

# PRINCIPALS



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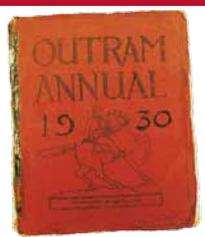
## CHARACTER-BUILDING PRINCIPALS

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## President's Message



While all of us will have gone through both training and preparation to be school leaders, I think you will agree with me that so much of leadership is learning on the job. Moreover it is a learning that must come from a resonance with your inner being.

You will see this in the stories of three principals with a strength of character we can all identify with. You will love the story of their many encounters with people and situations that have impacted their leadership. What is also very clear is that as principals model strength of character, they inevitably foster character building in their students.

This 9th issue is the last of these series that have looked deep into principals' lives, using an ethnographic approach, intending by looking in depth at a principal's thinking to bring out principles of leadership. In our later issues, there has also been voices from the past – from principals in earlier periods of our education history, having interestingly similar perspectives.

We would like to thank our editor, Paul FitzGerald, who has been our close partner in this journey. Paul has been the one interviewing principals and drawing out wisdom that was previously not captured.

As we celebrate our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary next year, the Academy will be starting a new series looking at different aspects of leadership.

May this publication, coming as it does, at the end of the school year, be a suitable summary of what we all treasure in our leadership journey – the ability to make a difference.

**Chan Poh Meng**  
 President of Academy of Principals (Singapore)

# Yeo Chin Nam: Voice, Instinct & Heart

*“I'm still a teacher. I just have the honour of being the Head Teacher of a school.”*

Many people are near to adulthood by the time they choose their career path. However, for the principal of Christ Church Secondary School, Mrs Yeo Chin Nam, that epiphany came when she was still a starry-eyed six year-old at Paya Lebar Primary School. Mrs Yeo attributes this early 'calling' to her Primary 1 Form teacher who instilled a life-long love of teaching.

2012 marks her 34th year of service with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and her 2nd decade of school leadership. Starting in 1993 as Principal of two yet-to-be-built Secondary Schools, Hong Kah SS and Pioneer SS, Mrs Yeo's Learning Journey has privileged her with heading St Hilda's SS, Henderson SS and since 2009, Christ Church SS – her last lap! She admits feeling tantalized by the prospect of soon retiring, but her hope and expectation is clear: to remain involved with

education for many years thereafter.

### Finding Voice

Mrs Yeo grew up with 7 other siblings in a humble Teochew-speaking home where both parents worked constantly. Reading was her great joy as a child, that is, when she wasn't playing make-believe games with her many siblings and cousins. But she discovered her 'voice' – along with a certain flair for leadership – when she began emerging from her shell at Cedar Girls Secondary School, thanks in large measure to her NPCC (National Police Cadet Corps) teacher, Mr Foong Kong Chee.

“He made each one of us stand at the end of the basketball court and yell out drill commands. I was shocked that I had such a loud voice! When I did my 'A' Levels at Tanjong Katong Girls', I was the Drill Mistress of its Ranger Unit, despite the fact that I couldn't



really march because, as Mr Foong had pointed out, 'One of your legs was shorter than the other!'"

Upon obtaining her degree, Mrs Yeo – not surprisingly – channeled her embryonic love for teaching into English Language and Literature. One memorable lecturer, Mr William Crewe, (“A wonderful person. He wore purple socks!”), managed to transform Linguistics, the driest of subjects, into classes that were actually quite bearable, underscoring her conviction that teachers can make all the difference.



*“Education impacts lives. You must enjoy learning. There's so much learning to do. It brings so much joy to discover so many skills that one can acquire through being in school, both as a teacher and a student.”*

### Trusting to Instinct

After getting married, Mrs Yeo joined Anglican High School (AHS) at the time it was being converted to a Special Assistance Plan (SAP) school. This meant from then onwards English, and not just Mandarin, was to be taught as a first language. “At that time, the area around the school was mostly farmland, and many of the students were children of the farmers in the vicinity. Their families were far more comfortable conversing in Mandarin. That was a very hard period for me – challenging and fulfilling – as I worked to improve the school’s level of English.”

Mrs Yeo’s own proficiency in Mandarin had slipped, due in part to her academic focus on English Language and Literature. A firm believer that everyone must take responsibility for their own education, she had to walk the talk. For practice, Mrs Yeo joined a Church with a strong Chinese congregation and took part in the Chinese choir. That was 20 years ago and now she proudly shares that she is able to read the Mandarin version of the Bible.

After a happy, productive decade with AHS, Mrs Yeo joined Tanjong



*“If you want your students to do remarkable things, that go way beyond your imagination, you have to return them their being. Let them be themselves and learn the skills to be themselves within the framework - otherwise there will be chaos.”*



*“To me, ‘curriculum’ refers to anything –in or out of the school. There is no way to provide a complete ‘curriculum’ that I can simply give to a teacher and say ‘Here you go. This is it. Teach this.’ Every child, and every teacher, is different. Curriculum needs to be categorized, and to have a structure and framework, to better focus on aspects of certain issues.”*

Katong Technical Secondary School. Six months into her new job, her official training to become a principal got under way. Sure enough, as her first appointment, this “Old Girl” was posted as Vice-Principal of her *alma mater*: Cedar Girls’ Secondary School.

Stepping once again into Cedar’s foyer, there was a surge of fearfulness that she hadn’t felt since those schoolgirl days. “Cedar had been very strict with discipline. Prefects and Discipline Mistresses were everywhere, ensuring that silence was kept throughout. Now, 20 years on, I realized it actually wasn’t as big and scary as I remembered.” Guided by her memories and her sharp teacher instincts, the fledgling VP took quick action. “I encouraged all my students to explore and get to know Cedar, to see what exciting things were happening around the school. I wanted to make sure they wouldn’t have the same fear

I had, but would *enjoy* their school.”

### Redefining Curriculum

As a student, Mrs Yeo had channeled every spare minute into CCAs with a gung-ho, tireless attitude that has stuck with her. Those early character-building experiences are a big part of her approach as an educator, especially to crafting the curriculum. “School shouldn’t just be about books. I had such a good time in school by becoming *involved*. Now I’m constantly working with my teachers to deliver a well-rounded curriculum, to help draw the best from our students. I want them to enjoy the same kind of full and enriching school experience that I had.”

Greater flexibility suits her style and philosophy. During her tenure at Christ Church, the pieces have fallen together nicely for this dedicated principal. Her spirited approach has made this neighbourhood school the preferred



*“As principals, we keep the mission of education in mind: to mould the future of our nation. We have created opportunities for students to visit different countries, to experience different cultures; to become part of the broader world. MOE has provided funds with somewhat relaxed guidelines. The face of education is changing. Schools have greater flexibility to experiment, provided we are mindful. Principals of years ago did not have this flexibility. We are fortunate.”*



choice of a steadily climbing number of families.

Committed to providing well-rounded education, Mrs Yeo invests heavily in the school’s CCAs. Student engagement with out-of-classroom school activities not only translates into strengthening character development and personal values, but makes academic work less of a chore. Time and again, Mrs Yeo has observed a direct correlation between low or no participation in CCAs and a student’s academic failure, often coupled with discipline issues. “We had problems with students not turning up for their after-school CCAs. By changing the structure to include sessions into the normal curriculum time, we managed to effectively turn the situation around. When young people are meaningfully engaged, they tend to stay out of trouble. This is precisely why I fully agree that they should be called Co-Curricular Activities as opposed to *Extra* Curricular Activities. Our ‘Friday Morning CCA Day’ is a change I implemented and am now watching with bated breath.”

### Family-friendly Philosophy

A mother of 2 daughters, Mrs Yeo believes that one doesn’t need to have a perfect straight-As report book in order to be successful and happy in life. “It’s our job as teachers to impact a child, to awaken his self-worth and show him what’s possible. Providing that kind of



memorable experience is what we need to do.” At the same time she believes that teachers should all be respected. “It does not mean that teachers know everything and everything they say is correct, or that every decision they make is the right one; but students should be able to talk to us and tell us things. They have to learn to say these things in a respectful way, just as we as teachers have to work to engage our students.”

### No Idle Principal

Sometimes, meaningful learning happens not just outside the classroom, but beyond the school’s gates as well. At the onset of her tenure at Christ Church, Mrs Yeo encountered a talented teenager who, instead of focusing on his ‘O’ Levels, had decided to take part in the Singapore Idol singing competition, much to his mother’s dismay. Desperate, she turned to the new Principal for advice.



With her eye on the boy’s courage, Principal Yeo recommended to his mother that she give him all the support he required. Her decision was questioned by many but deep in her heart, Mrs Yeo knew that if she had prevented the student from participating, it would only further fuel his resentment and flagging interest

*Principal Yeo summarizes the curriculum in her school with a simple acronym, “AOP”, which stands for:*

*Academic*

*Outdoor Education/Outside the boring classroom*

*Pupil well-being and developmental discipline/values*

*When she shared this with a former colleague, he immediately translated the basis of “AOP” into a single Chinese character – “命”, which means “life” and bears an uncanny resemblance to her three English letters. This glyph is made up of separate words symbolizing the components of education – people (or students), one (teacher), and the mouth of the teacher, used to impart knowledge to her students.*

人 (people)  
一 (one)  
口 (mouth)

in his studies. In her trademark gutsy style, gung-ho Mrs Yeo rounded up her teachers and together, they backed their star singer, even to the extent of organizing groups of students to go cheer him on at his performances.

The educator's instinct proved correct: the boy participated in the competition, blissfully. He then returned willingly to studying for his exams and graduated with 6 'O' Level passes. "He sang, braved insensitive comments from the judges, persevered, stayed strong and finished in 6th place," beams Mrs Yeo. "Today he is at Ngee Ann Polytechnic. I'm glad I stuck to my guns and feel really happy that we had the opportunity to get to know this boy a little bit more."

### Discipline with Heart

Such feel-good stories might suggest a leader who is a tad soft on discipline. On the contrary, Mrs Yeo sees discipline as central to her school's responsibility; hence it is a duty and a role she would never delegate to just a single person. "The student's well-being is of paramount importance; it should be the core of what we do." At 155cm she is



*"Not everybody can be a teacher. It's tough, and getting tougher."*

*Find the positive in your children, instead of focusing on the negative."*

hardly an imposing figure; but the force of this principal's "look" is legendary. One could equally interpret such a stern demeanour as harsh and unapproachable but that too would be to misread Mrs Yeo's naturally just quality.

For instance, when the school was wrestling with the issue of inappropriate wearing of school uniforms, Mrs Yeo decided to try raising awareness about why uniforms and overall neatness were every student's personal responsibility. Sensing an important opportunity to bring about a change in school culture, the savvy principal seized the moment.

"Detaining the students wasn't working, and it also ended up being more work for the teachers. I realized the issue had to do with the symbolic concept of

uniforms; that people perceive uniforms as nothing more than a two-piece outfit to put on to go to school."

Rather than dwelling on how the school's image was negatively affected by students' sloppy dress, she focused on helping the students realize that their 'uniforms' are an expression of the person wearing that uniform. Their entire appearance, from the top of their heads to the tip of their toes, how they carry and project themselves, all make up their 'school uniform'. People would see the students of Christ Church Secondary School as individuals who take pride in their dress and grooming. "After explaining that to our students, we saw a miraculous dip in issues concerning uniforms!"

### Heart and Soul

Through her constant efforts to improve the well-being of her students, and by believing that there is more to school than classrooms and books, Mrs Yeo personifies the changing face of education. "Ask yourself what it is you want to do. Not everybody can be a teacher. It's tough, and getting tougher. You have to make your classes exciting and engaging for your students, and they will attend your lessons willingly. Everyone wants to succeed. If your students like you, admire and respect you, they'll listen to you, no matter how difficult your subject is. You must allow for mistakes. If you get a wrong answer, think, 'How can I then turn it around to elevate the student's esteem?' Find the positive in your children, instead of focusing on the negatives. Your students are smart. If you don't give your heart and soul, they will know."



## CREATIVITY BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

An old rubbish dump, telescopes and photo albums – what do they have in common?

All three have played a part in encouraging creativity, showing how at Christ Church SS, curriculum truly extends beyond the four walls of the classroom.

### Life is a Stage

Every month, students (with some encouragement) voluntarily sign up to do stage performances: singing, dancing, playing the piano, and even teaching their audience a novel craft. These impromptu happen during recess or after school, and the students take them very seriously – often showing up on public holidays just to practise on one of the school's 3 donated second-hand pianos, to make sure that they put up a good show at the performance. "We've seen students without any formal music training playing the piano beautifully, just by dreaming and learning from youtube. This shows me that the school has touched the heart of the child, and the child is self-motivated to do well. It's nothing short of amazing." One of the boys played to an audience of about 2000 over 2 nights recently!

And venue for all this expression? – a rusty rubbish dump that the school cleaned up and transformed into a platform for creativity.



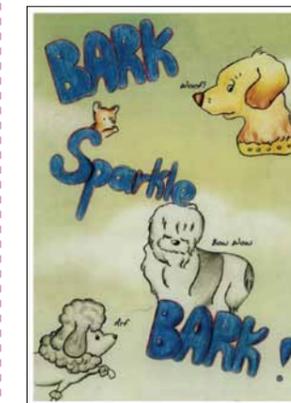
### Reaching for the Stars



Curriculum need not be limited to Earth either. One group of students approached their Principal looking for funds to purchase a telescope for their newly formed Astronomy Club. To support their plan they submitted a formal paper stating their cause. Thrilled that they had taken the initiative to pursue their keen interest, Mrs Yeo granted the students' request.

The Club went on to take part in an astronomy contest sponsored by the Science Centre. They did their school proud, bringing home two additional high-end telescopes as first prize. In celebration, the school borrowed a few other telescopes, and organized a community stargazing event. More than 2,000 students and residents from the vicinity flocked down to take turns peering at the night sky.

### Sparking Talent



During a 2010 school trip to Xiamen, PRC, it surfaced that a Sec 1 girl amongst the group had an unusual talent: she could mimic animal sounds, flawlessly. True to form, and thinking ahead, Principal Yeo suggested she record her calls onto a CD, find a picture book that fit with her repertoire, and they would use that on an upcoming trip to Korat, Thailand, for teaching English to the children. "The young lady came back dismayed that she could not find such a book. It turns out she can also draw quite well, so I asked her, 'Why not write the book?' and she did! "Bark, Sparkle, Bark!" is now in print with accompanying CD. The story is about a little dog who produces all kinds of animal sounds before finally learning how to bark. The author has already come up with a planned sequel: how Sparkle misuses his new found skills!"



Author/artist  
Tan Xue Ting

# Lysia Kee: The Incremental Feminist's Daughter

*Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee  
Calls back the lovely April of her prime.*

~William Shakespeare

By age 13 Lysia Kee had read the complete works of Shakespeare. Poetry was but one among dozens of passions that filled her self-described "glorious childhood" to the brim. Famous for her tree-climbing prowess, Lysia loved nothing better than to scamper up a favourite jambu ayer tree, a book and a box of chocolates pressed under one arm, and simply while away the hours in her reading perch. Whenever a thunderstorm gathered, like some figure from the literature she adored, Lysia would sneak out, jump onto her

*"Childhood was great fun. There was a lot of time to stand and stare; to dream."*



two-wheeler and ride straight to the tanjong to gaze at the churning water. "On top of the Raleigh bicycle, you really feel like the queen of the world – the wind blowing back your hair..." Drenched and exhilarated, Lysia would slip back home, her absence having gone unnoticed by her mother.

Lysia grew up in a long, double storey shophouse in Muar, Johor. Downstairs her father ran a thriving business, bottling aerated water. Lysia and her classmates would sometimes sit and watch the workers putting gas and essences into the bottles and slapping on labels. "During holiday festival times, Mom and Dad paid us a little money just to wash the bottles and help in the cleaning. It was really good fun!"

Both her parents were the firstborn from established Hainanese families.



Lysia with her parents.

Her grandfathers headed their respective clans, one in Muar, the other in Malacca. A qualified nurse, her mother had been on staff at Singapore General Hospital. "In Muar she didn't have to work as such," explains Lysia. "We were not short of money – we had maids, servants, and workers in my father's factory. Mom was a 'socialite' I suppose you would call it. She would



*"A girl's place is at home,' my mother told me. 'But a girl must have a job. If you are a teacher you will teach half a day. The other half you can fulfil your first duty: to your husband, your children and home. So, being a teacher is fine.'"*

do cooking classes, play mahjong, and did a lot of social welfare work as a volunteer."

## A Mother's Embrace

While arguably 'privileged', Lysia's idyllic upbringing was far from sheltered. "My mother was a great influence in my life. She was a dragon lady, who knew how to use her power. Actually, she pushed me into a career in education." Motivated by clear-eyed pragmatism rather than any notion about instilling a lofty love of knowledge, her mother was determined that Lysia be equipped for the realities of life. A witness to the vagaries of war and the persistent threat of communism, she felt it crucial that her daughter be aware of how perilous the world can turn, overnight. She spelled out to Lysia the explicit threats a woman might need to confront. The lesson was deep: survival, even of the unthinkable, boils down to one essential: self-respect. "I mean if you have a mother who tells you that it's 'OK', so long as you keep your wits about you and your brains intact, and you *do not lose your self-respect*, you know you really are a strong person. *Believe* in your own spirit. Believe in the *resourcefulness* you've gained through education. This will enable survival and prosperity. Looking back I believe that strength, the matter-of-fact nature, came from my mom. She was such a pragmatic woman. She



Lysia's mother.



wouldn't cry for herself. *Value* life and do the best you can. That was what I learned from her."

Like many Asian women of her day, Lysia's mother navigated a fine line between traditional Chinese family values and the breath of emancipation that was reshaping womanhood. "I am the eldest," Lysia asserts, "and I must continue family traditions. I am completely conversant with all the Taoist temples; how to fold all those papers; what to do, how to pray. I'm very well-trained!" Just as her thirsty mind could absorb every nuance of her cultural heritage, so too did Lysia take in high social and moral values that the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ), her school in Muar, had to offer as well as the worldly knowledge.

## School Values - "Simple in Virtue..."

Lysia was a 'Convent girl' from kindergarten to 'O' Level. "As a prefect," she explains, "if you were a really good girl you could borrow books from the library meant for teachers: a *great* library with all these *glorious* hardbacks. Even touching them was a privilege."

Sister Dorothy O'Keefe, an Irish nun, ("who never pushed religion down my throat...") gently nurtured in her students an enduring love of literature, enriching their imagination. She would play tapes of radio productions like *Great*

*Expectations* or *Julius Caesar*. "What you see in the mind's eye is so much more powerful than what you get fed through the TV," Lysia insists, recalling how the first time she saw the moors of England, the landscape evoked in her a flurry of literary touchstones. Lysia was devastated when Sister "Dot" gave her the only B on an otherwise perfect report. "But that taught me perseverance – in *everything* I embarked on. At CHIJ I acquired a lot of self-confidence; learning to measure success on my own terms; to do things to the best of my ability."



## Perfect Prefect?

Lysia was the ultimate prefect, ensconced in CCAs, organizing interschool General Knowledge competitions, going on retreats with *Joyful Vanguard*. "Prefects from across the district hosted exchanges. We slept on desks, bathed in sarongs; it was a cheap way to see our part of the world." CHIJ engendered genuine altruism – not being a 'do-gooder'. "If one felt for people, had true empathy, a great sense of humanity and humanness, *that* was the quality that really brought

*"When you know that you can literally lap learning from any corner, from anyone - from everyone - then the world is such a marvellous place!"*



*"I was the first girl in the family to actually attend university. But there were objections. 'Why spend money on a girl? She'll get married and everything she has will belong to another family. It will never come back to us'. That was the mentality. Mom knew I would succeed. She told them 'If you think she should not go to university, and I think she should, then I will use my dowry to send her.' So she actually made a very great show of selling her bangles, one by one. Each time a gold bangle went, she would hand me the money and say 'This is my dowry. And if your brother for whatever reason has no money to go to university, you must pay for his education.' My mom was a strong woman with clear direction."*



approval and smiles from the nuns."

Lysia studied for her 'A' Levels at co-ed Muar High School. She extended her 'saturation' policy by joining the Interact club, the debating society, the nationally competitive choir, the drama society, and running the school's annual magazine. She even took charge of gardening; "We all lived life so intensely; I was always hobnobbing with the Upper Six boys who were very good in poetry. In the evenings, gardening together it could have been very romantic. But no one had interest in anything other than platonic friendship, discussing writers and authors."

### University

Filled with confidence, humility and idealism, Lysia was eager for tertiary study. "I wanted to save the world - by being a lawyer." She applied to University of Malaya (UM) for Arts, and to Singapore University (SU), the region's only Law faculty. UM replied first. Shortly after settling into campus life, she had a surprise visit from Mom



- just checking if all was OK. (Years later a family friend revealed that, in fact, her Mom had received SU's letter accepting Lysia into Law; but seeing her daughter happily on track, she decided to remain mum.) "I'm not the kind to regret or be upset by such things. Besides, I was getting to know a certain med student at UM - my husband - so that helped. There had been earlier proposals for my hand,

but Mom turned them down. She felt I should choose."

### Teacher

Her first position was in a humble secondary school 17 miles from Muar - a lovely class of mostly Javanese speaking Malays for whom English was a poor third language. The school had no electricity; but the kids lit up Lysia's heart. Two years later she relocated to Singapore, joining National Junior College where her expertise in Malay language made her the natural choice for Civics Tutor and the principal put her in charge of the Malay tutorial group. Lysia felt right at home.

She began receiving calls from the Public Service Commission (PSC) about scholarship opportunities. The first was in England to study Linguistics: she quickly declined. "The climate's too cold and the subject's too dry." A year later, an English Literature Masters scholarship was offered, in Hawaii. Lysia packed her bags and two kids. Her husband took no-pay leave to join the family adventure, so she accelerated her process and finished her Masters



Lysia in NJC.

*"Mom died at 52 of cancer. She taught me what to do: how to change her, how to clean her up; what pearls to put in her mouth and her ears, how to do her make up; and that is what I did. I prepared her for death - at the grand age of 22; and newly married! Mummy knew she was dying and insisted I must marry before she passed away."*



in 9 months. Once back in Singapore, Lysia began serving her bond at MOE HQ as a Specialist Inspector in English on a team developing several English, Literature and Drama syllabuses. She ended up staying there for 10 years.

### Curriculum Branch

Lysia recalls days when the image of countless students taking exams based on what she and her team mates had written caused her hands to tremble, literally. "There were moments of severe self doubt. Who am I to write this? How do I know they can do it? What right have I to demand that they do this?" Her deeply ingrained values soon helped restore her equilibrium. "If I didn't have that kind of confidence that was built into me by all my teachers and my mother, it would have been awful! But I relied on knowing I did my best. Besides, the syllabus was reviewed every five years! Of course it became quite gratifying when people said how helpful they found the Literature guidelines."

After a decade of being happily promoted Lysia's career at HQ hit a ceiling. She balked at the 'Principal Kee' option. After all, she was the "only one working on the TSD syllabus" (Theatre Studies and Drama); or later, she "must continue with testing REAP!" (the Reading and English Acquisition Programme). When her then boss ominously stated the question, "Are you ready?" Lysia demurred. "No, no, I'm about... to give birth! It's coming!" she recalls explaining. "One year later," Lysia continues, "my boss again asked,



saying, 'Where is it?' Frantic, I replied, 'Coming!' Finally I did produce my 'afterthought' - out of necessity, just to stay put! Everybody was just bursting their sides at the length I went to, just to avoid change."

### School Leader

In the end what wore her down was one Mrs Tang, a clerk who, having heard Lysia explain her reluctance, commented, "It's a pity. You would have made a good principal. You have a way of making people happy. Happy teachers are good teachers, so students would benefit! So it's a great pity you don't want to make teachers happy." Lysia was dumbfounded. "To a Convent girl, this was... the ultimate guilt trip! The next time I was asked I said, 'Send me out as a VP.'" Mrs Tang was right, of course. Placed with Seletar Institute (SI), Lysia right away clicked with her teaching staff and her wonderful principal, Mdm So Bie Leng. On their watch, fully 68% of students with more than 24 points made it into university. Not bad. "If I can't give you fish I will give you prawns," Lysia told her students. "Mind you, *tiger* prawns."

Government plans were afoot to close Pre-U Institutes and build more Junior Colleges. So the splendid camaraderie and "kampong spirit" Lysia found with SI was to be short-lived. When Mdm So was sent to Nanyang JC, Lysia faced a dilemma - become Principal of Seletar or abandon her team to an unknown fate during the wind down stage. The offer letter was handed to her in person by a Deputy Director, her former Curriculum Branch colleague, Miss Seah Jiak Choo. "This... you cannot refuse!" Quite so.

Quoting from Wikipedia's entry on SI, "Paradoxically, when the institute was in her final academic semester, morale among the students (was) at an all-time high... there was no imminent sign



of closure throughout the campus, as all gardens, pathways, corridors, classrooms and venues were well-maintained."

### Coming Full Circle

Lysia was posted to Katong Convent in 1997 where she remained for seven years, mandated to steer the school to 'autonomous' status. After a failed first attempt - "the school was not ready yet" she was told - Lysia read between the lines: the obstacle was 'image'. "Katong Convent for the longest time suffered from this image problem: that the girls were frivolous, not serious about work." Lysia vividly remembers addressing the whole school. "I feel like a lame dog with two legs shot off. But we are going to grow ourselves new legs; and *you* will be my eyes and ears. We *must* change our image. It starts with every single one of you knowing what is the right thing to do." Speaking with the confidence and empathy of a true Convent Lady, there was no mistaking their Principal's offer: the chance and the means to restore their pride in being Convent girls - their self-respect.

"When I finished speaking, there was this deafening silence. Nobody hung their heads. The girls looked at me, I looked at them. They were appraising themselves as well as me. Do I want this? Do I want to be that proud of myself? Of course they rose to the bait."

Could they match their Principal's determination? In her first year Lysia sacked five students. "My VP cried

when she saw one of the mothers taking away one of the girls. In the blogs the girls were saying, 'Mrs Kee smiles and smiles, but she has teeth. She won't stop... until you change!'"

On the flip side, Lysia believes in extending lifelines. To one of the first she expelled, she said, "Go and find yourself another school. If you bring me proof that you really mean to change, I will take you back," spelling out achievable performance and attendance criteria. One year later, the girl brought a report exceeding those targets. Lysia kept her promise. As writer Jo Owen says, in *How To Lead*, "Leadership is about performance, not position. If you take people where they would not have gone by themselves, you're leading."

#### Values

In December 2004, Lysia became Principal of Bukit Batok Secondary School and is still going strong. RESPECT, the acronym of her school's values, mirror her own, shaped in childhood and enhanced by experience gained along her journey. Values are her stock in trade. Lysia listens, intently. She finds richness and learning wherever she looks. "It is always good to look for people's strengths." She counsels. "Everybody will have shortcomings for sure, but it's your mindset of valuing their strengths which counts. In my school I value all my teachers' strengths first, which helps create an atmosphere of trust, and of being valued."

#### The Prospect of Impaired Vision

When she was 12 it was discovered – much to her surprise and her mother's horror – that Lysia was quite myopic. Being shorter than her classmates, she had always sat at the front. "I overheard the optometrist scolding my mother for not noticing sooner," she recalls. "He said, 'Your daughter could go blind!' Mom really chastised herself and I didn't want to distress her further, so at night

when she was asleep I got out of bed, blindfolded myself and learned to feel my way around the house, memorizing the steps that I would have to take to go to the toilet, to go here and there. I told myself, I had better learn how a blind man feels, so that when it really happens, I'm prepared."

It may be a truism – 'readiness is everything' – but Lysia feels completely comfortable with her belief that things – whether students or systems – have a way of unfolding in their own time.

"Children must find their own water level. My task is to be there, to pick them up if they fall, to hold an elbow, to provide a listening ear, a smile, a word of encouragement; mostly to believe in them, whatever they choose to be. I don't think it's my right to mould. It's my privilege to actually build and support, to open doors, ways of perceiving things, and giving values. That's a lot to do there. Instead of, 'Do

this, or that', I say, 'Let's think about it. What do you feel?' Help them articulate it to themselves, to clarify. And then, very importantly, help them to judge, to weigh for themselves. That, I believe, will make very strong people; because of who they are, not because of you."

For Lysia Kee, a teacher is but one influence, albeit crucial, among many. The shaping of a person is global: school, culture, society, not to mention genetics and parents. Lysia's own hugely influential mother being a case in point. "I say to my teachers, 'Most of the kids waking hours are with us, not with their parents. Like it or not, we are the beacons in their formative years – the lighthouses that will show the way. If we do not accept that responsibility, then we are not fulfilling our role as a teacher, a guide, a mentor, a surrogate parent. We have to. Our role is so big, and so important.'"



# Mr Adolphus Tan – Resistance and Flow

On an average workday in March 2006 about a year into his stint with the School Appraisal Branch, 45 year-old Adolphus Tan was approached by his Deputy Director. "He invited me for lunch. I was surprised. He never ever invites individuals for lunch. That's why I felt certain that I was in trouble."

Lunch, in fact, was a pleasure, and served with a helping of good news. Adolphus was being asked to assume the leader's position at Shuqun Secondary School, replacing the well-respected Mrs Chua Yen Ching, who had been tasked to start a new venture, Northlight School. His mandate: to carry forward the trailblazing efforts undertaken by Mrs Chua; plus he would need to step up to the task immediately.

And that was how, in the middle of the academic year, Adolphus came to take over the reins at Shuqun Secondary School. Today

he celebrates five years as its proud Principal.

"Mrs Chua started a number of community projects and initiatives to help boost the students' esteem and confidence level," explains Adolphus, "I came here to continue her good work. It has been my job to change the perception of this school from one of being a place for challenging students to one that brings hope to all who care to join us."

In terms of both social-economic status and PSLE scores Shuqun students fall somewhat towards the lower end. Many come from disadvantaged families. But as far as their schooling at Shuqun is concerned, 'disadvantaged' is a label that Adolphus absolutely rejects. From the moment of his arrival,

Principal Tan injected his sincere belief in Shuqun's worth and potential. That faith coupled with his quiet, steady leadership has brought to this school the much-deserved success it enjoys today.

The steady increase in student enrolment at Shuqun SS reflects Adolphus's effectiveness. When he arrived the school's intake was barely 900. Today, the number of students has surged by 45%. "We started getting good results after my first year here. People began to believe in us as a school." Adolphus is quick to attribute the improved performance to his committed team and his predecessor. "I'm fortunate to have this group of motivated and dedicated teachers." This characteristic humility is in keeping with Adolphus' gentlemanly nature.

*"These are kids who were never given the opportunity to succeed. I wanted to change that. I wanted to create the environment for them to succeed."*



At first Adolphus discovered that the meaning of Shuqun's motto, 'An inviting school that brings out the best in everyone', had not always been understood the way it was intended. As he said wryly, "It was an 'inviting' place for students. They were more than happy to come to school: they looked forward to making the lives of their teachers miserable!" He felt that had to change. "Shuqun must also be inviting to teachers; they should feel motivated and drawn to come to work everyday. Students would need to be taught discipline; and respect for their teachers." So together with his Discipline Committee and Vice Principal, Adolphus set about instilling in students values like diligence, self-motivation, and a willingness to learn. "These are the best gifts students can give to their teachers, and when the teachers are happy, they in turn create happy children. Everybody wins in this situation."

#### A Principal's path: From Resistance to Surrender

Born in 1960 to an Indonesian-Hokkien father and Singaporean-Khek mother, Adolphus is the eldest of 8 siblings, but the only Singaporean amongst his brothers and sisters. His father's job relocation triggered the family's move from Singapore to Malaysia when Adolphus was still a toddler. He cites his lack of a structured approach to the learning of the Mother Tongue in school as one of the main reasons for



Siblings enjoying their back yard.

*"To be honest, I was rather unhappy that I got the scholarship. It meant that I had to be a teacher, and I didn't want that."*



Adolphus with his sister Christine.

his poor level of spoken Mandarin, though he is able to communicate well in Hokkien. Nevertheless he considers himself lucky to have attended the top state school in Kedah where all his lessons were conducted in English.

After completing his 'A' Levels, Adolphus applied for entry to both the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur and the University of Science of Malaysia in Penang. As a third option he applied to Singapore's Public Service Commission (PSC) for a scholarship

which he was duly awarded, after his interview. "To be honest, I was rather unhappy that I got the teaching scholarship. It meant that I would have to become a teacher. I wanted to be an engineer like my father who had studied architecture. In fact I appealed to the Public Service Commission Board to reconsider their decision; I really did not want to be a teacher!" What Adolphus didn't know at the time was that he had been refused entry to his preferred choices in Malaysia. "Only much later, long after my successful PSC scholarship interview, did I receive my rejection letters from both Malaysian universities!"

Adolphus learnt to go with the flow, accepted the scholarship, and was enrolled at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Besides, his family was hardly well-to-do; the scholarship lifted a considerable financial burden off his shoulders. At university he was an average student who tried very hard not to be late for lectures and tutorials. Mind you, staying at Dunearn hostel directly across from the Bukit Timah campus, there was no excuse. Academic life was immensely enjoyable for Adolphus and he was grateful to have the opportunity to study an additional year for an honours degree. And yet he graduated from NUS with no more enthusiasm for a career in education than he had felt going in. Inspiration was eluding him.

Serving his 8-year bond as a schoolteacher naturally began with compulsory National Service (NS). "I was 22 years old when I entered NS, and they called me 'Old Man'. I didn't feel old, though I didn't excel in physical fitness. That was when I discovered my leadership potential. At the end of my three-month Basic Military Training, I was selected for Officer Cadet School

*"... Apparently the (Army) officers felt I had a certain leadership quality about me."*

(OCS). I thought it was because I was an MOE scholar, but apparently the officers felt I had a certain leadership quality about me."

#### A Lucky Break

Exploring the allure of leadership, as it turned out, would have to wait. A medical problem requiring surgery meant taking a one year hiatus from the rigours of NS training. While recuperating, Adolphus used his time to finish studying at the National Institute of Education (NIE), and not just the books. A bright, bursary award winner taking the teacher certification course also captured Adolphus's 'scholarly' interest. They fell in love and decided to marry. Adolphus claims that his wife has been his greatest source of support and strength. In fact, she stepped down as a Head of Department so that she had more time for the children.

Upon returning to OCS, Cadet Tan was told he must retake the Officer training from the beginning. Whether due to his blissful state or to his developing

sense of maturity, the 'Old Man' went with the flow and decided to make the most of the situation. His attitude and work ethic served him well: Cadet Tan graduated as Top Cadet and was presented the Sword of Honour by then President Wee Kim Wee.

#### The Emergent Teacher

His military and NIE training completed, Adolphus joined National Junior College (NJC) as a Physics teacher. "I'd had a passionate secondary school Maths teacher," Adolphus recalls, wistfully, "...the only instructor who could teach without referring to the textbook. He was inspiring and had an answer for every question. At university, I majored in Maths and Physics, but ultimately settled on teaching Physics. Maths can be very mechanical: as long as you know the formulae, you are OK. But Physics is more challenging; there are fewer formulae but much more in-depth thinking. Of course, it is also more difficult to teach some of these concepts..." Gradually the component forces of the 'educator' within Adolphus were beginning to coalesce.

Teacher Tan again went with the flow, staying at NJC for the full 8 years of his bond, finding he actually

liked the work after all. He could imagine himself happily remaining a physics teacher for the rest of his career. "Then one Friday evening my principal called me into her office and offered me the chance to be the Head of Department (HOD) at a secondary school. 'Think about it seriously over the weekend,' she had said. It was a tough decision. I had three sleepless nights. I was happy doing what I was doing, and apprehensive at the thought of joining a secondary school where the culture was very different. But I convinced myself 'If you never try, you'll never know.'"

*"As Principal, you are responsible for students, their parents, accountable for your teachers and educational outcomes."*

That's how Adolphus ended up heading the Science Department at Hong Kah Secondary School (HKSS). The workload was so heavy that there was hardly any time to worry about adjusting to his new role. After three years, he attended leadership training with NIE, was promoted and remained at the position of Vice Principal of HKSS for the following year. In 1999, Adolphus was called for an interview with the Board of St Gabriel's Secondary School, and he accepted their invitation to become the new principal. "To summarize the interview, they were very keen to know if I was a good Catholic!" His faith passed the test, as did his track record, excellent attitude, and the Ministry of Education's own interview

*"A successful principal is one who can bring different people, different leaders together, to work for you."*



Top Cadet Adolphus Tan proudly introduces his bride to President Wee Kim Wee.

process. Adolphus Tan was deemed ready for school leadership.

### The Rigours of Leadership

Through first-hand experience Adolphus quickly grasped the salient points of a Principal's role. "You are responsible for students, their parents, accountable for your teachers and educational outcomes. It was a really daunting experience!" His natural bent towards careful reflection before taking decisions proved adaptive. Adolphus also drew from mentors like Mrs Yeo Chin Nam, (also featured in this issue of Principia), his Principal at HKSS. "Mrs Yeo taught me that if we focus on developing the character of our students, they will learn to be responsible to deliver good academic results."

Adolphus finds people tend to feel burdened by the administrative side of school, impatient to just get the task over and done with. He has learned the essential value of careful strategic planning: sometimes, 'to be fast is to be slow'. "Take time to consult your people," he counsels. "Go through the hassle; get the right support. When a final decision is reached with consensus, there will be a lower chance of problems arising. This is why my HODs and I spend hours planning the timetable for teachers, ensuring that the workload is fairly shared."

By being meticulous and building consensus, Adolphus invests in his



*"People must like you so that they will trust you, that you will lead them well, and lead them to the right places. Consistency is very important... in the way you communicate, and in the way you treat everyone. People need to know that I don't waver when it comes to my values. If they don't believe in you, they won't be happy working for you. That, to me, is the hardest part of being a Principal."*

teachers' happiness. Investing in teachers' happiness is something valuable that he learnt from his second mentor, Miss Dorothy Tay. "It will show in their work. By making that extra effort, we demonstrate to teachers that we care. That means more than a token box of chocolates at the end of the year to thank teachers for their efforts. I'm not against chocolates; but I think that putting together something that positively affects my teachers' time for the whole year is far more important." Adolphus sees the culture of caring extending to where it counts the most: the hearts and minds of students.

Although creating a culture of care is his top priority at Shuqun, Adolphus has no qualms about administering punishment when and as appropriate. Teaching students accountability for their actions is crucial. "They must understand that they have

done something wrong, accept the consequences, and reconcile with the other party. Those are the two steps of our school's 'discipline with dignity' approach. That's the best thing to teach your students about how to survive in the world as adults."

*"We need to show our students that we care."*

### Running the Talk

Back at HKSS, Adolphus had battled debilitating migraines, a side effect of his being 10 kg overweight. As a first step he took part in the Terry Fox "Run for Hope" which inspired the principal in him to set a better fitness example. When he began at St Gabriel's he was down to an acceptable 80 kg and initiated the "Principal's Challenge": every student that could beat their Principal's time in a run held at MacRitchie Reservoir would receive a collar badge. "My teachers panicked. 'The whole school will beat you!' they said. Ah, what faith they had in me! But the students lacked perseverance and determination and it turned out that less than half beat me.



Accepting the Principal's challenge.



*While at St Gabriel's, some of the brotherly camaraderie shared by students rubbed off their Principal. Although reserved by nature, Adolphus grew comfortable mingling with his students, and that friendly, relaxed style has followed him to Shuqun SS. He had likewise struck up a friendship with Neo Tick Watt, who was then Principal of Montfort Secondary*

*School, also in the Gabrielite family. The two decided that a little friendly competition would drive them both to do well for their schools. "We were trying to outdo each other in terms of providing quality education to our students," Adolphus admits. "...just a little healthy challenge," he adds, with a boyish grin. On a more serious note, Adolphus emphasised that he learnt from Mr Neo "...the responsibility we, as principals, have to champion the academic growth of our students so that they can progress to the next level towards success."*



*During his time at both St Gabriel's SS and Shuqun SS, Principal Tan had to oversee a school rebuilding phase. At last! The chance to live out his career dream of being an engineer, if only temporarily. But his educator priorities remained top of mind. "I could have moved classes to a holding school while ours was demolished and built, but I didn't want to risk losing any students. For both instances, I opted for the prime-on-site option, which meant that lessons went on amidst the banging and drilling." True to his go-with-the-flow approach Principal Tan fostered unity through adversity. "Everyone had to cope with noise and dust but, together, we managed and pulled through. We made the best out of the situation."*



A motivational run.

20 minutes for a 3.6km run; not too bad for a man my age!"

### Leading by Presence

In a recent community project, the students of Shuqun went knocking on doors in the neighbourhood for a newspaper collection. Instead of waiting in his office to hear the results of their efforts, Adolphus rolled up his sleeves and joined the students. "I walked all over, until the last group returned.



*"I always ask my people, 'Is that the best? Is there any other better solution?' I am very involved in helping them find better methods. It's often easier and quicker to give people answers, but I don't. That's not how people learn."*

*"You must be humble. If your ego grows with your success, that will be your downfall. In fact, the higher you climb, the more humble you must be... so that people can be truthful and dare to tell you when things are not working."*

Something like this will not appear in any official report card anywhere, but my mere presence allowed me to show my support. Some might say that I'm wasting my time but I don't agree. I believe in the traditional, romantic concept of a leader - 'The King is always there, fighting - the first one ready to die!'; that way they know that you are with them. Lead by your presence."



With students at finale of motivational Sec 4 camp.

A strong believer in setting good examples, Principal Tan always tells his teachers, "When you leave one place for another and look back, you must be able to say that the place was better at the point of you leaving, than when you joined. You must have made a positive difference." Apt advice indeed. As he prepares to flow into his next posting at the helm of St Patrick's School, Adolphus feels gratified knowing that with Shuqun SS he has lived up to his own standard.

### Last in his Class

In his final talk with students before the end of term, instead of engaging

them in a typical Principal's 'dialogue session', Adolphus wanted to inspire his graduating students by sharing a personal story. His opening words certainly caught their attention. "During my secondary school days I stood last in my class. But today, I consider myself quite successful. Remember: it isn't the end of the world if you're a late bloomer. Your Principal, standing here before you today, is a late bloomer too. You have to believe in yourself and your day will come. Keep pressing on and don't ever give up!" In meeting his own principal's challenge, providing supportive leadership for so many, Adolphus Tan stands in a class of his own.

# Past Voices: Goodman Ambler's Magic

Captain Goodman Ambler, nicknamed the "Gambler" by students on account of his signature (G. Ambler) on school reports, was credited with bringing stability to Outram School in the early years, when school leadership was plagued by a succession of short-term headmasters due to the colonial policy that only Europeans could hold key administrative posts. With Ambler, a decorated World War I hero who had fought in France and Gallipoli, at the helm between 1926 and 1932, the school established itself as the foremost feeder school for Raffles Institution, according to K. Y.L. Tan (2006), author of the school's centenary commemorative history. What many may not know was that Outram Secondary School was first set up in 1926 in a predominantly Chinese quarter to enable more children to start learning English at the elementary

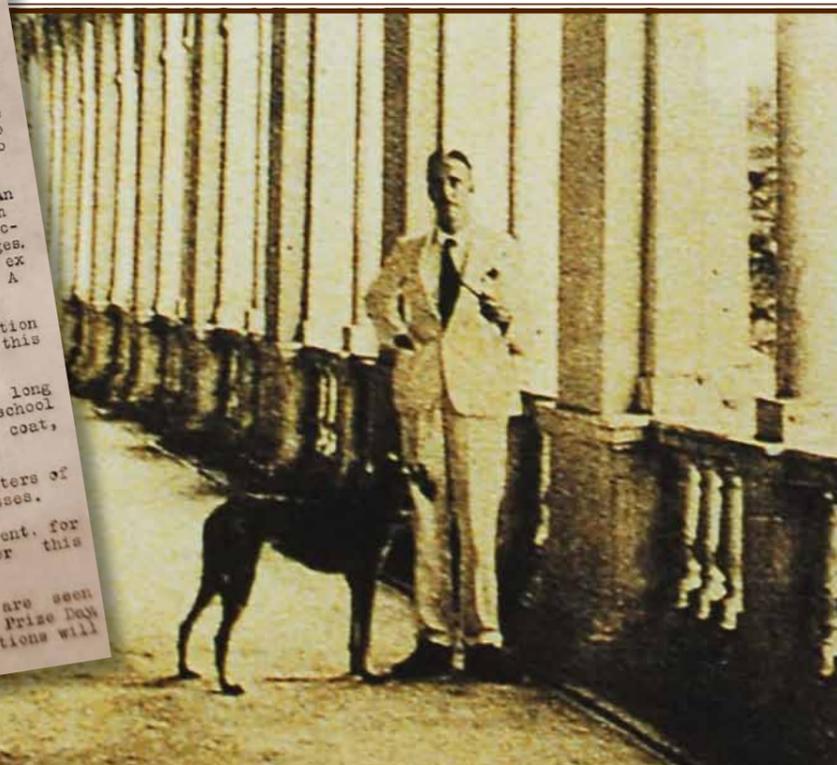


Outram hosts St Andrew's for a football match. Besides being the disciplinarian headmaster, Ambler was an enabler of talents. He apparently "engineered the most formidable football team in the entire history of the sport among Malayan schools" (Lim Hong Bee, 1994).

level. At that time most students only began studying the language at age 12 in secondary school, if at all. The school was named after a military great in British India, Sir James Outram.

Sai Keong (1905-2005), Director of Education, Vice Chancellor of the University of Singapore, and later Ambassador to the Philippines; Lim Yew Hock (1914-1984), Singapore's second Chief Minister; more currently, Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng; and last but certainly not least, fourth President of the republic late Wee Kim Wee (1915-2005). The latter's memories of his years at Outram and of a turning point encounter with Captain Ambler is vividly captured in the excerpt... ¶

Illustrious Outramites include Choor Singh Sidhu (1911-2009), Supreme Court judge; late Justice Abdul Wahab Ghows, Solicitor-General, and son of Outram's first Asian Headmaster, Mohamed Ghows; Kwan



**TO PARENTS**  
SCHOLARS'S Birth Certificates are valuable documents, please treasure them. Statutory Declarations are not sufficiently convincing.

Each scholar has his Report Card filled in each week. Please ask for these, sign them, and see where you can help the school. Your children are under school control for only half their waking hours. Where and how do they spend the remainder?

Too much importance cannot be attached to good English speaking. Where possible insist on your boys speaking English, reading English, and thinking in English. In these days of cash-registers, dictaphones, and other labour-saving devices in office equipment, it will be the distinct and convincing speaker who will progress rapidly - not the inarticulate office factotum. Remember your sons may have to rely on speech (personal interview) to get their jobs and to hold them.

To do any real good your son cannot study in an English school by day and in an overcrowded school (often studying Chinese) by night. Commonsense condemns this practice, for English and Chinese are two difficult languages. Your boy has home-work to do, has to sleep, bath, eat, and exercise, and perhaps do a few odd jobs in the house. "A healthy mind in a healthy body" should be aimed at.

No boy can be admitted into Raffles Institution with above the age of 15. In the course of a year or two this may be reduced to 14.

Only senior prefects are allowed to wear long trousers at school. School boys should be dressed as school boys, that is to say, in "short pants", open shirt or coat, shoes and socks and stockings.

Boys absent from school must produce letters of explanation before being allowed to re-join their classes.

The attendance at this school (99.7 per cent. for the whole year) is about the best in Singapore and for this we thank you.

Except on Sports Day very few Parents are seen at school functions. Your presence on Empire Day, Prize Day, adults' night of the School Play, and at other functions will be appreciated by the Headmaster and the Staff.

# Outram Secondary School, (1926 - 1935)

## THE MAGIC WAND

*It was soon after the results of the class test for the 1st term had been compiled... I did badly in the test, not unexpectedly. My mother had moved the family from Holland Road to Kampong Bahru after my father's demise. For my education, the move was somewhat a disaster. There was too much fun for boys of my age there, from rounders, basketball, fighting fish to mischievous exploits of one sort or another.*

*My teacher was one Mr Doraisamy. He was a genial person who was not very keen to use the rod. He wrote just 4 words in my report book and they told it all: "Can work, but lazy."*

*It was the system then that principals would go round to each class and take a look at every report book to assess how good or bad the class had been progressing or regressing. The principal, Captain Goodman Ambler, was a retired army officer who was posted here from Britain. He was about 5'6" tall, slim and slightly hunched, but his looks were enough to give shivers to students who did not match his expectations.*

*...Captain Ambler sat on our teacher's chair and went through the pile of report books. For some odd reason my book was on top of the pile.*

*He called my name. I stood at my desk at attention. work but you are lazy, eh?" That question did*

*He said in his loud military voice: "So, you can not call for a reply.*

*"My boy," the principal bawled, "go to my office. Next to my desk is a wooden cabinet. Open it. In it find the magic wand you like best and bring it back to me."*

*office. Next to my desk is a wooden cabinet. best and bring it back to me."*

*I did not need any prodding. I stepped quickly out of my class and headed to his office with my heart in my mouth.*

*quickly out of my class and headed to his*

*In the office, I found the mahogany wooden cabinet just as the principal had directed. I opened it. In it were six canes of various thickness, from the girth of one's smallest finger to one's fat thumb.*

*cabinet just as the principal had directed. thickness, from the girth of one's smallest*

*What a decision to make! ... I had heard from other mischievous boys that the thicker the cane, the less the pain. So I took a risk. I stroking the cane which I knew would soon whip my buttocks. But, what I could not guess was: How many strokes would I be given?*

*from other mischievous boys that the thicker chose the thickest one. I walked back to class, whip my buttocks. But, what I could not guess*

*By the time I returned with the cane, there were about seven others who had been asked to come up and form a line. I was asked to join the line at the front. I was asked to take the spot, bend down and touch my toes. I was not much of an athlete and could not touch my toes easily. The principal was not going to be sidetracked. Like a first-rate magician, he pressed the back of my neck with his magic wand to make me bend down more and more, until my buttocks stuck out like the peaks of the Himalayas. Then, without even so much as an 'Alakazam', he brought the cane down.*

*I almost fainted. But, that very instant Captain Ambler called, 'Next'. It was the most happy word I had heard till that moment, for it meant that I had qualified for only one stroke.*

*I walked back to my desk. When I sat on the hard wooden chair I shot back up into the air. The pain was an excruciating, burning sensation. Instinctively, I pressed my hands on the seat and pretended to sit, remaining in that position till the pain subsided.*

*I will never forget all that happened in class that day. That one stroke of the magic wand helped me turn 180 degrees. All my extra-curricular activities in the kampung were put on hold. It was study, study and study almost round the clock. When the results of the third term came in, there was nothing in it to make me qualify for another stroke.*

*... if Captain Goodman Ambler had not used the wand on me, I could have ended as a dropout and ruined my life. Deep in my heart I am fully grateful to him for performing his magic.*



The young Outramite, Wee Kim Wee.

This passage is an excerpt of *The Magic Wand* from *Glimpses and Reflections* by Wee Kim Wee (2004) and together with the photo of Wee Kim Wee is reproduced with the kind permission of the estate of the author.

# PRINCIPIA



**Mrs Yeo Chin Nam**  
Christ Church Secondary School  
**Voice, Instinct and Heart**



**Mrs Lysia Kee**  
Bukit Batok Secondary School  
**The Incremental Feminist's Daughter**



**Mr Adolphus Tan**  
Shuqun Secondary School  
**Resistance and Flow**



Outram Secondary School Principal  
Mr Loh Cheung Ming with  
*Outram Annual 1930*

**Captain Goodman Ambler**  
Outram Secondary School  
1926-1935

**Past Voices: Ambler's Magic**

