

# PRINCIPIA

Vol 7 No 2 Dec 2014 Academy of Principals (Singapore)

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## Leading People



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## President's Message

We talk very often of leading schools. After all, as school leaders, we are appointed specifically to schools. But as we come into the school, we realise all too quickly, that it is not an abstract institution we are leading, but a very real community of people – teachers, administrative staff, students, cleaners, security guards, in-house vendors. And how do we lead so that people will follow?

The principals featured in this publication vary from the experienced to the newly appointed and it is interesting to see how different the path can be between one who has learnt to read the pulse of people and one who is in the process of weighing the import of each encounter and each move.

I think you will enjoy the zestful energy that Lim Yan Hock brings to everything he does, admire the quiet steadiness of Alice Heng, celebrate the satisfaction with which Teng Lai Kwan has overcome her first mis-steps and walk with different eyes as Suraj shares what it is to be a newly appointed principal in his second year.

Yet through all these four stories, one thing holds true: every school leader has first to know himself and what he values before he can gain that credibility to lead.

As we come to the end of another busy but fruitful year, may I encourage every school leader to take the time off, no matter how pressing the daily demands, to renew his personal vision and recharge especially for a very special year ahead in 2015.

Chan Poh Meng  
President, Academy of Principals (Singapore)

*A decisive leader and inspiring communicator, Yan Hock leads by example and gives of himself to inspire others.*

# HIGH ON Energy

## *Lim Yan Hock*

*Every now and then, one encounters a leader whose very person and personality are the life force of the institution he leads. Lim Yan Hock is one such leader. He is driven by passion and purpose, rather than power. He does not wear his values on his sleeves, but his deeply held convictions pervade everything he says and does.*

This Principal of Presbyterian High School engages people the way he wants to be engaged – with great energy, generosity and gladness; and he leads people the way he likes to be led – with trust, transparency and true empowerment. One comes away from the meeting with him feeling uplifted. An inspiring communicator, Yan Hock energises others with a sense of vigour and purpose that emanates from within him. A decisive leader, he insists that students must “learn the right values”, and that his teachers give of their best and “do the right thing”.

With enthusiasm that never once waned throughout the three-hour interview and photo shoot, Yan Hock spoke of his experiences in education, his approach to leading people, and his hopes for Presbyterian High. It becomes clear that this school leader leads by example and gives of himself to inspire others.

### **HIGH ON INTEGRITY: BEING CONSISTENT IN WORDS AND ACTION**

A good leader ‘walks the talk’ and in doing so earns the right to be responsible for others. Being consistent is high on the priority list of leadership must-dos for Yan Hock. His staff and students respect him for making principled decisions in moments of stress and complexity, and for making good on his promises.

Once, a beginning teacher did not handle a situation in class well and lost her cool. Yan Hock knew he had to send a clear signal that the teacher’s actions could not be condoned, and he had to do so while maintaining her dignity and preserving parents’ trust in the school. He spared the teacher the ordeal of facing the child’s parents, but counselled her and took the necessary action. He managed the parents’ anger,

assured them that the school would do what was necessary, and sought their continued partnership with the school to improve their child’s behaviour. “The teacher reflected on her action and was grateful that I handled the parents and did not put her on a spot in front of them.”

Yan Hock leads his students with the same firm hand and clear expectations. To drive home the importance of having self-control, he once stopped a recalcitrant student from participating in the National Schools Basketball Tournament even though he was the school’s top basketball player. Yan Hock had caught this student sleeping when the class was in progress and issued him a warning. When he walked past the class the second time, the same student was still snoozing. Yan Hock’s action left a clear message to his students – poor behaviour and



When Yan Hock became Principal of Presbyterian High in 2008, he called the former principals of the school to inform them of his appointment. Since then, Yan Hock has always invited them to key school events.



As part of a whole school approach for parents to communicate their love to their children, Yan Hock proposed Parent Hugs, a thrice-yearly treat sponsored and coordinated by the Parents Support Group.



Yan Hock inspires his students to aspire and pushes them to work hard to achieve their goals.



Yan Hock believes in reflective practice and fosters a culture of continuous learning and improvement in Presbyterian High.

disrespect to teachers will not be tolerated in Presbyterian High. He rationalises with them: “If you know that your Principal has seen you doing something wrong but did not take any action, you would think that your Principal accepts that behaviour. So I must take action.”

Previously Vice Principal of Hwa Chong Institution and Principal of Geylang Methodist School (Secondary), Yan Hock has encountered countless challenging situations and has had to make many difficult decisions. On how he knows if he has done the right thing, Yan Hock administers this litmus test: “I ask myself, ‘Can I sleep peacefully at night?’ If the answer is ‘Yes’, then I have made the right decision.”

Yan Hock’s moral courage and consistency of words and actions have become a model of decision-making and self-reflection for his teachers and students. In an amused but approving tone, he discloses: “My teachers know that I will ask them whether they can sleep peacefully whenever they have to make a tough decision. I have even seen some of my teachers counselling the students and asking them whether they can sleep at night when they reflect upon their own behaviours!”

### HIGH ON INTENT: COMMUNICATING VISION AND VALUES

An ex-Physics teacher, Yan Hock sings, cooks, bakes and writes. This spirited Principal sings during Chapel services in school, shares his personal stories and experiences at daily devotions, pens letters to his teachers, and cooks curry and bakes cookies for his staff. Through these gestures of love, he imbues values, inspires change and institutes a culture of care in Presbyterian High.

Yan Hock is big on communication and makes it high on his leadership agenda. He makes a point to share his plans, explain the intent of his actions, and provide timely updates so that “there is no second-guessing and no negative emotions”. To this day, his teachers remember his ‘full-moon’ letter accompanied by *ang ku kueh*<sup>1</sup> to mark his first month as Principal of Presbyterian High. He wrote another letter to them after his “first 100 days in office”, and subsequently, anniversary letters every year since coming to Presbyterian High in December 2008. He begins the anniversary letters with a personalised message for each teacher and mails the letter to the teacher’s home.

Besides serving as a communication tool, Yan Hock’s letters serve another purpose – to encourage reflective practice. Yan Hock sets a theme every year and provides guiding questions to trigger the reflection process. For instance, on the goal of making “Every School a Good School”, he urged his teachers to reflect on the extent of how Presbyterian High is a good school; and as part of the SG50 celebration, he invited them to share stories about their interaction with colleagues or students, or a time when they felt accomplished. Again, Yan Hock leads by example and shares his own reflections in his anniversary letters. He says light-heartedly: “My teachers know there is no escape – I took time to write to them so they must also

<sup>1</sup> ‘Red tortoise cake’ in Hokkien. A small round or oval-shaped pastry with soft, sticky glutinous rice flour skin wrapped around a sweet filling in the centre.

write to me. I will remind them and ‘chase’ them, so all of them will give me their letters.”

By investing time in writing, in reading and responding to teachers’ reflections and concerns, Yan Hock shows that he values every teacher as an individual and appreciates each teacher’s work. “I connect with my teachers at a deeper level and open up conversations. They tell me their concerns and I can quickly address issues.”

Yan Hock also invests a lot of time in communicating with his students and showing them how values are lived out in real life. He personally prepares for and delivers weekly devotions, using personal stories, current issues and trends that resonate with the students to illustrate the lesson he wants them to take away. For instance, he used the character of Yue Niang in the popular drama series, *The Little Nonya*, to encourage the students to “never give up”, to be gracious and to always have hope. He types out all the morning devotions so that the School Chaplain would have a record of what he has shared, and has also published *Monday Thoughts: Lessons Learnt and Lived*, a compilation of 31 devotions he had given during his time as Principal of Geylang Methodist School (Secondary).

Just as he engages his teachers in a one-to-one dialogue every year, Yan Hock meets the student leaders in Presbyterian High every year in January to seek their feedback and suggestions for improving the school. “The student leaders sometimes make requests for their CCAs, and if their concerns are valid I take action immediately.” Over the past five years, the students have come to respect Yan Hock for taking swift actions to improve their school experience and for delivering on his promises. In living out the values he espouses and sharing of his own experiences, Yan Hock shows his students how to live meaningful and responsible lives.

### **HIGH ON HOPE: LEARNING FROM THE PAST TO BE BETTER IN FUTURE**

Yan Hock’s hope for his students upon their graduation from Presbyterian High is that they are able to enter a post-secondary institution or course of their choice. He inspires his students to aspire and pushes them to work hard to achieve their goals. A consistent strategy he employs to motivate his students is to show them that past actions do not dictate current choices, and present effort is what defines the future.

On why he likes to paint the past-present-future picture for his students and even the parents, Yan Hock has this to say: “When we are future-oriented, we have hope. And hope is what keeps us going and our soul singing.” For students who have encountered previous failures, Yan Hock tells them that they can achieve their dreams if they put in effort in the present; for those who have accomplished in the past, he exhorts them to continue their hard work now in order to ensure continued success in the future.

Indeed, Yan Hock is willing to go the extra mile to help his students succeed. All classes in Presbyterian High have two form teachers. The Express and Normal Academic (NA) classes have two form teachers on a two-year duration – from Secondary 1 to 2; and from Secondary 3 to 4 (or 5 for NA classes). For Normal Technical (NT)



*Yan Hock invests a lot of time in communicating with his students and showing them how values are lived out in real life.*



*Yan Hock’s staff respects him for making principled decisions in moments of stress and complexity.*



*Yan Hock works closely with different stakeholders to build an inclusive and vibrant school community.*



*In a cooking class for school leaders in the N6 Cluster, Yan Hock reinvented the traditional dough-based pizza using a potato base.*



*Yan Hock and his family on a vacation to Taiwan.*

classes, the two form teachers follow the same class from Secondary 1 to 3, and one of them will continue with the class to Secondary 4. This is because Yan Hock believes that the students in the NT classes will benefit especially from a consistent approach, stability in the learning environment and strong teacher-student relationship. He carefully selects the form teachers of the NT classes and personally asks them to take on the classes. "It is important to put the right person on the right bus, so that the journey will not be a chore."

The spirit of continuous learning and improvement is something Yan Hock consciously tries to foster amongst his staff. He walks the school grounds and talks to students often so he is able to share pertinent feedback and useful insights to help teachers adapt and improve their teaching and learning strategies. For instance Yan Hock once 'shadowed' an Express, a NA and a NT class, each for a whole day, and observed that students in the same class responded differently to different teachers because of the different routines that each teacher had set up with the class.

Yan Hock takes learning seriously. He sees leadership as a journey of "learning and reflecting, a spiral built on experiences". He is grateful to have

worked under many good leaders. In particular, he learnt many enduring leadership lessons from Mr. Lim Siong Guan who was then the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education during the time Yan Hock served in the Curriculum Planning and Development Division. "I was a secretary in a committee chaired by Mr. Lim, and he would call me into his office to discuss the meeting agenda. Somehow I never felt fear in front of him, and I thought, 'If someone in his position could make a person feel so comfortable, how could I do the same?'" Yan Hock also took away a lesson on valuing every contribution from the way Mr. Lim insisted that everyone in a meeting, including the secretary, must make a contribution.

#### **HIGH ON LIFE: LIVING A FULFILLING LIFE**

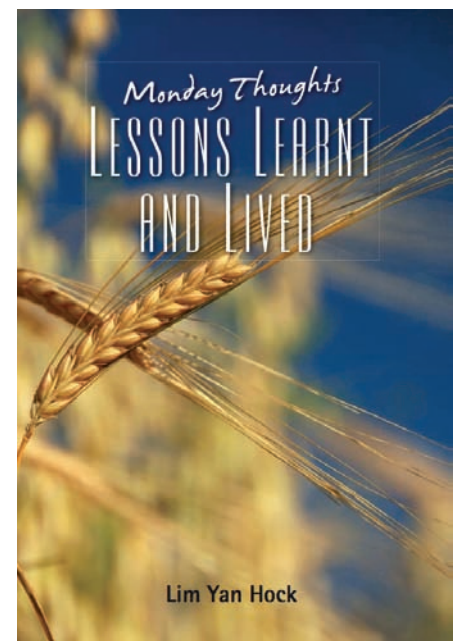
Every now and then, Yan Hock reads his own journals, his teachers' reflections, notes of appreciation from students, and looks back on his past 25 years in education with a sense of fulfillment. Beyond work, his family and social life is equally satisfying.

Yan Hock is the tenth child in a family of 12 children, and father to a teenage son and daughter. He played the tuba in the Symphonic Band for almost twenty years and has performed in various concerts. He has been singing

the tenor part in the church choir since 1988 and has taken part in three original musical productions. He also leads worship in his church. This family-oriented man has dinner with his family at home every day. Every Saturday, he cooks for his family, with his children making special requests for their favourite dishes. Every year during the Chinese New Year period, he will bake cookies and tarts for his siblings, friends, and staff.

The timbre of Yan Hock's leadership echoes the way he lives life in high spirits. Yan Hock looks forward to coming to school every day to "experience the students' energy", and calls on everyone in the Presbyterian High family to unite in building "good behaviour, good discipline, high school spirit and good academic outcomes".

A good leader aligns his people's efforts to a shared vision and helps them to achieve results; a greater leader connects their work to a larger purpose and harnesses the energy of the institution to achieve success. With high energy, Lim Yan Hock continues to serve, lead and inspire the lives of teachers and students who enter the gates of Presbyterian High School.



*Yan Hock published a compilation of 31 devotions he had given during his time as Principal of Geylang Methodist School (Secondary), entitled Monday Thoughts: Lessons Learnt and Lived.*

Alice believes that leaders must value people and be 'others-centred'.

A photograph of Alice Heng, a woman with short dark hair and glasses, sitting at her desk in an office. She is wearing a black and white patterned top and a blue lanyard. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The desk has a computer monitor, a keyboard, and some papers. There is a window in the background with a view of greenery.

# Leading FROM WITHIN

*Alice Heng*

*Alice Heng is an authentic leader. She builds her legitimacy through honest relationships with the people she leads. She is self-aware and genuine, courageous and fair. Her heart of compassion, agility of mind and integrity of conduct blend into a distinctive flavour of ethos, logos and pathos that draws people and influences growth.*

When Alice was first posted to Broadrick Secondary School as Principal in 2010 and tasked to ensure a smooth merger with Telok Kurau Secondary, she could have possibly asked herself, “Why me?” Instead, she thought, “Why not me?” Typical of her characteristic optimism, Alice chose to “take a learner’s stance instead of a judge’s stance”. There is much wisdom in her logic: “Sulking wastes energy and creates negative emotions. How can we serve people if we are unhappy?” To Alice, to lead is to serve, and in serving the school, she inspires loyalty from the people she leads.

The core of Alice’s leadership philosophy focuses on humanity – she believes that leaders must value people and be ‘others-centred’. Her brand of leadership is rooted in who she is and what matters most to her. Over the past three years, the staff and students of Broadrick Secondary have grown to love and respect Alice for her strict but nurturing approach, as well as her resolute and visionary leadership. Through her acts of giving generously and caring selflessly, Alice role models the values of care and respect, and builds a climate of congeniality and collaboration in Broadrick Secondary.

#### **A BONA FIDE LEADER WHO INSPIRES**

Before expecting anyone to follow, a leader must first demonstrate the vision and values worthy of a following. Alice puts people at the heart of things, and leads with her heart as well as her head. She commits to excellence, not perfection

- she sets clear standards and high expectations, and she is ready to bolster anyone who needs a second chance or an extra boost.

Alice believes that pride and confidence will encourage high-performing behaviours and elicit excellence. Hence, every teacher must be proud of being a teacher and feel proud to be part of Broadrick Secondary. “I tell my teachers that Broadrick Secondary is a school in the neighbourhood, not a ‘neighbourhood’ school. We must be a choice school for the students who choose to come to us, and we compete within ourselves to be the best for our students!” Because what teachers do have a significant impact on the students, she holds them to high expectations; but because every mistake is a chance to learn, she forgives, coaches, and trusts.

In saying what she means and meaning what she says, Alice exudes self-confidence and simplicity – building blocks of substance and steadfastness.



*Alice desires to provide a holistic education to nurture achievers with strength of character.*



*Alice having a light moment with the recipients of the school's Honour Roll who were invited to a Tea session with the Principal.*

This school leader, to whom staff and students look up as a firm but forgiving ‘mother’, also upholds the adage, ‘spare the rod, spoil the child’, yet sees the wisdom of ‘different folks, different strokes’.

Once, a student committed a serious offence, and his father, at his wit’s end, implored Alice to give his son a caning. The boy had been diagnosed with special needs; he had been caned before but the repeated offence proved that caning had not worked. Alice decided to take a different approach, and that made all the difference: she told the father that she would “hold the cane but not cane the child”, and convinced him to work with the school on a plan to rehabilitate the boy. Part of the plan was to reconcile father and son, and with hugs and tears, they thanked Alice for the second chance and resolved to try harder. Alice’s plan worked - the boy did very well in the ‘O’ Level examinations, and to this day, the ever grateful father still comes back to tend the hydroponics garden in the school.

As firmly as this ‘mother’ disciplines when the need arises, so as heartily she plays with her ‘children’. Alice organises staff bonding activities and *makan* sessions for her teachers and support staff. In July this year, in a partnership with the National Parks Board, Alice and her teachers cleaned the Geylang park connector and enjoyed *potong* ice-cream afterwards. She also joins her support staff on Learning Journeys to places such as the MOE Heritage Center and Marina Barrage.

### A UNIFYING CULTURE FOR A MERGED SCHOOL

Broadrick Secondary was merged with Maju Secondary in the early 1990s and again in 2010 with Telok Kurau Secondary. Alice is sensitive to the fact that while the two other schools are now part of history, Broadrick’s history

continues. The culture and flavour of Broadrick Secondary and Telok Kurau Secondary were different, and Alice knew she had to rally the staff and students of both schools quickly. “It’s like having twins – twice the challenges, twice the opportunities!”

Instead of trying to prevent and manage resistance, Alice focused on building enthusiasm and passion around the change. She invited teachers from both schools to join her in the journey of forming a new community, and in a strategic planning session involving key personnel, teachers and staff from both schools, they revisited the school values, vision and mission to envision a future and identity that is relevant to the new Broadrick Secondary. “The collaboration saw the creation of a new school flag and crest which retained and embodied elements from the two originals. A new school song was also written and recorded to indicate a new beginning and to foster a common identity.”

Alice also used Professional Learning Teams (PLT) as a “gel” to unify the teachers. Using the Lesson Study approach, teachers collaborate to inquire about their instructional practices and students’ learning behaviours. This proved to be a highly successful strategy in Broadrick Secondary for several reasons: firstly, the teachers focus on the common goal of improving students’ learning; secondly, as they learn and grow in their teams, trust is built and interdependence is fostered; thirdly, as the teachers see improvements and celebrate successes, they see the value of collaboration and cohesion.

Not only has PLT taken root in Broadrick Secondary, it has also taken flight. The school organises an annual Learning Symposium to share best practices and the teachers regularly present papers at the World Association of Lesson



*Alice believes in her students and exhorts them to aim high and stay focused on their goals.*



*Alice works very closely with her team of key personnel who are clearly at ease with her.*



*Alice organises regular Learning Journeys and bonding sessions for her staff.*





*Alice's personal touch has earned the affection and appreciation of her teachers and students.*



*Alice is mentor and good friend to Mdm Kit Gek Wah, Principal of Woodlands Primary School.*



*Alice spends Saturdays with her mother and siblings.*

Studies (WALS) conferences. Just one year after adopting PLT, Broadrick Secondary was invited to host international delegates from the WALS Conference held in Singapore in 2012. This year in November, the school will be sending 20 delegates to present four papers at the WALS Conference in Bandung. And Alice, who personally coaches her teachers in their preparation, will as always, be present to support them at the conference.

While Alice attributes the success of PLT in Broadrick Secondary to the commitment of her key personnel and the hard work of her teachers, her staff credits her for creating an environment that is “safe to fail”. And while PLT provides the structural ‘gel’ that binds the teachers towards a common goal, Alice supplies the relational ‘gel’ that excites them to give their heart and soul.

### **A PEOPLE DEVELOPER WITH A VISION**

Good leaders do not put their people in boxes; instead, they help them to reach places they did not know they could go. This Principal runs a tight ship but gives her teachers latitude to navigate the course. Alice strikes one as a very balanced leader – empathetic and caring, perceptive and practical, logical and systematic. She calls herself a people developer; her teachers call her a visionary leader. She is dearly respected for providing clear direction and for harnessing strengths for success.

Professional development is a priority for Alice and she establishes school routines that facilitate professional learning and growth. For instance, the monthly Staff Contact Time is reserved for workshops and teacher training, and information dissemination is done at the weekly staff updates (school starts at 8.20 a.m. on this day). Her strong belief in professional development extends to her support

staff – they engage in meaningful conversations on school improvements and will be presenting their InnoWits project at the annual Broadrick Symposium.

Grooming school leaders is “not a threat but a joy” to Alice who feels a sense of pride in helping educators fulfill their aspirations. Alice has mentored a few successful school leaders and several Master Teachers in the 17 years she has served as a Principal. Mdm Kit Gek Wah, Principal of Woodlands Primary School; Mdm Valerie Goh, Principal of Bishan Park Secondary; and Mr Md Shahrin, Master Teacher in the Academy of Teachers, Singapore, all count Alice as their “mentor and very good friend”.

Alice’s reputation as a people developer reaches beyond Broadrick Secondary. She was surprised one day by a phone call from Mdm Lim Ying Ying, Head of Strategic Management from Dunman High School, requesting an opportunity to learn from her. In her reflection at the end of the one-week job shadowing, Ying Ying esteemed Alice as a great mentor and attributed the success of Broadrick Secondary to Alice’s “consistent engagement of staff [and] continual communication, persuasion and empowerment”.

Alice is a visionary in her ability to recognise strengths in people and systems, and leverage them to augment results. For instance, Alice took advantage of the school’s strong Design and Technology programme to develop a niche area in Entrepreneurship and Innovation (E&I). She saw tremendous potential in the Head of Department for Science who had prior experience in research work with the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A\*STAR) and asked her to anchor the E&I initiative. The school received the Innergy Award in 2012 and E&I became the school’s Distinctive Programme in Applied Learning in 2013.



*Alice uses Professional Learning Teams as a gel to unify her teachers and give them a shared purpose.*



*Alice takes time to coach beginning and trainee teachers.*



Alice, her husband and their two sons enjoy a close-knit relationship.

Today, all Secondary 1 and 2 students learn the process of Design Thinking; a small group of students with demonstrated competence form the E&I Club in their upper secondary years and take part in real-world tasks locally and overseas.

### A PRINCIPAL WITH A PERSONAL TOUCH

Alice wears different hats in school – mentor, counsellor, critic, disciplinarian, sister and friend – but her staff and students see her as the same person. The coherence of her person sets the tone for coherence in the Broadrick family. Her personal touch makes her real and brings geniality to the office.

This petite lady cuts a dignified figure and there is an air of serenity and calm about her. She writes notes of appreciation to every teacher once a year and visits every staff member who has become a new parent and shares her experiences of motherhood with them. She also jokes that her husband of 30 years is resigned to the fact that every time they travel, they would bring an extra piece of luggage to contain gifts for her staff.

Alice's family bonds are very strong too. Every Sunday, Alice, her husband and her two sons in their twenties have dinner and chat. Saturdays are spent with her mother and siblings. She speaks very fondly of her 92-year-old mother, a "sprightly lady" who "sets clear expectations of [Alice and her siblings] from young" and who "gives so much but never asks for anything in return". The family also makes at least two trips a year to Hong Kong where her relatives are.

Leadership demands emotional strength and behavioural characteristics that can draw deeply from the leader's spiritual and mental reserves. Alice sees beauty in the human soul and is gifted with the ability to connect with people and help them grow. Her approach to building a culture that values people is underpinned by her Buddhist faith and her beliefs in self-cultivation and the value of human life. "Everyone wants to do a good job and live a good life; some just need a little more help than others to do that."

A testimony of Alice's impact and influence on the lives of teachers and students under her care is found in her office, on a hanging scroll with Chinese calligraphy penned by Venerable Long Gen. The late Buddhist monk, in this gift to Alice, exemplified her as a selfless educator who gives her life to educating others.

Under the leadership of Alice Heng, the teachers and students of Broadrick Secondary School are well placed to *soar with honour and pride*.



Alice was given this calligraphy by the late Venerable Long Gen as a tribute to her selfless contribution to education.



# ASPIRE TO Inspire

*Teng Lai Kwan*

*In her favourite fantasy play as a child, Teng Lai Kwan was a teacher in a classroom, and her students were dolls and whatever stuffed toys she could get her hands on. From child's play to profession, Lai Kwan came full circle when she stood in front of her very own class in Clementi Town Primary School. Fast forward twenty years, Lai Kwan is now Principal of Bendemeer Primary School, and still finding tremendous meaning in her calling.*

Lai Kwan's approach to leadership is anchored in her belief that the human potential is only limited by one's belief in whether or not one can accomplish something. In engaging people, she has learnt that a leader has to "be sincere, humble and respectful towards others." A teacher at heart, she makes no compromises when it comes to helping children reach their fullest potential and never holds back a praise that is due. As a school leader, she practises distributed leadership, trusts that every contribution matters and makes a difference, and maintains that there is no 'you' or 'I', only 'we'. She leads by example to build a culture of openness and collaboration, and a climate of shared purpose, teamwork and respect.

Lai Kwan's story in Bendemeer Primary is a testimony of the difference

one Principal can make to the lives of hundreds of students, as well as a tale of how much one school can benefit when its leader finds support from the fraternity.

### **"YOU CAN DO IT!"**

Bendemeer Primary serves a unique community – 60% of the students live in HDB 3-room or smaller flats and 33% of them are on the MOE Financial Assistance Scheme. A number of them are latchkey children or come from disadvantaged backgrounds. "This makes our job even more meaningful. We have a great responsibility to level up our students, and open up opportunities for them!" Because Lai Kwan believes that a child's self-esteem is his armour against the challenges in life, she is resolved to build self-confidence and instill a positive mindset in her students.

Hence, her mantra for the students is "Believe in yourself – you can do it!"

One of the ways that Lai Kwan uplifts students' self-image is to use positive reinforcement and to celebrate small successes. In "Catch You Doing Right", a montage of photos featuring students exhibiting the school values is shown during assembly. These students are photographed in the act without their knowledge, to reinforce the message that they should behave well all the time, not just when they think someone is watching. And in what has been affectionately dubbed "Mrs See's Commendation Award" (Lai Kwan's students address her as Mrs See) that is given out every term, Lai Kwan gives away prizes to one student from every class who has shown improvement in effort or conduct. She gets the teachers to write a short



*During a Learning Journey to Arab Street, Lai Kwan and her staff sampled different foods and learnt more about Singapore's vibrant multi-ethnic cultures.*

testimony on each awardee, and this is read out as the student comes on stage to receive the award. "For those who may not stand a chance to be recognised for academic excellence or to receive the Star Pupil Award, I want to acknowledge that they can be good role-models too and give them a chance to be affirmed publicly."

Lai Kwan keeps a pink box full of stationery in her office. With a twinkle in her eye, she shares that her challenge to her students is to be invited to her office "for the pink box instead of the cane". She is balanced in her approach towards nurturing students – she encourages them with words of affirmation and giving of rewards, but also reprimands and disciplines when necessary.

### **EVERY CHILD HAS THE POTENTIAL TO SUCCEED**

Coming into contact with students who need additional support early in her education career has been instrumental in shaping Lai Kwan's nurturing attitude towards her students. Her first class as a beginning teacher was a Primary 8 Extended<sup>1</sup> class. The challenges were great but

<sup>1</sup> In the 1980s, students in the Extended and Monolingual courses could complete their primary education in eight years instead of the usual six years for the Normal course.

the satisfaction she found was greater. Her hard work bore fruit when her students passed the Primary School Leaving Examination and one even qualified for a Special Assistance Plan (SAP) school. This experience cemented her belief that every child has the potential to succeed with the right environment and right support. It is also why she constantly exhorts her teachers to believe in the students, to use positive words to edify the children, and to guard against turning their own fears into self-fulfilling prophecies.

And how far would Lai Kwan go for her students? "I have one son at home, but I have one thousand children in school. In any decision I have to make, I ask myself: 'If it were my son, what would I do?'" This is the very motivation behind the structures and programmes in place for the students in Bendemeer Primary. For instance, because many of them would probably not get a chance to learn music, all students learn to play the keyboard in Primary 1 and 2, the xylophone in Primary 3 and 4, and the guitar in Primary 5 and 6. And before the Student Care Centre was set up in the school this year, many of the teachers voluntarily stayed back after school to coach students who have little or no supervision at home.

Clearly, Lai Kwan has her teachers on board with a common purpose: "What we want for our own children, nephews or nieces, we try to provide for our children in school."

Lai Kwan looks forward to seeing the happy faces of the children each day and is heartened to see the leaps in their self-confidence and the progress they have made. In the drawing of an adorable teddy bear by a boy with anger management issues, in the girl who calls her "my favourite family member", and in the simple but earnest words that tumbled out of a grateful parent's mouth, "感恩" (*Gan En*, which means heartfelt gratitude), Lai Kwan finds great encouragement to labour on.

### **"THE SCHOOL HALL IS MY BIG CLASSROOM!"**

One can see that Lai Kwan really enjoys engaging her students. Being around children makes her happy and from the look on the students' faces as they interact with her, it is clear that the feeling is mutual. Lai Kwan is truly a teacher at heart and makes learning a multi-sensory experience for both the students as well as the teachers.

Knowing that most of her students are visual and kinesthetic learners, Lai



*As an incentive for good behaviour, deserving students get to enjoy an afternoon in the Games Room that is equipped with a foosball table, board games, and a Nintendo Wii video game console.*



*The school's Concert Band was invited to perform at the National Day Observance Ceremony in the Ministry of Law. Lai Kwan is heartened by opportunities like this that boost her students' self-esteem.*



*Lai Kwan engages in many bonding activities with her staff, such as this Cook Off session.*



*Lai Kwan is grateful for the support she receives from her team of dedicated colleagues and her Vice Principals.*



*Lai Kwan works closely with the school's Parent Support Group to create a positive school experience for the students.*



*Lai Kwan encourages her teachers to believe in the students and help them to achieve their fullest potential.*

Kwan often uses props and analogies to hit home her message. During one assembly, she invited students to a game of bowling on stage to teach them the importance of focus and determination in achieving one's goals. Another time, she invited an underperforming boy into her office, put a Hot Wheels car in front of him and taught the fascinated child about finding the key to ignite the engine (motivation), fuelling the car (effort), and staying the course to reach the destination (determination and goal-setting).

Lai Kwan adopts the same approach for her teachers to encourage them and to change mindsets. In her first year in Bendemeer Primary, she came to hear about a boy who asked for permission to bring home the Yan Yan biscuit sticks given by his teacher because he wanted to share them with his sibling who had never tasted it. That year during a staff meeting, Lai Kwan gave every teacher a box of Yan Yan biscuit sticks to remind them of the manifold needs of the students and to re-ignite their passion for teaching. To inspire their belief in the students, she gave them magic trick sets to illustrate how perception can influence behavior and judgement, and told them that

nothing is impossible. And when the school recorded an improvement in the PSLE results, Lai Kwan gave all the teachers an apple each to enjoy the fruit of their labour.

When asked what kind of leader she is, Lai Kwan smiled and said, "I see myself as a teacher leader. I was a teacher first, and I'm now here to lead and inspire my teachers."

### **STRENGTHENED BY THE STORM**

A humble heart is the wellspring of infinite growth. Lai Kwan's leadership journey has not been without challenges, but her willingness to learn and openness to feedback have earned the respect and trust of the people she leads. She spoke candidly about the "storming period" in the beginning of her journey as school leader as well as the lessons she learnt.

After ten years as teacher and Head of Department for Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Clementi Town Primary, Lai Kwan became Vice Principal in St. Michael's School and joined the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP) two years later. She was posted to Bendemeer Primary as Vice Principal after the LEP and took

over as Principal at the end of 2008.

As a new Principal then, she "moved too fast", "did not communicate enough" and "micro-managed" her teachers. She planned the deployment of staff, vetted all examination papers, scrutinised Schemes of Work, observed every teacher in lesson and re-observed those whose lessons were less than satisfactory. While she thought that she was improving the work processes in school when she created structures and set standards, she did not know that she had inadvertently created stress among the staff. It did not help that both Lai Kwan and her Vice Principal were both new to the job then, and that she had a new team of key personnel during the transition.

Her awakening took place when the results of the School Climate Survey came with a jolt. She reflected on her approach and realised that although she had devoted so much of herself, it was all a one-way communication. Lai Kwan overcame her disappointment, resolved to do better, and the rest is history. Today, Lai Kwan jokes that her teachers know what she wants to say before she says it. There is strong camaraderie amongst the staff as the school strives to create a collegial,



*Lai Kwan, her husband and their 15-year-old son enjoy travelling and spending time together.*



*Lai Kwan encourages her students with words of affirmation and the giving of rewards, but also reprimands and disciplines when necessary.*

caring and supportive working environment.

Over the years, Lai Kwan has learnt to appreciate every member of her staff as a uniquely important source of knowledge, experience and wisdom. She now empowers her teachers to be responsible and accountable for leadership in his or her own area, and supports and strengthens them with the right resources. Another enduring lesson she took away was the importance of communication. “Now, I make it a point to share my thinking, open up conversations, and close the loop after I take action.” She meets her teachers for a one-to-one dialogue session every year and seeks feedback through regular focus group discussions.

Because leadership is not about rhetoric but about action, Lai Kwan acts on genuine concerns and implements feasible suggestions. For instance, the teachers in Bendemeer Primary now look forward to mealtimes in the school canteen after the menu and quality of food were enhanced, and eagerly await the once-a-term ‘Connect Time’ where the usual weekly Staff Contact Time makes way for bonding over food. To reinforce the importance of work-life balance, Michael Bubl  s *Home* is played over the school’s public announcement system at 5.15 p.m. every day to remind teachers to “go home and

spend time with their family”. She also limits phone calls and emails to her teachers during school holidays so that they get their “undisturbed, well-deserved break”.

### **AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE**

As the interview drew to a close, Lai Kwan was invited to share the one thing that had really made a difference in her leadership journey. “I wouldn’t be able to do what I’m doing today if not for the people who had faith in me and supported me. Their belief in me had in turn inspired my belief in others.” Her conviction was on her face, and one could not be more convinced.

Lai Kwan is thankful that she has learnt a lot from the guidance of all the senior teachers and Principals whom she has met. In particular, she says she owes a debt of gratitude to her mentors to whom she can always turn for good counsel - Mr Peter Tan from Anglo-Chinese School (Barker Road), and Mr Thomas Koh from St. Stephen’s School; to her Principals in the schools she had served who taught her how to lead with a firm hand but caring heart – Mr Jumaat Masdawood and Mrs Jean Sng during the time she was in Clementi Town Primary, and Ms Wee Siew Sun when she was first appointed as Vice Principal in St. Michael’s School; to her cluster Superintendents (past and present) whose guidance and

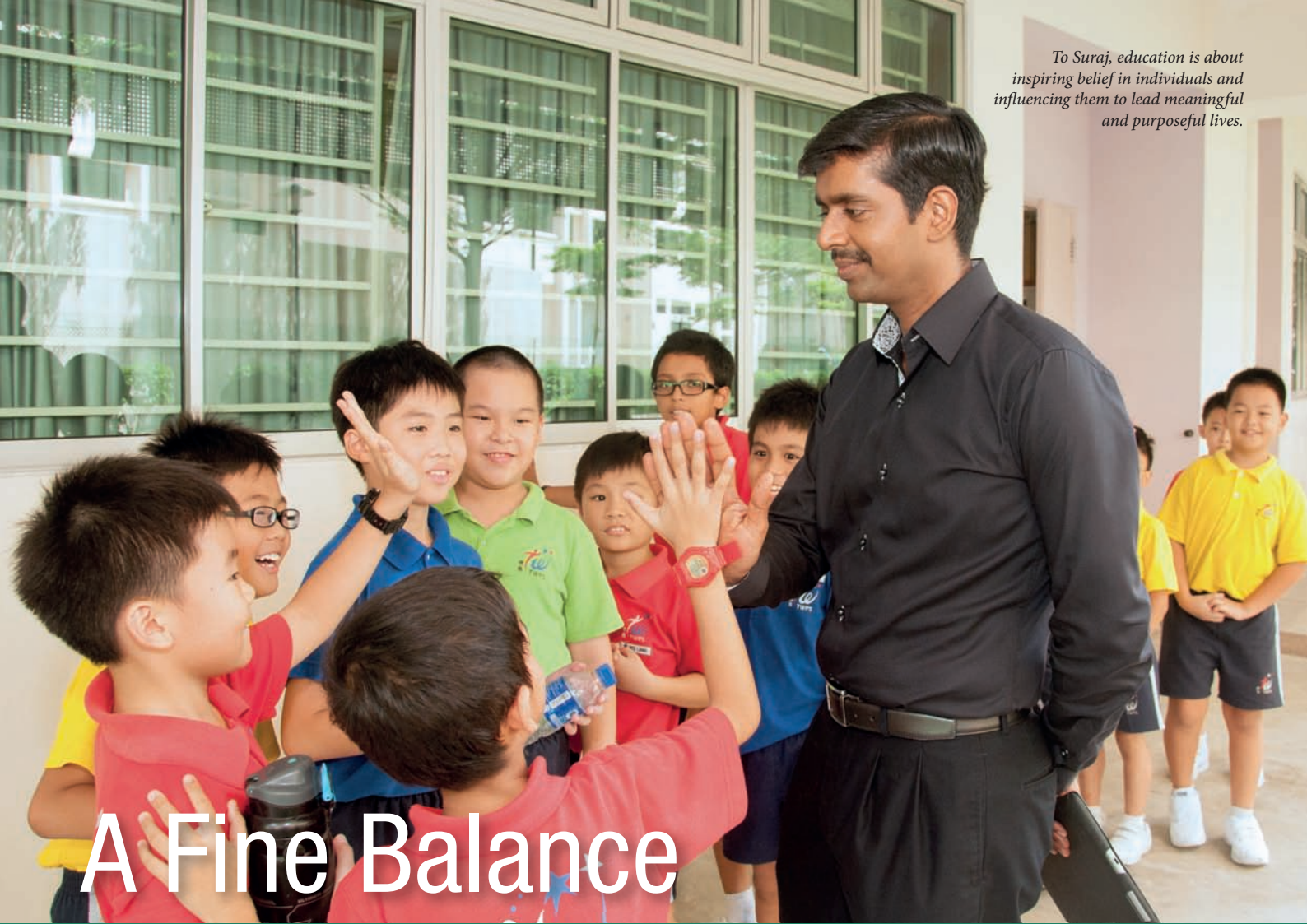
encouragement had empowered her – Mrs Lim Thian Loke, Mdm Tan Yen Fong, and Mr Ong Kong Hong; to her colleagues in her cluster and her classmates in the LEP in whom she found friendship, support and solidarity. And most of all, to Mrs Lee Lee Kien, her then teacher in National Junior College and now Principal of Yuhua Primary, for her belief in her.

Lai Kwan is also very grateful to the support which she receives from her team of dedicated colleagues and her Vice Principals in Bendemeer Primary and counts herself “blessed” to have the support and encouragement from her family.

As Lai Kwan elaborates on how each person has helped her, coached her and spurred her on as she grew in her leadership journey, it becomes clear that the kind of leader she is today is shaped by her experiences with the leaders she has encountered. Lai Kwan’s story in Bendemeer Primary School demonstrates that the support one Principal receives can indeed bless an entire school community.

A leader must aspire to inspire. Teng Lai Kwan is truly inspirational in the way she is completely human – undeniably imperfect yet infinitely capable of making a difference.

To Suraj, education is about inspiring belief in individuals and influencing them to lead meaningful and purposeful lives.



# A Fine Balance

*Suraj Nair Venugopal*

*18 months into his role as Principal of Teck Whye Primary School, Suraj Nair has earned the respect of his school community for being clear in direction, caring in conduct, and steadfast in action. PRINCIPIA caught up with this recipient of the APS Prize in Leadership Learning for graduands of the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP) in 2012 and he shares how he has grown in his leadership journey and how he is leading Teck Whye Primary on the path of change.*

**You were Vice Principal in Teck Whye Primary for three months before taking over as Principal. How did that help in your transition?**

It was a very important phase for me because it gave me time to understand the school, its journey so far and some of the challenges we face. I'm grateful that my predecessor, Mdm Ng Puey Koon, took pains not to colour my lenses and presented her own views objectively. That gave me the space to draw my own conclusions about the school. I was also able to immediately put into practice some of the things I had learnt in LEP. For instance, Bolman

and Deal's (2003) Four Frame Model was useful in helping me to understand the school's culture and how it was being shaped by its people and social architecture.

**As a new Principal, what did you go about doing?**

One of the first things I did was to initiate one-to-one conversations with my teachers and support staff. I wanted to get to know them better, to hear their dreams for the school, their personal aspirations, and the joys and challenges they face in their work. These conversations are a regular feature now. From the feedback I have received, I think they

appreciate the time I set aside for them. As a way to gear the school to move, I began a Whole-school Conversation about the values that should anchor our students and the work we do, the kind of student outcomes we desire, and how teaching and learning should be like in the school. This was during the time when the Singapore National Conversation was in progress and it turned out to be very fruitful. We articulated a set of student outcomes and synced that with the core values we felt were vital. For instance, we desire to nurture Confident Communicators who engage others with Respect; and even as we



*Suraj enjoyed bonding with his colleagues over staff games activities when he was in Beacon Primary.*

develop our students to be Adaptive Leaders, we want them to be able to collaborate with Integrity. This set of student outcomes and values is very important because it provides guidance to my staff in the process of change.

### **What are some of the changes you have introduced and how do you manage the process of change?**

It's a fine balance that you want to strike. While I'm mindful not to introduce too many changes too quickly, we shouldn't also lose opportunities that can have a significant impact on the students' development and learning. So I try to build on existing strengths, pace the changes carefully, and help my teachers appreciate that the changes are a natural progression towards the outcomes we want for our students. For instance, when I came in, discussions for PERI upgrading were underway and I saw an opportunity to leverage the Flexible School Infrastructure (FlexSI) provisions to develop a niche area for our school. Teck Whye Primary has strengths in media and technology – people still remember the dancing robots during the school's opening ceremony in 2002 – and I thought we could revitalise this area. We then applied and received approval for a Media and Production Studio. Then came the chance to apply for Distinctive Programmes in Applied

Learning (ALP) and Learning for Life (LLP). Again, those were great opportunities to level up our students and strengthen our school identity. Our ALP is "Media Whiz Kids!" to prepare our students to use media and technology to communicate confidently, effectively and responsibly. Our LLP is "I Lead I Serve", to nurture our students to be Adaptive Leaders and Model Citizens who will apply their learning in the service of others. These are all aligned to our desired outcomes for the students.

### **You are not a stranger to change, having been involved in the conceptualisation of Beacon Primary School in the FutureSchools@Singapore Project and having served as its Vice Principal. How was the process of change different between Beacon Primary and Teck Whye Primary?**

In Beacon Primary, we began on a fairly clean slate. There were no precedents, no examples to follow. While there were broad guidelines, we had significant latitude to grow our desired culture and practices. The challenge then was to provide clarity to the staff in the face of ambiguity. Being a new school with a new concept, we also had to manage and align different expectations and views. For instance, a teacher who wanted to join us initially thought that we will be using very advanced

technology seen perhaps in movies like *The Matrix*. We had to temper her expectations. On the other hand, in an established school like Teck Whye Primary, when changes happen, it is natural that there might be some anxiety because people have to unlearn and re-learn. So it is important to ease people into the process, and pace the changes so that they don't overwhelm. In both cases, it pays to pay attention to the people. Ultimately, we are about developing people, not using them as mere means to an end.

Suraj strikes one as a balanced leader and calculated risk taker. He has vision and strategy, pushes for change but protects aspects of culture, values and strengths worth preserving. He is clear about the goals he wants to achieve, tolerant of ambiguity, and able to gauge the impact of change on people and tailor his leadership strategies accordingly. And he understands and values people. It is refreshing how this Accountancy graduate and IT-savvy man can be both task-oriented and people-focused.

### **You come across as level-headed and practical. What is your approach to leading people?**

I guess it has to do with the role I see myself play as a leader. To me, leadership is about being, not becoming. We live out leadership in



our daily routines. In my reflection during the LEP, I shared that leaders, in some way, can be likened to grease i.e. a lubricant – they are enablers. Grease is not glamorous, but it enables machine parts to run smoothly and protects them even under extreme conditions. Leaders serve others, and I have a responsibility to develop and care for my staff as they contribute to the school – it's a two-way exchange of value.

Suraj's approach to leadership is largely shaped by his beliefs and the values instilled in him from young. Growing up, he had watched his mother hold two jobs during tough times and yet wake up at 4 a.m. every day to clean the house and ensure things were in order before she left for work. His father was a patient man, taught him 'handyman' skills and gave him independence and "space to grow". Through his parents' examples, Suraj learnt the values of respect, discipline, and service to others. From a young age, he helped around the house. "It was

a natural thing to do – I needed to contribute so as to help my parents and I continue to do that in my home even today."

A strong believer in the principles of ethical leadership, Suraj is aware that his position of authority in the school could inevitably put some pressure on his staff to comply and just do what he wants, so he consciously measures his words and gives them space to reflect and come to their own decisions. To send the message that everyone's contribution matters and to show solidarity with his staff, Suraj sometimes takes on tasks that few expect a Principal to do. He has even been mistaken as the school's operations staff because he occasionally directs traffic or mans the school gate to ensure that the students cross the road safely. The value of giving back to the community also underpins the decisions he makes about school programmes. "Whatever we acquire and learn cannot just serve ourselves; they have to be put to far better use."

His respect for people and his high regard for fairness and honesty strongly influence the way he conducts himself and leads others. Once, over a misunderstanding, a student's parent turned offensively impolite to one of his teachers and even undermined Suraj's own integrity and professionalism. Suraj reasoned with him patiently but firmly, and in no uncertain terms, told this parent that his behaviour was unacceptable. The parent eventually offered his heartfelt apology to the teacher involved, who felt so appreciative that she wrote to Suraj, thanking him for his support to her.

Suraj was called into leadership early in his education career. In his second year as teacher in Fuhua Primary, he was asked to head the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) department. After six years in Fuhua Primary, he joined the Educational Technology Division in MOE, and soon after was roped into the FutureSchools@Singapore Project Committee. Suraj was involved in the conceptualisation



*Suraj desires to nurture CHAMPs in Teck Whye Primary - Confident communicators, Healthy individuals, Adaptive leaders, Model citizens and Passionate learners.*



*Suraj has earned the respect of his school community for being clear in direction, caring in conduct, and steadfast in action.*



*Suraj believes that the school should be a place that stimulates and nurtures students' imagination and intellectual curiosity.*



*Suraj initiated a Whole-school Conversation to get his teachers to reflect upon the type of student outcomes they desire.*



*Suraj and his syndicate members in the LEP went on a study trip to New York City and Washington DC.*



*Suraj believes in the principles of ethical leadership – he respects and serves others, is fair and honest, and builds community.*



*Suraj, his wife and their 12-year-old son make time for meals, movies, and their routine jog on Saturday mornings.*

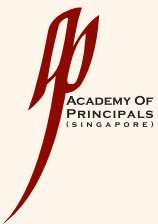
of the then newly proposed Beacon Primary School and later served as one of its pioneering Vice Principals. Subsequently, he pursued his Masters in Educational Research in Scotland, did a short stint in the Curriculum Policy Office at MOE, participated in the LEP, and was posted to Teck Whye Primary as Vice Principal before taking over as Principal in December 2012.

### **What are some of the most enduring leadership lessons you have gained over the years?**

I have had many peers, mentors and superiors from whom I learnt invaluable lessons in my time in the schools and MOE HQ. In my time in the schools, my then Principal in Fuhua Primary, Mrs Mary Lim (now retired), taught me a lot about engaging people and winning hearts and minds. From Ms Lim Boon Cheng, Principal of Beacon Primary, one of the key things I learnt was the importance of seeing things from the learners' perspective. So when I have to make decisions, even seemingly simple ones, for instance, on pupils' seating, I sit where they sit and try to understand how they see the world from their level. When I started out as a leader I was very task oriented. Over the years I have come to better appreciate that the human dimension is as critical, if not more so, if you want to achieve and sustain success. As a young Head of Department then I had some bad habits – when my teachers came to see me when I was busy, I could appear distracted when they were talking to me. Now, when my staff come to see me, I remember to lower my laptop screen and clear my table to signal that they have my full attention. Over time, I have also found it helpful to get regular feedback on my leadership.

To Suraj, education is about inspiring belief in individuals, influencing them to lead meaningful and purposeful lives not just for themselves, but for the people around them. His priorities in Teck Whye Primary are to develop good character in the students, and strengthen teaching and learning so as to find better ways to reach out to every learner.

It is early days yet in his leadership journey, but Suraj Nair, with his character and calibre, is poised to nurture our young to shape the future.



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Photography by William Chew

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Comments and suggestions are most welcome

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ISSN 1793-4699



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