to take part in the reflective exercise. At a meeting with the school's parent support group, she made them pause and reflect on three things about their day that they were thankful for. "They liked and understood the activity, as they could continue the exercise at home with their kids," she says. "They told me that their day is so packed that they have no time to keep silent and just reflect on things."

She also encouraged parents to write complimentary notes to their children's teachers. "I told the parent support group that instead of always seeing the things that go wrong in the school, why not write complimentary letters to encourage and show your appreciation?" she says, before adding: "Positivity motivates!" Before long, the letters started coming. They were uploaded on the school's website and also pinned on a noticeboard in the staff room, next to where teachers had voted for their love language.

She subsequently introduced mindfulness to teachers and students, a technique to eliminate distractions and help the mind focus on the present. They learnt simple breathing exercises to let go of stress and pent-up emotions, during assembly as a school-wide activity. "Mindfulness helps us look at a situation purposefully. It helps us recognise our emotions. We can choose to let go of an unpleasant emotion and respond to situations in a way that will get us to a positive landing," she shares.

A small action, a big difference

The changes happened gradually. With the complimentary letters publicly available on the school website, it motivated



other parents to pen notes of appreciation to teachers as well. She read out the letters to teachers in their weekly meeting. She also started devoting a portion of the meeting to thanking teachers. "Any moment a teacher has done something good, I will thank him or her during our weekly contact time. I call it 'appreciation and kudos' and it has become a regular item in my meeting agenda," she says.

Gradually, she could sense the teachers' moods lightening up. The number of complaints parents made to the school decreased as well. In 2013, a year after she joined the school, teachers reported higher levels of engagement in a biennial ministry-wide survey. It was an endorsement of the initiatives she had implemented.

The gratitude movement and mindfulness technique "are not just fluff and niceties", she maintains. "If you can take stock of yourself and be self-disciplined and the entire community is aligned, you'll find that good work will follow.

Almost gave up

Daphne started her teaching career in 1984 as an English teacher in Singapore Chinese Girls' School (SCGS), her *alma mater*. There, she taught alongside her former teachers who continued to guide her even in adulthood. She eventually rose to become the school's Vice-Principal.

In 2000, she was assigned to be Vice-Principal in another school and she left her SCGS. "By then, I had spent 28 years there, counting my student days. There were tears all around when I had to leave the school," she recalls.

Her time at her new school, however, was a "dark period". "I had a difficult time there. I was new and so was the Principal. Perhaps I didn't quite know how to relate with my Principal," she reveals, adding that her abilities were doubted several times.

Her self-esteem took a beating and she started thinking of leaving the profession. Less than two years into the job, she wrote her resignation letter. But an old friend at MOE headquarters managed to talk her out of quitting and encouraged her to join the headquarters instead.

She followed the advice and joined the headquarters' staff training branch where she stayed for two years writing policy papers and organising training workshops and courses for teachers. It was a steep learning curve at the headquarters, as the culture there was different from that of school. The work was vastly different as well.

"Confronted with the challenges, I chose to build myself and my leadership philosophy," she says. "I started reading books on leadership and management, organisational culture, human psychology and personal mastery and growth. I read so many books. That period gave me my leadership grounding."



Two years into her stint at the training branch, she was asked to join one of the curriculum branches as an Assistant Director. She was hesitant at first as she wondered if she could handle the task, but she decided to give it a shot. “I took three weeks to think about it. It was frightening to me because by then, my self-esteem had suffered so much and I didn’t think I could be a leader anymore,” she discloses.

It was here that she learnt how judging and blaming could derail a person’s development. In the more rarified workplace where assigned tasks received immediate feedback, a lack of trust led to deadlock. Young colleagues were unsure how to improve their work while those they reported to were frustrated with the lack of progress. It was not a satisfactory situation at all. Through it, she learnt together with colleagues to try different approaches that led to constructive discussions and quality results.

She stayed on at the curriculum branch for six years before being identified for a programme to develop her leadership capabilities. “It was at the curriculum branch that I put a lot of what I’d read in books into practice. We were able to turn the culture around and I think we made an impact with the young officers,” she notes.

The art of letting go

Currently, mid-way through her sixth year in DLSS, Daphne knows she may have to say goodbye to the school soon as Principals usually get another posting after six to seven years. But her work on positive education is far from done.

She has just started exploring the concepts of self-compassion and self-pity, on how people struggling with self-doubt and low self-esteem can free themselves from the unhealthy trap. With a sound understanding in this area, she can then begin to help colleagues and students enhance their personal well-being.

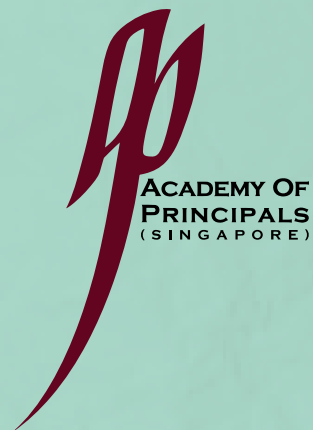
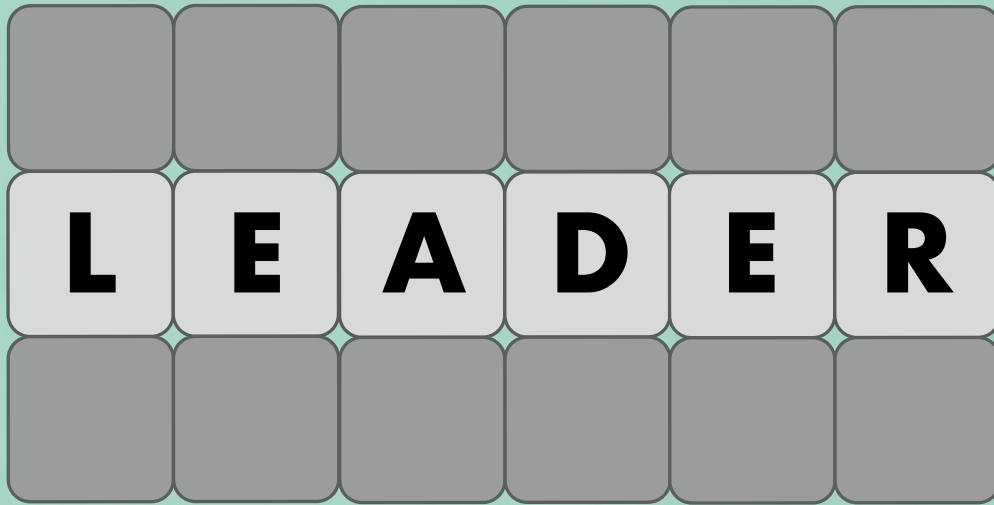
Explaining the two concepts, Daphne says self-compassion entails being kind to oneself when confronted with failure and personal shortcomings, and acknowledging that suffering and pain is a shared human experience. With that, individuals will not be limited by negative and limiting self-doubt and can therefore progress with positive feelings, thoughts and actions.

Self-pity, however, takes on a negative tone with individuals adopting a “poor me” attitude. “These are very introspective concepts. But they also reinforce an individual’s character and resilience,” she says.

She has started prepping her school management team to continue the positive education initiative. “If they believe in it, they will continue to do it. Looking at how the school culture has transformed, I believe that they will continue with the movement,” she notes.

Daphne has also been readying herself for the day she has to leave DLSS with the very concepts she has tried to pass to the school. “At the end of the day, what is mindfulness really about? It is about being able to let go of the distractions and focus on the present,” she elaborates. “Once I leave the school, I will move on to focus on the next phase of my journey...to continue offering positive education to those I meet because that will be my ‘present.’”


“Confronted with the challenges, I chose to build myself and my leadership philosophy”




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