

PRINCIPIA

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The Language
of Leadership

President's Message

This will be my last President's Message before I retire. I have had much pleasure all these years, reading about fellow members in the fraternity while also being alternately inspired and encouraged by their various forms of leadership.

In this second in the series about the Language of Leadership, you will get to read about leadership from seasoned lips as well as from some still relatively fresh in the profession. It is heartening to know that regardless of the experience, the child is still at the centre of what we do.

You will read how newbie Fr Adrian Danker sets down the language of community for his school so that they go beyond the academic to being people aware of others. You will see how Chuah-Koh Eng Ngoh's awareness of the needs of others leads her to see things from their perspective so that she leads by building up her people. Elaine Quek's bubbly approach, on the other hand, masks a determination never to let circumstances reduce her sense of self-worth, a spunkiness that she wants her teachers as well as her students to take on. It is fitting to end with Sulaiman Yusof's amazing personal goals in physical fitness by which he inspires staff and students to do better than they last did because that matters more than being better than someone else.

As you begin 2018, may I wish every school leader a great year ahead, inspiring your whole school community to work together meaningfully for the kind of learning that will last beyond the school years.



Chan Poh Meng

President, Academy of Principals (Singapore)

December 2017

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ADRIAN DANKER

Principal, St. Joseph's Institution



“GO AND WASTE YOUR EDUCATION ON SOMEONE ELSE”

The worth of one’s learning comes from paying it forward

Warm sunlight streams into the Principal’s office at St Joseph’s Institution (SJI), unhindered by the conspicuous lack of curtains or blinds at the windows. Adding to the glasshouse effect are the see-through glass windows installed in two of the four walls.

Sitting in the bright, naturally lit room, one can clearly see the lawn where students play during recess and after school. This is exactly how Father Adrian Augustus Danker envisioned his office to look like – warm and welcoming.

In preparing to take over as Principal of SJI in January 2016, he had requested for specific changes to his office when the school was renovating. “I asked for the curtains to be removed. I want the students to be able to see me. Sometimes they wave to me as they are walking by. They also knock on my window and I’ll open it, and we’ll have a short chat,” says Fr Adrian, an SJI alumnus who was from the Class of ’81.

“I want the students and staff to know that the room is open and they can come and talk to me. I want them to know I am with them and we are a community.”

The spontaneous chats by the window help him keep in touch with students. But these interactions are not enough. So, to

maintain a constant conversation with the students, he writes them notes that are also sent to the school staff and parents.

The notes, which he pens weekly or fortnightly, carry his thoughts on issues or his observations of the people and life in SJI. Sharing these stories, he urges students to think of a larger point, in particular, to have a sense of service for others.

In one note, he wrote about how he was stranded at the bus stop just outside the school during a heavy downpour. A Secondary 1 student saw him and offered to share his umbrella, which was barely big enough to shelter the young boy.

“This young Josephian demonstrated empathy that morning. I was humbled by his care and inspired by his compassion,” he wrote. “His kind act made me ask myself: Am I as empathetic towards others as he was? Do I allow the needs of others to move me to kindness and care? Am I really practicing the call to be a Josephian, a person for others?”

In another note, he jotted down his observation about the value of making sacrifices so that someone else’s life can be improved. He cited the example of the school’s security guard Raja who lives in Johor. Raja wakes up at 4am every morning, makes the commute across the Causeway, and reaches SJI by 6am. In the evenings, he repeats the journey home. Such a schedule means he does not have much time for himself and his family.

“Raja’s story touched me deeply because of the daily sacrifice he makes to journey so far for work in order to care for those he loves,” he said in the note.

Making sacrifices, he wrote, is about putting others before self. “(It) helps us learn the value of giving up something that I want so that someone else will have a better life.”

Not a savvy educator, but a shepherd

Fr Adrian Danker was the recipient of the Academy of Principals Prize for Leadership Learning during the Leaders in Education Programme in 2015. Yet, he readily admits that he is far from a savvy educator, one who is well versed in the workings of Singapore’s education system.





The former Public Service Commission scholarship recipient spent a few years teaching in schools and later, working at the Ministry of Education (MOE) headquarters after he completed his doctoral degree overseas.

After about seven years, he left MOE and the civil service at the age of 36 to enter the Catholic congregation of the Society of Jesus. He was ordained as a priest 12 years later, at the age of 48. He is now 52.

“When I made that decision to become a priest, it was with the understanding that I would not come back to education as there are no Jesuit schools in Singapore,” he shares.

But four years ago in 2013, while completing his theology studies in Boston, Fr Adrian received an email from the SJI board asking him to return home and lead the school. The Society of Jesus agreed to let him come back – but he was filled with doubt and spent nights wondering if he was the right fit for the job.

“I felt I wasn’t the right person because I’d been out of the education system for so many years and MOE had shifted and the education landscape had changed. I felt very inadequate. What can I bring to this community?” he recalls.

He prayed hard for clarity, and got an answer. “I felt God was asking me to be a good shepherd to the school,” he says. Yet, he

had more questions. The SJI board flew him to Singapore for a discussion. He asked specifically for two meetings to be set up.

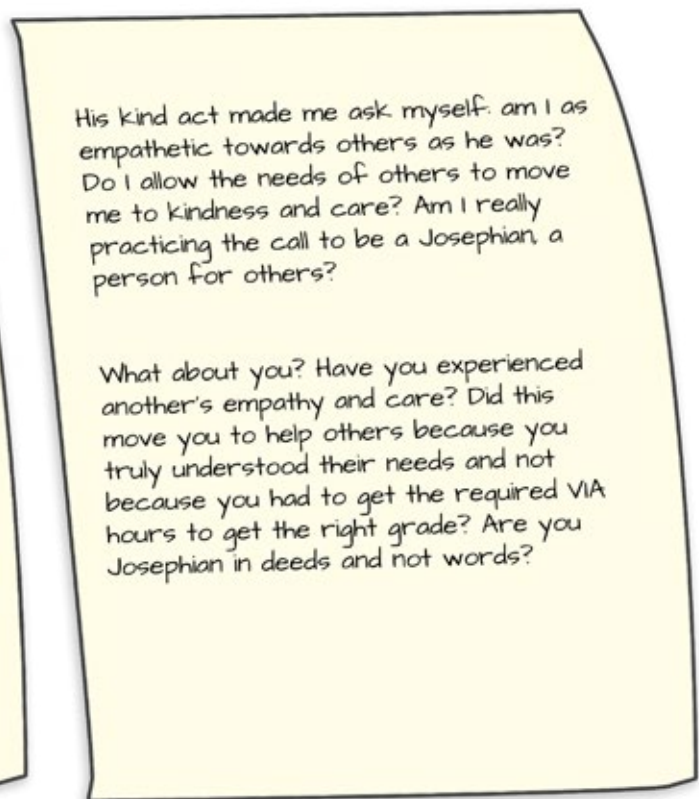
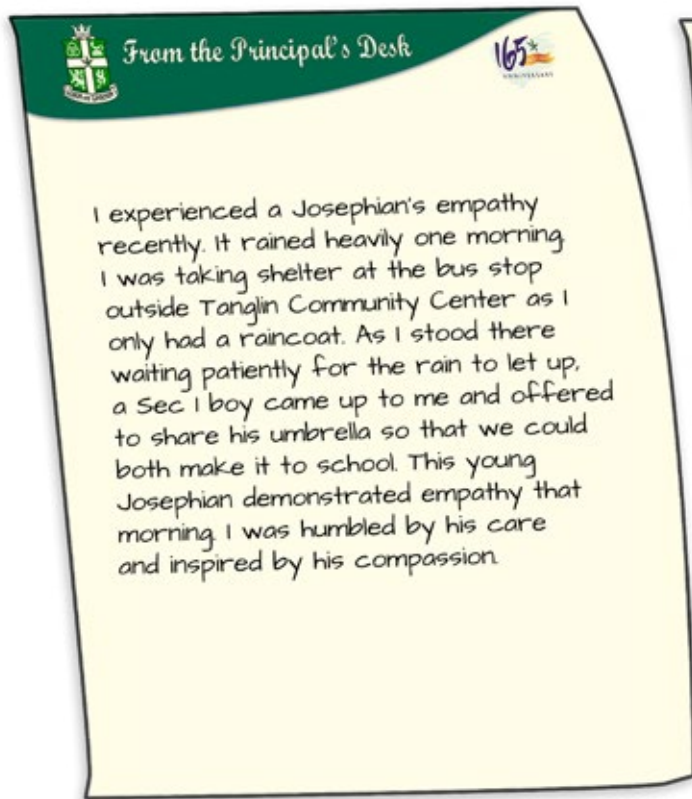
The first was with the then Director-General of Education, Ms Ho Peng, whom he knew before he left MOE. He wanted to know if the ministry would be comfortable with a priest leading SJI.

From its founding up till 1997, SJI has always been led by Principals who are LaSallian brothers. The school had its first layman Principal in September 1997, after Brother Paul Rogers. This is the first time a Jesuit priest is leading the school.

“When I saw her, she said ‘Oh, so this was where you’ve been! We’ve all been wondering where you are and when you would come back!’ I told her if I come back, I will come back as a priest. And she told me SJI needs someone like me at this point in time,” he says.

The next meeting was with the head and deputy prefects of SJI. “I asked them in a sneaky sort of way what they would want in their next principal. I said I was doing research work on educational leadership,” he says with a grin as cheeky as some of his schoolboys.

The replies heartened him. “Their description of their next principal fitted the image of a good shepherd and resonated with my prayer,” he adds. To him, shepherding means caring



for the school community, guiding the school to the next stage, bringing light to make things better and showing the way forward.

He tries to inject this leadership principle in all his communication with staff and students. "In all my speeches, I try to point the way forward," he says. "I guess that is why I write those notes too."

Not grades, but growth

One of the earliest lessons Fr Adrian learnt about education was at Telok Kurau Secondary School (TKSS), where he was posted to teach English and Humanities right after completing his PhD in English Literature in 1994.

In those days, MOE provided data and schools' performance to The Straits Times, which published annual rankings of the top 100 secondary schools. TKSS never made the list as it was an unranked school.

"The Principal, then Mr Dilbagh Singh, was very clear about how the school should be. He believed that these are the students we have and we can't turn the school around tomorrow to be in the ranking. But we can offer a quality education that meets the students where they are and we take them up slowly," he says.

Instead of focusing on the grades, the school focused on helping students grow step by step. "This style of leadership, of helping people to grow a step at a time, rubbed off on me," he adds.

"Shepherding means caring for the school community, guiding the school to the next stage, bringing light to make things better and showing the way forward."

Today, he tells students and parents at their graduation ceremony that the worth of one's education is when they go and "waste it on someone else who needs it more".

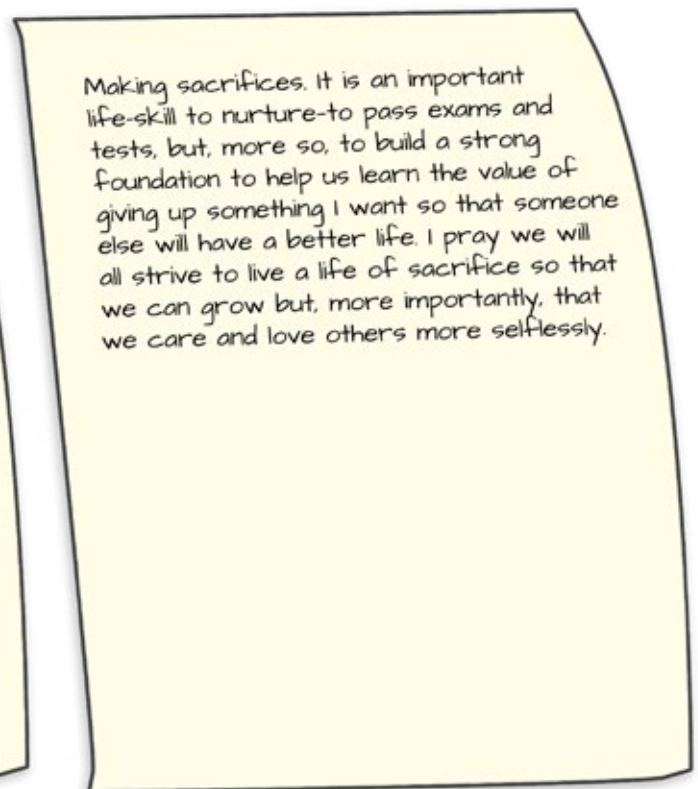
"Sometimes parents freak out because they think 'I've paid so much money'. But it's not about the students themselves. It's about what they have become so that they can make the world better," he stresses.

"The worth of an SJI education is when you can say 'Thank you', 'I'm sorry', 'I value you', 'I'm glad you are part of my team, let's make a difference together and change the world'. When students can say that, you've built a Josephian with gratitude, humility and empathy."

Academic excellence is important in SJI. But equally important – if not more – is the ability to reflect, grow and support one another, he emphasises. As the students who make the SJI cut-off and enter the school successfully already know how to study and prepare for exams, he hopes the school is able to add value to other aspects of their lives.

To shape them into teenage boys and girls of good character, he encourages students to be reflective and think about questions. Deep learning and growth, he believes, come from reflection and learning about oneself.

When he meets the bright-eyed Primary 6 students at the year-end orientation before they formally enter SJI, he tells them that they are all a gift to the school. Then, he gives them holiday homework to think about: What is their gift to the school?



“When they come back to the school I’ll go around asking them what their gift is. Some will say ‘I’m good at studies’ or ‘I’m good at sports’. But sometimes you will get students who say ‘I make people laugh’. And that is great,” he exclaims, noting that no gift is too small.

Last year, Fr Adrian visited all the graduating classes in Secondary 4 and JC 2, and posed three questions to the students: What are you thankful for in SJI? What do you want to improve? What advice will you give to the Principal so that he can do his job better?

“The last question boggles them all. But slowly, they start saying things like ‘be present more’, or ‘keep writing your notes’,” he says.

For the parent-teacher meeting last year, the school also experimented with letting a small group of Secondary 1 students take charge of the presentation to parents instead of having teachers lead it. Students recorded videos of themselves talking about the personal goals they had set, and if they managed to meet those goals.

“So you have a child saying on video ‘Mum, Dad, teacher, my goals in the beginning of the semester were this and this, I did well here, I didn’t do well here because I was too distracted. I will work on this’,” he says. “It was a process to get the students reflecting.”

A home for everyone

Fr Adrian tries to build SJI as an inclusive community for all – even for the often-overlooked support staff who work on administrative matters such as human resources and school

finances. He allows teachers and support staff to take time off during the workday to tend to emergencies, such as health and family matters.

“We are a Catholic LaSallian organisation. We have a duty of care to our people. If someone comes to me and say they have a medical appointment and it’s no fault of theirs that the appointment falls on this time, I’ll say to them, go. You go because your health and wellbeing is important to you,” he explains.

“If we say everyone is an educator – every ‘auntie’ and ‘uncle’ helps the boys and girls – then if we accord half-day to teachers, we should accord it to the support staff,” he notes. “SJI has to be a school that cares for everybody. We want to be an inclusive community where everyone has their place.”

It has led to a strong culture of care in the school where the staff and students look out for the principal too. He sometimes finds food and drinks left on his table anonymously – a reminder to not skip meals even when work gets too demanding.

“The students sometimes leave a note on my window to tell me to please have lunch. Staff members will drop by and ask me if I am OK and if I am managing well. They remind me to go home at 6.30pm,” he shares with a laugh.

“I’m touched and surprised because they don’t have to bother but they do. I am thankful for that. I sometimes think that they give me more than I give them. They teach me about caring and they inspire me.”

CHUAH-KOH ENG NGOH

Principal, Yuan Ching Secondary School



“WHY ARE MY STUDENTS COMING TO SCHOOL WITHOUT HOPE?”

Giving hope to students from modest backgrounds

Outside the school’s General Office, a group of boys sat in a row looking sombre. Walking past them, Mrs Chuah-Koh Eng Ngoh thought they were waiting to see a teacher about schoolwork.

Stopping in mid-stride, she turned to talk to them. It was her first day in Boon Lay Secondary School as Vice-Principal and she was keen to get to know the students better. To her surprise, the boys told her they were waiting to be punished for playing truant.

“I spoke to one of the boys. He told me that he was in Secondary Two and in the Normal Technical stream,” she recalls. “I asked him, ‘What would you like to do after you finish your N-levels?’, and his reply was... ‘Nothing. There’s no hope. I’ll just go to ITE, or if not, I’ll find a job.’ That struck me. I asked myself, ‘Why are my students coming to school without hope?’”

In that moment, something stirred inside her and she was determined to fill students with hope and optimism instead of a sense of resignation and even despair. “It firmed up my calling as a school leader. I told myself, I must bring hope to my students. I must see how I can help the children see beyond their school years – there must be something better waiting for them after they graduate,” she shares.

She described it as a “poignant moment” that she would never forget. That was in 1999, when she embarked on her first school leadership role where she was exposed to students from different backgrounds. Before that, she had spent 15 years as an Economics teacher at Raffles Junior College and the Head of Humanities Department at Nanyang Junior College.

Today, 18 years later, she is now Principal of Yuan Ching Secondary School – after stints as Principal at Fuchun

Secondary School and Chua Chu Kang Secondary School. But she has never forgotten to spread the message of hope.

“As a Principal, I feel that the most endearing and enduring satisfaction I get is when I see the students enjoy their time here in school – that they are able to look forward to coming to school every day with a grateful heart,” she notes.

Poignant moments

Through her postings in different schools, she recalls many more moving moments with students – requiring different modes of communication to get through to them.

When she was Principal at Fuchun Secondary School, she noticed a Secondary One girl in the library, who was always burying her head in books, studying. It piqued her curiosity. “I struck a conversation with the girl, and she told me that her parents were very disappointed that she was posted to Fuchun Secondary. Her parents felt that their hopes of her being a university graduate were dashed,” she says. “But I told her, ‘I think you can do it and go to university.’”

Her quiet confidence gave the girl hope. Through hard work and constant encouragement from Eng Ngoh, the student did well for her O-Levels, entered Innova Junior College, then went on to complete an arts degree at National University of Singapore – defying her parents’ expectations.

Till today, she continues to keep in contact with the student, and was even invited to her wedding last year (2016). She shared this story to show how communicating hope is critical to boosting morale, leading to eventual success.

In another incident at Chua Chu Kang Secondary, the communication method differed. She recalls a girl who

misbehaved in class and was defiant to her teachers. After several incidents, the student was brought to the Principal's office.

The student refused to say anything and stood in silence for a long while. She almost wanted to give up, as the student remained quiet despite her constant probing. Suddenly, a thought came to her and she passed the student a pen and paper. She told the taciturn student to write down her feelings.

To her surprise, the girl opened up. "The student was able to express herself so well in writing, sharing why she was angry in school. That helped me to work with her teachers to allow her to communicate her feelings via writing," she shares, her eyes lighting up.

Eng Ngoh bought her a journal to jot down her thoughts, and the student would hand in her journal at the end of every week. She had to buy her another journal after a month because the student was so diligent in writing her thoughts.

Her teachers used the same method of communicating with the student until she was comfortable to articulate herself verbally. The student improved in her social skills, built her self-confidence and was able to relate better to others. On the student's 21st birthday last year (2016), she sent Eng Ngoh a card to thank her.

These encounters with students strengthen her belief in the adage: When there's a will, there's a way. She recalls her own

childhood as the youngest of six children who lived in a two-bedroom flat together with her parents. She is the only one among her siblings who went to university.

"I grew up in a poor family. I shared a room with three other siblings. We slept on bunk beds," she says. "My father was a trishaw driver, and my mother was a domestic helper. They were always working hard to provide for the family and encouraging us to give our best."

As she didn't have her own room, it was very difficult to study at home. "When the family members were back in the evening, I would go to rest. I would wake up when everyone was asleep because it was quieter. And I would study in the kitchen, which was the only place with a table. It was lit with only a light bulb," she reminisces with a laugh.

Her humble background has allowed her to identify with disadvantaged students. "Education is a leveller. If not for the value my parents had placed on education, my siblings and I would not have enjoyed the quality of life we are having now," she observes.

Picking yourself up after failure

Even though Eng Ngoh was a well-behaved and obedient student in the past, she also had to overcome obstacles of her own. While reading Economics at NUS, she had a first taste of failure in her first year of study. "I failed Math. Up to that time, I had never failed as a student," she says. "I remember when



Close-up: Eng Ngoh huddling with her students for a selfie.



An inspiration: Eng Ngoh draws strength and inspiration from her students, such as Yuan Ching alumnus Samuel Lim (second from left), who overcame his personal struggles to excel in school.

I got the result, I was totally devastated. I stayed at home for three days. I was crying a lot.”

It hit her so badly that her parents even suggested to her to drop out from university. But she was determined to carry on. “That first failure taught me how important it is to pick myself up. I told myself that if I wanted to be an effective teacher, I must also learn how to be resilient,” she notes.

The experience taught her to empathise with others who have stumbled. “A failure is a rich learning experience. That first failure not only taught me to pick myself up, but to feel for others who do not succeed,” she adds.

This empathy also shapes how she reacts and responds to those who make mistakes. Once, she recalled, a teacher had not covered a topic that was set in a term test paper. The students raised the issue after the examination.

“Together with the exam committee, I went to the teacher concerned to understand why the topic was not taught,” she discloses. “The teacher was not able to complete the teaching as he felt that the students needed more time on the earlier topics.”

But instead of pointing fingers or taking the teacher to task, she believes that the mistake was necessary for improvement

and innovation. “When mistakes are made, it is a learning experience. The teacher should not be put in the line of fire,” she explains.

Instead, the school relooked its vetting processes to ensure all teachers teaching the level vet through the paper so they can flag out any discrepancies. “Mistakes should not be condemned. What is more important is not the mistake, but what happens after the mistake,” she adds.

Reframing the issue

Eng Ngoh believes in being a role model to her staff, especially in challenging situations such as dealing with difficult parents.

In her first year in Yuan Ching Secondary, she had to engage an angry parent who felt that his son was not getting sufficient learning support in the past years. He was aggressive when communicating with the teachers and was unwilling to hear their views on how they had been helping his son. “I asked him to come to school one day for a meeting, together with the teachers concerned,” she shares.

He was not willing to open up initially. But she pressed on, assuring him that the school understood his concerns about his son’s learning and that they shared the same desire for him to do well. When she finally got him to share the issues and

concerns with his son, she realised that he was simply fearful for his son's progress as his son was not keeping him updated about school matters.

Instead of viewing him as a difficult parent, she turned it around and saw him as a concerned father. "I reframed the perspective for the teachers. I told them, 'We are not looking at a difficult parent, but a loving father who has fears for his son – about whether he can do well for his O-levels,'" she says.

The key, she maintains, is to engage the different stakeholders to find common ground. "When I have meetings with parents, I would bring my key personnel like my Heads of Department and form teachers on board so that they can see how I engage with parents. When they see you in action, the learning is so much more impactful, than when you tell them what to do," she says.

Her efforts proved to be helpful. "At the end of it, we won the father over. He thanked the teachers for working with him and helping his son complete his O-levels."

Local heroes

Empathy for others gives her work a purpose. At Yuan Ching Secondary, Eng Ngoh started a school-wide affirmation movement to spread a culture of gratitude. Teachers and students who have witnessed or received acts of kindness in school can nominate the person either through a web portal or on paper.



During assembly, she would then share these stories with students. If a student were nominated, the school would also send a letter to inform his parents to share the good story. The aim is to celebrate positive actions. "When we call parents, they panic. They feel like their child was caught doing the wrong thing. But we should also catch the child doing the right thing," she smiles.

During school events like Sports Day, for instance, apart from giving out medals to runners who won first place and recognising students who did well, she uses the opportunity to share stories of students' exemplary behaviour, like that of a student who was leading in a race but stopped to help a friend who had tripped and fallen.

Even non-teaching staff members, like security guards or canteen vendors, are recognised. "One of the canteen stalls vendor was affirmed because he made an effort to know the students by name and would put up a sign to wish the students all the best during the examination period," she remarks.

The affirmation movement instills faith and optimism, especially in schools where students come from diverse backgrounds. "Students have learnt to look out for these small gestures of kindness every day," she adds. "This is important, because we have students who have gone through challenging times."

She especially likes to look for "local heroes" to inspire her students. One of them is Samuel Lim Hong Xiang, a former student of Yuan Ching Secondary who has a dramatic story to share. When he was an infant, his helper poured acid down his throat. As a result, he was unable to eat and talk normally. Despite the challenges, Samuel has grown into a fine young man with a passion for music. He has also done well in his studies and is now a student at Nanyang Junior College.

His story continues to inspire subsequent cohorts of students at Yuan Ching Secondary. The school has, together with the Parents Support Group, started The Samuel Lim Award, to honour and recognise students who have overcome challenges and contributed meaningfully to others.

"Samuel is very inspiring to all of us. During his stay in Yuan Ching, he has grown well, in both his studies as well as in his co-curricular pursuits," she acknowledges. "We want other students to emulate Samuel's qualities and to be able to see beyond their personal challenges to help others."

"In school, there are many wonderful stories to share and inspire the kids to look beyond themselves," she adds. "I want students to see school as a home, where they know they are being valued and that there are people here who can help them in their development."

In her own home, Eng Ngoh, who has been married for 30 years, has no children of her own. "I have 1,200 children – I just don't bring them home," she says with a laugh, gesturing around her.

ELAINE QUEK

Principal, Maha Bodhi School



“I JUST WANTED TO BE H.O.T – HAPPY, ORDINARY TEACHER”

Making the best of every opportunity even without a degree

Step into the Principal’s office at Maha Bodhi School, and it feels like you have entered Disneyland. Every nook and cranny is decorated with gifts, plush toys and colourful art work. There are close to 100 teddy bears displayed around the room, a wall filled with appreciation cards from her students and teachers, and the smell of scented oil permeates the air.

Mrs Elaine Quek-Lim Hwee Bin, who has been Principal at Maha Bodhi School for four years, was determined to make her office an inviting place for her staff and students. “If they are bothered to write these appreciation cards, it is only right to display them,” she smiles, gesturing around her. “During dull moments, you look at them, and you get additional inspiration.”

The teddy bears, in particular, have become her trademark. It harks back to her childhood. “As a child, I was sickly and visited the doctor regularly. The first bear I ever received was from my grandmother. Bears have a special look on their face that seems to talk to you. That appealed to me. I see it as a symbol of compassion,” she discloses.

Today, she still receives – and gives – teddy bears. But it is more an expression of gratitude rather than a show of compassion. “A bear is an emblem of love, joy and care,” she adds.

It is no surprise that gifting is her love language. At the start of the semester, she prepares personalised gifts, such as a cutlery set and lunchboxes, for her teaching and non-teaching staff to welcome them back to school. “These are not expensive items, but very meaningful,” she shares.

She uses gifting as a way to send important reminders to her staff. For instance, the cutlery set and lunchbox serve two purposes. “One, it is to do our part for the environment, and minimise our waste by not using disposable products. And two, we should eat together more often as a family,” she explains.

But she was quick to add that people should not mistake the love language of gift giving for materialism. “I do it because I find meaning in it,” she says. “It’s a joy to give, and it’s a joy to receive.”

On these presents, she prints a small appreciation note decorated with images of bears and a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, which has guided her philosophy in teaching. The quote reads: ‘In doing something, do it with love, or never do it at all.’

She adds: “It is also a reminder to the people receiving the gifts that whatever we do, we do with love. It’s a message that I want to send to them.”



Care bear

Apart from her colleagues, Elaine extends her love to her students through positive education. Keeping with the bear motif, she led her team in the creation of a deck of appreciation cards, called “Beary Good News”, where teachers would write good news to the students and parents. The good news range from academic achievements to acts of kindness.

In a class, about three to four students will receive a “Beary Good News” card every month. And in a year, every student will receive the card at least once. “Beary Good News” is meant for teachers to write to every parent. Teachers are given a whole set of 40 cards. They will select a few students every month and write the card and mail them to the parents.



Gifts galore: The office is filled with various presents in the form of teddy bears, photo frames and art work.

“When teachers call parents, there’s a misconception and fear that it’s always bad news, such as, ‘Your child did something wrong.’ But we should exercise more positive education,” she explains. “Even for a child who may not be strong in studies, we affirm every child, and extend the love to the parents. Otherwise, parents would say that when they receive news from the school, it’s either the child is injured or the child has gotten into trouble. We want to change this mindset.”

She adds: “It’s about catching them at the right moment, in their acts of kindness or acts of service. It’s not about academics, but knowing that every child is celebrated for doing good. We celebrate efforts, not just achievements.”

Looking back, her career in education would not have been what it is without celebrating efforts and believing in others despite the odds.

No degree, no problem

Teaching is a career which Elaine stumbled into. She had wanted to be an engineer, after graduating from Ngee Ann Polytechnic with a diploma in electronic and computer engineering in 1993. But she changed her mind after a two-week relief teaching stint at Outram Primary School, her *alma mater*.

Her former teacher, who was away on an urgent medical leave, called Elaine to help take care of her class. She agreed, even though she was fearful as she had no training or experience in teaching.

“I still remember on the morning I was supposed to go, I had cold feet,” she recalls. “I even wondered, ‘Should I call in sick? Can I manage a whole class of children?’ I didn’t have the confidence. I was worried I’d be swallowed up by the children.”

But her fears were unfounded, and the experience turned out to be entirely life-changing. “I saw the bright-eyed wonder in those children,” she smiles. “And I thought to myself, ‘That’s it. That’s the kind of impact I want to have on them.’”

“It’s like when you buy fish at the market, you look for the bright eyes. You don’t want them to look at you with blank eyes,” she adds, chortling at her comparison between students and fish. “That bright spark in their eyes is a quick dipstick to tell you if the children are able to enjoy their learning, or catch up with their lessons. It’s a litmus test.”

She went on to complete a diploma in education at the National Institute of Education, before becoming a teacher at Bukit View Primary School in 1995. Her career was a surprisingly rapid

rise to the top. “You know, from the start, I just wanted to be HOT,” she shares, laughing. “A Happy, Ordinary Teacher. It’s a tongue-in-cheek joke among the teachers.”

But one job led to another and eventually, she rose to become Principal – defying expectations as she does not have a degree. “At that time, having a degree was important,” she explains. “Looking back, I didn’t expect to be appointed to leadership positions. I never thought I would be a Principal.”

In 1997, she moved to River Valley Primary School. Within two years, she was appointed as Subject Head for Science, and became Head of Department for Science the following year. In 2005, she became Vice-Principal of Woodlands Ring Primary School and four years later, Principal of Chongzheng Primary School. She was appointed Principal of Maha Bodhi School in 2013.

On whether the absence of a degree has affected her in any way, she replies emphatically, “No impact at all. While academic achievement is important, it is not the be-all and end-all. I was still given opportunities to helm projects and lead teams.

“It’s not just having the knowledge, but also having the willingness to contribute and learn that will stand the test

of time. I went through the baptism of fire in my different positions, learning from others and learning on the job. Through it, I’ve realised that not everything is learnt through books, but experience too.”

Today, she uses her personal experience to inspire others. While she does not readily share about her success despite the lack of a degree – partly because parents still expect their children to get a degree – she talks about it with her colleagues in private moments, hoping to instill in them confidence that like her, they can do it too.

“When I come across teaching staff who are non-graduates, I tell them that they do not need to chase the degree for the sake of it. There must be genuine interest, and it should be relevant to them,” she says. “You should pursue education for the right purpose, not because you want the ‘paper’ only, otherwise you end up not using it for its value.”

Seizing opportunities

For Elaine, it’s about stepping up and seizing the opportunities, no matter what your starting line is. Having blazed the trail and proven that those who do not have a degree can rise up the ranks too, she hopes others do not see it as an impediment.



Good news: Elaine started a movement where teachers write positive messages to students.



Elaine gifted her staff with lunchboxes to encourage them to eat together as a family.

“I might not have pursued a university degree outside, but that did not stop me from taking up the opportunities within the service. I think that’s more important,” she says.

Opportunities were extended to her and she made the most out of them. For instance, when she was Head of Department (HOD) for Science at Woodlands Ring Primary School, she was one of only two HODs selected to attend an overseas training course on life sciences in Seattle.

There, she learnt how to better design lessons and activities in science classes. When she came back, she conducted a sharing session at a cluster symposium with parents and teachers from other schools.

She stepped into her first leadership role, when she became Subject Head for science at River Valley Primary School. “Then, there was still a clear distinction between graduates and non-graduates. I was young in service, and there were others who were more senior,” she discloses. “I did have some reservations then. I pondered over it and wasn’t sure if that was the right position.”

But she stepped up to the opportunity, and made a point to use her leadership role to empower those around her too.

**It’s not about academics,
but knowing that every child
is celebrated for doing good.
We celebrate efforts, not
just achievements.**

“It’s not about imposing my leadership on others, but it’s about doing together and learning together,” she says. “Many times, I also count on my colleagues’ advice or suggestion and

hearing their voices. You don’t have to lead from the front all the time, but sometimes it’s also about leading from the back and the side too.”

“I still joke that I was ‘conned’,” she says with a laugh, about stepping up to her new role. “But ever since then, there has been no looking back.”

As her responsibilities at work started to become heavier, so did her role at home. She recalls having difficulties trying to manage motherhood and work, describing it as one of her low points.

“There was a time when I was only surviving on three to four hours of sleep every night. I was trying to be the best mother, and also the best teacher,” she shares. “I was down. And the self-doubts started surfacing. I thought to myself, ‘Am I doing the best for my family?’”

While she admits being a perfectionist and wanting to do well in both her roles as a mother and an educator, she reconciled the tension with the support of others – her family and friends – who said as long as she is giving her best ability, it doesn’t always have to be perfect.

She has also translated this sensibility to her leadership style. She sees her students and staff as more than who they are in school. For instance, a student is someone's daughter and sister; a staff member is a father and breadwinner.

"I see my staff and students as real people, and not as numbers. When you reach out to people, you take an active interest in them and acknowledge that everyone has other different roles in life. When you understand the multi-faceted nature of people, it is easier to work together with them, because you are treating them as people first, workers second," she shares.

Love you forever

In her office, there is a book shelf stacked with hundreds of books from her home that she would lend and sometimes even give her students and teachers.

"Reading transports us to a land of imagination and opens up possibilities for us. Every time we pick up a book or an article, we enhance our own knowledge and learn from different perspectives, such as understanding what others have gone through. When we do that, we re-assess our own perspective and also get to hone our craft," Elaine says, extolling the benefits of reading for her leadership.

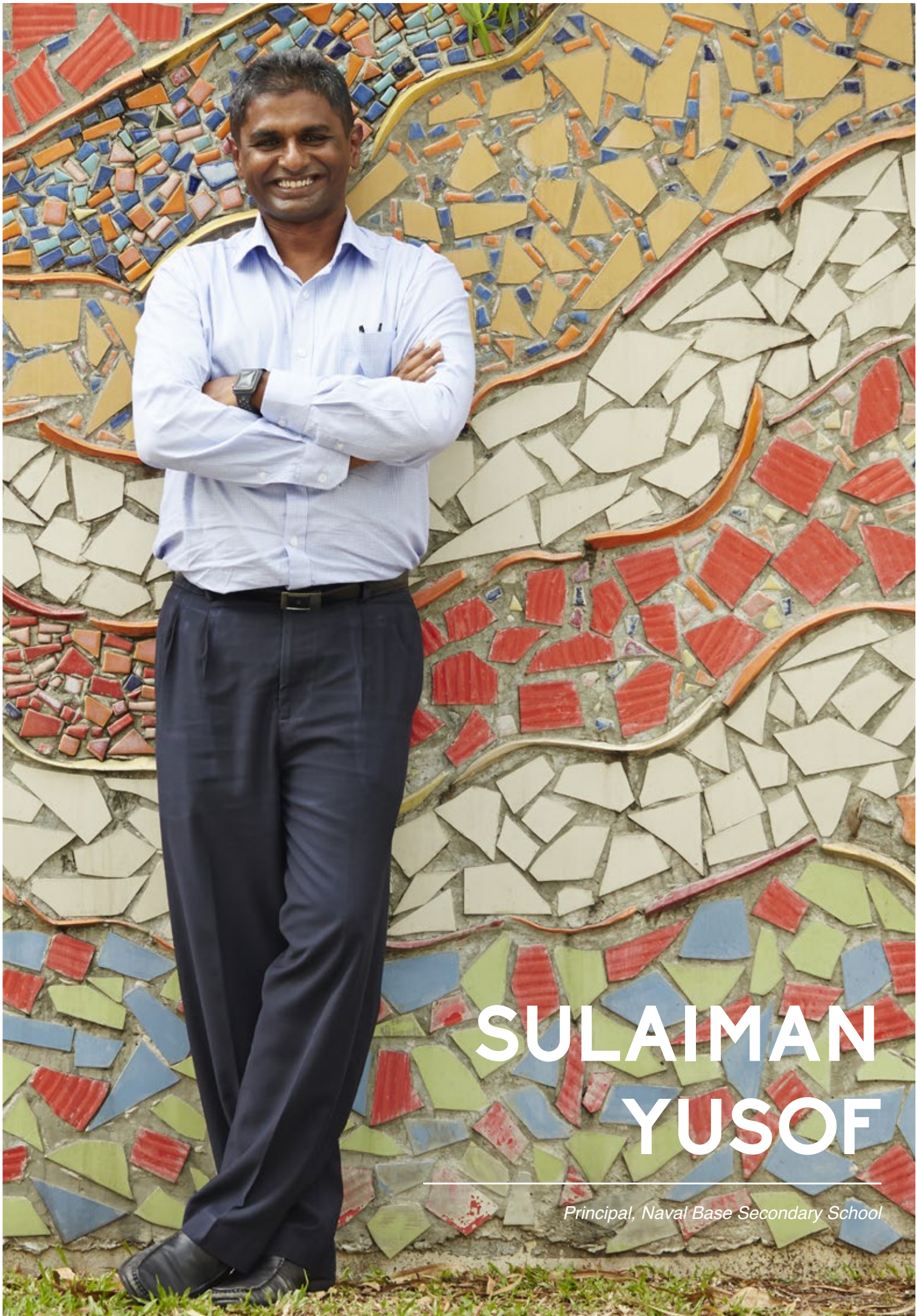
One of her favourite books is titled 'Love You Forever', a picture book written by Robert Munsch and published in 1986, which tells the story of the evolving relationship between a boy and his mother. "It's about a young baby and his mother and at the end of each day, she would sing a refrain: 'I'll love you forever / I'll like you for always / As long as I'm living / My baby you'll be'," she says.

To her, the message is simple, yet profound. "A child goes through different stages, from innocence to rebellion and resistance. But the mother never gives up. At the end, it is the son who cradles the mother and sings to her. Then the son, when he has his own child, he sings it to him," she explains.

It says so much about the circle of life in education, where she sees a young child growing up through the different stages. "Those are the joys that are intangible and something you can't get from other professions," she adds. "It is meaningful to me because the children are always at the heart of what we do. We are always there to make things better for them."

She has two children – a son who is 16 and a daughter, 12. When she realised that she has been referring to her students as children, she laughs and tries to explain. "I see the similarity in my role at school and at home," she says. "I refer to my students as children, and sometimes, my own kids get jealous."

Elaine sums up her leadership ethos with a meaningful Chinese idiom, "饮水思源", which translates as: When you drink water, think of its source. "I have been very blessed, and it's about being grateful for all your blessings, knowing where they came from, then extending them to others," she says.



SULAIMAN YUSOF

Principal, Naval Base Secondary School

“COMPETING AGAINST YOURSELF... TO BE YOUR BEST”

Success is not about beating others, but being our best

Learning to be a Principal is vastly different from learning to swim. But for Mr Sulaiman Mohamad Yusof, a first-term Principal at Naval Base Secondary School (NBSS), the two are inextricably linked.

When he first joined NBSS in 2013, preparing to take over as Principal at the end of the year, he was barely able to swim a lap in the pool before he became uncomfortably breathless. “My strokes were fine, but my breathing technique was all wrong. I’d start panting after just one lap,” shares the swimming enthusiast who has always enjoyed exercising and sports, but was never a strong swimmer.

He decided to set himself a swimming challenge: More laps, less panting. He started reading articles about breathing techniques and watched YouTube videos on people demonstrating the right way to breathe when swimming.

Swimming long distances, he observes, was less about speed and endurance and more about technique, which required practice. As he was motivated to go the distance, he practiced non-stop. “I planned my time to go to the pool to swim. No matter how busy you are, you have to try and meet the targets you set for yourself,” he notes. He began sharing his progress with students during mass assembly. It was not too long before he was swimming 10 laps easily, then 20 and finally over 30 laps.

In 2015, he set another target: Swim 98.15km, to signify the 9th of August 2015, to commemorate Singapore’s 50th birthday. That worked out to 1,963 laps in the pool, which he gave himself a year to complete. “I started swimming 30 to 40 laps each time. By July, I had already hit 2,000 laps. When the end of the year came, I had swum about 3,000 laps,” he reveals, beaming. “I tell students I am able to do this because of personal mastery.”

With almost Zen-like calmness, he qualifies that he is not seeking perfection or beating the competition to come out tops. Instead, he is more focused on working towards personal excellence and mastery – constantly striving for a better version of himself.

This philosophy extends beyond the pool. It guides how he leads staff and students; telling them it is not about the results but doing their best. “Success is not just about the end result but also about the process. Ultimately, you are competing against yourself – it is not about being better than someone else, but about being the best that you can be,” he says.

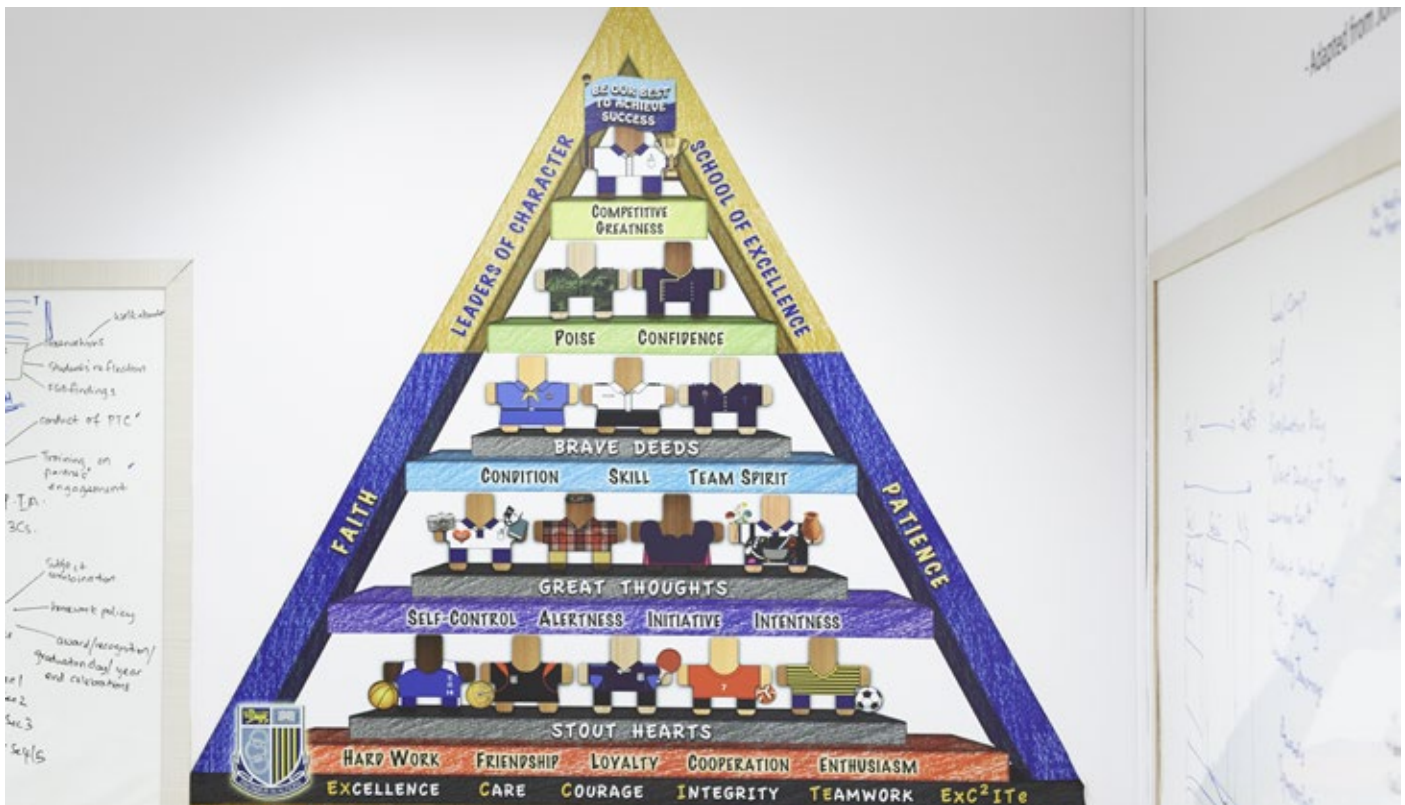


Pyramid of Success

Sulaiman’s philosophy towards success is adapted from a book by American basketball player and coach John Wooden, titled *Wooden on Leadership: How to Create a Winning Organisation*. The book, which discusses how individuals strive to perform at their peak, also introduced the concept of “pyramid of success”. It refers to the different building blocks that make up competitive greatness.

Wooden has four levels to achieving competitive greatness, which stands at the very tip of the pyramid. At the most basic level, an individual must have the commitment to work hard and be enthusiastic about the activity. Next, develop attitudes such as self-control, taking initiative and being intent in every activity. At the third level, get the necessary skills and embrace teamwork. After mastering the first three levels, it results in the fourth level of attaining poise and confidence, leading to competitive greatness.

To get students to imbibe this concept, Sulaiman put up posters designed by the school’s art teacher, Ms Maybelline Tay, showing the Pyramid of Success in alignment to the school’s vision, mission, core values and motto. The posters remind



These Pyramid of Success posters are found in several corners of the school, reminding students to aspire towards personal mastery and competitive greatness.

students to aspire towards personal mastery and make a positive impact on others. They also emphasise the Principal’s focus on an individual’s character over academic grades.

“The most important thing in school, to me, is character development. Everything is anchored upon one’s character. If you want to excel academically, build your character first and your performance will follow,” he shares.

To him, traits such as discipline, diligence, being a team player and having a strong and genuine desire to learn will help students cope with the demands of school. These traits will also guide students to navigate life’s complex challenges. “I tell my students that the highest mark of man is the person with the highest of character. Likewise, the lowest man is the one with the lowest character. If you do not have values and you do not have a good character, it doesn’t matter what your position or status in life is,” he stresses.

The Pursuit of Excellence

While the Ministry of Education (MOE) has prepared a Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) syllabus to guide teachers, Sulaiman wants to go one step further to enhance CCE lessons by getting teachers to facilitate discussions on the pyramid of success.

“For example, if they are discussing self-control, the teacher will get them to think about different scenarios and reflect on how self-control can be practiced. The discussion must touch on different aspects of their lives so that it is grounded in their reality,” he notes.

To help students internalise the spirit of pursuing excellence, his Key Personnel (KP), including year heads and subject heads, are reading Wooden’s book right now. Once a week, they have a book reading session with Sulaiman where they discuss different chapters. In reading about organisational management and leadership strategies, it helps them think about their work in school. “Such discussions help to ensure that we are aligned in our leadership direction. We link the concepts in the book to how we lead in the school. It’s also how we deepen our thinking,” he says.

Apart from Wooden’s book, the book club has also read titles such as *The Chimpanzee Paradox: The Mind Management Programme to Help You Achieve Success, Confidence, and Happiness* by Steve Peters. The other books include *The Global Fourth Way: The Quest for Educational Excellence* by educators Andrew Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley and *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life* by Marilee Adams.

Sports Buff

It is clear from Sulaiman’s book choices and leisure activities that he enjoys sports and draws strength and inspiration from working up a good sweat. He has even built a little exercise corner in his flat, which he shares with his wife and four children. “I live in a HDB flat, but I have a mini gym inside with four workout areas. I will work out for an hour about two to three times a week. It’s just to keep me recharged and refreshed – it’s not about anything else. When I exercise, I feel refreshed,” he reveals.

For the Principal, exercising and working out are ultimately a quest to do better each time. An individual may start out slow,



“I was inspired to push myself the same way. That explains why I managed to swim 3,000 laps in 2015. Positivity is a very powerful strength because it rubs off on other people. When you surround yourself with positive people, you become positive as well.”

His positive attitude has rubbed off on his colleagues. They started two informal exercise groups – a Hiking Club made up of 15 members, and a Cycling Club with 28 people. He is a member in both clubs. Some members of the Cycling Club planned a 60km cycling route to mark the school’s 60th Anniversary. “We achieved this target on Saturday 9th September when we cycled from Yishun to Changi beach and back,” he discloses.

These casual platforms also allow him to interact and connect with his staff outside of work. “We meet for hikes or to cycle on the weekends. Those are rest days so we don’t talk much about work. We just connect with each other through the activities,” he adds.

Learning From Leaders

The people Sulaiman meets are his sources of inspiration and he learns from them in different ways. With his friend Kahar, he learnt about the power of staying positive – something he tries to pass on to his staff and students.

At Sembawang Secondary School, his third posting after a stint at Pasir Ris Secondary School and at the MOE headquarters, he saw how the then Principal, Mrs Elsie Rajaratnam, gave space and autonomy to her staff. She is now heading Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Secondary School.

“Mrs Raja was – and still is – an inspiration because she taught me the importance of giving people time and space to work on what they want to, to help them live their dreams. She showed me what it was like to be a leader for the people. She gave teachers a wide space to work, but provided clear direction at the top,” he shares.

Today, he tries to do the same with his staff. He says: “I give my VPs and KPs a lot of space to handle things on their own. If they want to try out new ways of teaching and learning, they are free to do so. But I wouldn’t say that it is a *laissez-faire* approach. At the top, I set very clear direction. The staff know my approach to leadership.”

He believes in working closely with his core team of Vice Principals and KPs. They have devised a multi-tier support system where students receive different levels of guidance. “The first tier is targeted at most students, with programmes built into mass assembly sessions to help students understand what is expected of them. Every day, we start the day with something about school or character development. It’s a structured platform

perhaps even struggling – like Sulaiman’s initial attempts at swimming laps in the pool. But with effort and practice, one gets better. His competitors are not the other swimmers in the pool, but himself from a week or a month ago.

This year, the sporting enthusiast has set an even more ambitious target: Swim 60 laps at one go, 60 times, to commemorate NBSS’ 60th anniversary. “But my progress has been quite slow – I’ve only done 30 sets so far. I should be on my 40th set by now,” he says, laughing. “All this sounds really tough but it is actually a manageable target with discipline and planning. When I share my story with the students and staff, I hope it creates a ripple effect and they will be inspired to challenge themselves too.”

It was a personal friend, veteran grassroots member Kahar Hassan, who had inspired Sulaiman to start swimming. He recounted a conspiracy theory that the world would end in 2012 – known as the 2012 phenomenon – that was gaining traction around the world. “Kahar’s response was that he would not be affected by the rumours... and he would continue to have a fulfilling life. So he set a challenge to run 2,012 km that year. He broke it down to how many kilometres he should clock weekly and eventually he surpassed his target and ran more than 3,000 km cumulatively,” he shares.

“Success is not just about the end result, but also about the process. Ultimately, you are competing against yourself – it is not about being better than someone else, but about being the best that you can be.”

where the school communicates its expectations to students,” he says.

For instance, on Wednesday (Winners’ Day), students share their school experiences with their peers, and the school celebrates successes. On Thursdays (Thirst Days), teachers talk to students about contemporary issues and draw connections to the students’ lives on the ground.

The second tier is for students who require additional support, and heads of different departments are roped in to guide the students. The third tier involves students who are dealing with problems beyond the school and require specific help. “They may be having issues at home, such as abuse, which could lead to them refusing to come to school. Where we can, we try to work with their parents though that may not always be possible,” he explains. “We work on the belief that the better we handle the first and second tiers, the smaller the group in the third tier. Thus the emphasis on providing quality service at the first two tiers.”

Apart from school leaders whom he has worked with, he also draws strength and valuable lessons from people he got to know along the way. Mr K. Govindan, who leads Peiying Primary School – just right beside NBSS – is one such person. “His school is right beside mine, so one day I dropped by to say ‘hi’ to him. We started chatting and realised that we could click. We are very close now and we go for lunches together, even though our schools aren’t even in the same cluster,” he says. “From him, I learnt leadership through humility. He is a more senior Principal but yet very humble and grounded.”

Another person is Punggol View Primary School’s Principal Kelvin Tay, whom Sulaiman got to know when they were both working at the MOE headquarters in the early noughties. He describes Kelvin as a steadfast friend with a genuine care for the people, recounting an incident where Kelvin gave him unstinting support when a student had sustained serious, almost life-threatening injuries.

“I had to go to MOE headquarters for a meeting while dealing with this case in school. Kelvin came all the way down from his school to MOE to meet me for a chat. He just wanted to talk with me to make sure I was doing fine, and to support me in that difficult time,” he says. “Kelvin is a person who puts people at the centre of everything he does. I have learnt a lot from him as well.”

While a leader remains people-centered, he remarks that the person should also not forget the importance of putting in place proper processes so that the school runs smoothly. He learnt this when he was Vice Principal at Greenridge Secondary School, by observing the Principal, Mdm Veronica Ng. “I learnt how to ask critical questions to challenge ourselves to plan ahead,” he shares.

Sulaiman, who started teaching in 1996, adds that he still has much to learn. “Every leader whom I have met has taught me something. They guide and help me define my leadership style. I still don’t have an answer to what sort of leader I am, as I am still learning. Leadership is a journey that takes a long time to master. Maybe it is not possible to master it at all. We just do our best and be our best.”




Sulaiman picks out books on organisational management and growth for his Key Personnel to read so that they are aligned in their leadership vision.





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