

REFLECTIONS



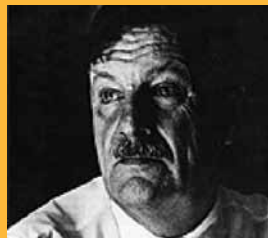
CAREER SHIFTS

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President's Message



Most of us do not come into the Education Service with our eyes fixed on the goal of being a school principal. In fact, I am one of these. Many of us would have started out just wanting to teach (and I believe, still want to teach as much as when we first started.)

The principals in this issue have in common their sidelong paths to school leadership. Phuat Chuan left a sparkling career as the Deputy Chief with the SAF, when he heard that MOE was “looking for leaders”; Fuziah, intent upon resuming classroom teaching after a 20-year stint as TV producer with the former ETD (Education Technologies Department), found herself redirected toward running a school; and Yu Kee who, as a freshly-minted PSC scholar/Stanford grad on a solid engineering track, had his mind, heart and career path transformed by a serendipitous outdoor adventure with a group of teenaged students. Even our Past Voices principal, Francis Thomas, came to lead St Andrew’s following an idealistic career in Singapore politics.

In common, these leaders share, with the rest of us, a passion for impacting the hearts and minds of young people especially as we can see so clearly the potential for good or ill that lies in the choices the young people make. Like them, I think we too, wish to give that next generation their chance of leaving a worthy legacy, and so renewing our common world.

May this publication, coming in the middle of the school year, remind you once again of our common and great enterprise to make a difference among the students and teachers we lead.

Chan Poh Meng

President of Academy of Principals (Singapore)

Past Voices: Francis Thomas - Engaged Principal, Reflective Writer



“...I have been a teacher, a prisoner, a minister and a principal. I look forward hopefully for a more interesting future in a world which to me is full of hope.”

Communication is a school leader's quintessential skill. When the Principal speaks – during assembly, at staff meetings, with parents or when out in the community, there is a tacit expectation that their words will be clear and effective. Meeting those expectations can be intimidating, especially for those newly appointed. But with time and practice, most learn to relax and grow to fully enjoy their role as communicators.

Yet when combing through a school's memorabilia for the voices of past leaders, one discovers that those few principals who have put pen to paper usually have limited themselves to expected themes: the accomplishments of hardworking students; the selfless dedication of teachers; the patience and support of parents; exhorting yearbook readers to keep their eye on the prize and their hearts filled with the school values.

The fact remains that it is unusual to find school leaders who have had the inclination (and taken the time) to write and share their own reflections on what being a principal has meant to them. Francis Thomas is an exception. Tucked away in a corner display at Woodsville House, the building which has served as residence for the Headmaster of St Andrew's School (SAS) since it was built in 1940, sits a copy of *Memories of a Migrant*, Thomas' autobiography written and published in 1971.

Francis Thomas became Principal of SAS in 1962, five short years after returning to teaching. He had left the profession in 1955 to enter politics and served as a member of Singapore's Labour Front coalition government elected in the same year.

St Andrew's, counted among Singapore's top grade schools for nearly a century,

was founded in 1862 by the Anglican missionary, Revd Edward Sherman Venn. The first decade was marked by financial difficulties and cramped facilities, but the school gradually began to prosper after becoming a grant-in-aid institution and receiving from the Government a 4-acre parcel of land fronting on Stamford Road, where SAS remained for the next 65 years.

Then in 1940, under the farsighted leadership of Headmaster Revd Reginald Keith Sorby Adams, SAS relocated to Woodsville Estate near the village of Potong Pasir, where the school has continued to grow and flourish ever since.

The Saints – how the alumni and students of SAS refer to themselves – hold Francis Thomas in high regard, both as an educator and humanist. The community work that Thomas and his wife spearheaded has

become a part of the culture of St Andrew's and indeed of Singapore. His leadership inspired a generation of students and teachers who remember their Principal with respect and affection.

What follow are a few extracts from Memories that centre on Thomas' years as both a teacher and later, a principal.

"During 1958 I always assumed that when my job in the Labour Front government ended, I should go back to teaching at the School. There was a possibility I might still be wanted in politics; there was a possibility a new government might punish me for being in politics by refusing my re-appointment. But these seemed quite unlikely. I felt no need to compromise my political decisions because of anxieties about my future.

Nevertheless, when I got back into school, adjustment was difficult. Working rhythms were quite different. Instead of living in an atmosphere of urgent crisis, the timetable brought back the same class in the same room for the same syllabus day after day. It was necessary to slow down and to treat students in quite a different way from politicians. I had been accustomed while sitting in the Legislative Assembly to fit the various members around me into their appropriate slots in classroom categories; the bright little boy whose hand is always first up; the able plodder; the future prefect; the troublemaker; the boy who never does his homework; the boy who will cheat if given the chance. The same categories still applied when I got back in front of the class, but now I had to try to see their needs and troubles and understand how to help them. One does not in that way look at a fellow politician to see how to help him.

I was shocked early in 1959 by a failure to adjust in the way I ought. A troubled little boy irritated me by insisting that he must go to the toilet when I had told him to wait for the bell due to ring in a minute or two. It was not a genuine toilet need on his side nor genuine discipline on mine. It was a confrontation between two neurotic personalities. Seeing that he had disturbed me, he left his seat and faced me in front of the class with his request.

A blind fury seized me. I took him by the

neck with both hands and gave him one shake. I was on the edge of smashing him against the wall. I weigh two hundred pounds, and if I had, I might well have cracked his skull and ended his life and my teaching career.

This was one of very few occasions when I have truly lost my temper with a student. It showed me what a dangerous devil was hidden in me. Ever since I have watched myself carefully so as not to let my devil off his chain again."

At the end of 1962 Francis Thomas was selected to succeed Principal Tan Lye Whatt who had reached retirement age.

"In working as Principal I have never forgotten a boy in 1947 who was found to have the first signs of leprosy. I connived with his family to get him overseas to where the best treatment was said to be available. For a few days we kept him in isolation in a spare room. They must have been hard days for him; he felt no guarantee of cure.

One afternoon when I dropped in to visit him in his isolation, he said to me: "I'm glad I have had some education. A least I will be able to try to do something for the other lepers".

For a boy like that, education had truly been a dynamic process of personal freedom, thinking for himself, reasoning things out and not depending on authorities. He was ready to be fully aware of the world around him, and to mix his life with it in decision-making service. Personal disaster could not crush in him this unconquerable human spirit.

With this example in mind, I have always tried to fit opportunities for decision-making service into our school structure. The first major effort started in a small way soon after my marriage. My wife saw an old man digging up plants near our house in the school compound. She found he was too poor to go to a doctor and was seeking herbs to heal his bad legs. She took him back to the house and gave him dressing and treatment, and told him to come back for her to change the dressings.

He came back with others, who in turn brought others until she had a kind of daily outpatients clinic going in our garage. Some

time later, a group of students undertook to start a free clinic inside the Potong Pasir vegetable farms area. We borrowed the wayang shed of the small local temple, got the voluntary help of a trained nurse, bought some supplies and collected student volunteers, including girls from our Pre University class.

It was striking to discover how remote Potong Pasir was from the life of the school. In distance our wayang shed was a long quarter of a mile away; culturally it might have been a thousand miles. For months after we first went in children would come running to see me with shouts of: "Ang Moh, Ang Moh", as if I was a circus elephant or giraffe. A few showed hostility; once they threw dried pig shit at me, but missed.

The gap was on both sides. When our girls first went to help, some came dressed in high heels and party frocks. It was moving to see them pick their way through the muddy paths and over ditches, and kneel down on the plank floor of the shed to wash and dress the foul sores on the legs of old people, or the infected boil covered with tarlike medicine on the head of a baby. They had not known people lived like this in Singapore. Now that they knew they did all they could to help.

Work like this cannot do much to give people a better life; it reaches only the edge of the problem. But it is immensely valuable by narrowing the gap of culture and education and privilege. Students year after year have carried on this kind of work from the School's Social Work Group. Their experience will remain as part of the background of their lives and will affect their decisions thirty, forty or fifty years from now.

Our Social Work Group students had an unforeseen task in the Christmas holidays of 1954/55, when the Kallang River flooded badly. Potong Pasir is the river's flood plain, and as the sun was setting we saw the waters rising steadily to the roofs of the plank and attap huts. Distant voices were calling for help, but there was no help in sight. With some difficulty we borrowed a lorry from a saw mill. We got two volunteers from the Chinese boatmen in the Kallang Swamp area, and put their sampans onto the lorry. All through the night these two heroes plied to and fro over the flood

waters, carrying women and children to the edge of the school compound, where our students met them and brought them up to the school.

It was a massive exercise, in which we had no experience, no plan and no ready resources. Everything had to be improvised. At first we were very short of helpers. My wife worked hour after hour trying to deal with people who needed medical attention, dry clothes and something hot to drink. When at last she came downstairs, not to rest but to deal with another part of the work, she fainted in the corridor.

Gradually order developed out of chaos. Supplies and helpers came in. The floods went down, and the refugees went home. The rains came again, and the refugees came back. At the peak we had more than 900 sleeping in the School, and we were the rations centre for several thousand.

Since then we have had similar floods regularly. The last was in 1969, when we had 460 refugees. Nowadays it is simple work. Everyone has experience, both helpers and helped. The government is better organised for this kind of emergency.

We can cope with several hundred refugees without my having to give the work more than a few minutes of my time. Our students are fully competent for most of the decision-making needed.

An odd incident during the 1955 flood work was that I got an official letter warning me about corrupt practices prior to elections. I was sufficiently a political figure for this work to be seen by opponents as a vote-catching exercise. I replied that they must not be silly, and heard no more about it. A prosecution for corrupt practices would really have been a vote-catcher for us in the circumstances of that time."

Their Principal's care and responsive action encouraged students to become active citizens, independently, while placing the school at the heart of the community.

"An important point about the work of our students through their Social Work Group is that as far as possible they take their own decisions without depending on guidance from higher authority. The free clinic became unnecessary when a government clinic was put up near enough for local poor residents to use. Now the

students run a free food scheme for poor families - more than 100 currently - raising the money themselves and doing their own organisation.

I was rather distressed recently when we had to introduce a scheme by which students have their extra-curricular activities like these recorded and are given marks for them. This is supposed to be an incentive. In particular, they can use these ECA marks in place of an academic subject for entry to Pre University classes. This is not the spirit in which students started and maintained this work over so many years. But probably the scheme has made little difference and there is no need to worry about it, except insofar as it demands more clerical work of an uninspiring kind.

My main job is to provide the business management infrastructure which will release the capacities of staff and students. It has been remarkable how rapidly and competently quite young teachers have taken over major duties and carried them out much better than I could have done. Full delegation is the obvious basis for efficiency in our situation.

"When I sit at my desk, I have on my right an open door onto our road, so that I can see - and unfortunately hear - every person or vehicle that comes into the grounds or goes out. Anyone who wants can enter by this door. In front I have an open door to our general office, and beyond that, to the office of our Senior Assistants, whom I can see from my desk. To my left a third door is open to the corridor, and beyond that to our Staff Room.

These open doors have a positive use by making me as visible and accessible as possible to everyone and anyone. They also have a negative use by protecting me against anonymous accusations, which any teacher or principal has to allow for. When an ill-wisher wrote to the Ministry of Education to accuse me of having sexual fun in my office, it was obvious without investigation that he did not know what he was talking about. Any activity like that would become a popular exhibition, drawing large crowds.

Being accessible seems to me a basic policy in my job. I was very pleased and complimented when two boys once came to me because they were worried about spots on the penis; or more recently when boys came to my house to borrow neckties for a party. (The spots were nothing serious; if they had been, accessibility would have been all the more important). Amongst those who use my open doors are very small boys from our Primary School, which shares our main buildings. It is important to some of them to call out "Good morning, sir" as they pass; or to stop for a friendly word, or just to stare at me. A few will come in to chat for a minute. At least some of these have problems at home, perhaps a missing or troublesome father; they may see in me a father-figure.

Accessibility takes a great deal of time. I first realised this in 1964, when I made a minute-by-minute record of everything I did in my office during the long morning shift from 7.15 a.m. to 1.15 p.m. I made this record in March 1964, and thereafter in March of each year until last year. In 1969 we also made similar records in May of everything done during a whole day by myself and both the Senior Assistants."



The danger of delegation is loss of co-ordination. We guard against this by a Planning Committee of department heads, for which the basic Agenda is a report by each on what his department is doing. After that, the Committee deals with matters of common interest. These meetings provide for mutual criticism and self-criticism. With a very low ratio of staff to students, time must not be wasted on too frequent meetings, but the Planning Committee has a valuable place for the future. I should like it developed further to carry greater decision-making responsibility.

We have recently tried to carry this principle of delegation into the student life by setting up a Student Councils scheme. Each class elects its own committee, and the chairman of each Class Committee sits on the Student Council for his age group; Lower Secondary, Upper Secondary and Pre University. We hope the Councils will develop more self-discipline, self-reliance and initiative among the students. It is too early to say, but the first signs are that this is what is happening. They confirm my belief that Singapore has huge stocks of unused talent and capacity, and that the shortage of local leadership is artificially created by unfavourable institutional structure."

A deep sense of social responsibility and compassion for the downtrodden guided Francis Thomas. From the individual plights he witnessed, Thomas drew important lessons about society at large.

"Some time in the late 1940s or early 1950s the attendants went on strike at Woodbridge Hospital, and I was among those who volunteered to help out with mental patients. I was assigned a large, quiet ward

which we entered through a heavy barred door. I spent the night sitting in the orderly room, or walking round the beds. I read through most of a pile of patient dossiers which were lying on my table.

The case history of one patient has always remained in my memory as a kind of guiding insight into the problems of the new Singapore. This man had a humble job, by which he supported a wife and two children. His wife became sick and their savings were exhausted in medical costs. Then he lost his job. Then his wife died. He remained unemployed, falling into greater poverty. Then one child died, and soon after, the other. Crushed by this series of blows, he fell into a kind of stupor. He sat at the front of the slum house where he had lived, until at last he was taken away by the police and warded at Woodbridge.

I went out several times into the ward to see this man. He had an end bed next to the wall. Throughout the night he lay quite still, with his face to the wall. As far as I could see he never moved even a finger or an eyelid during the whole night. Only his ribs rose and fell with heavy breaths.

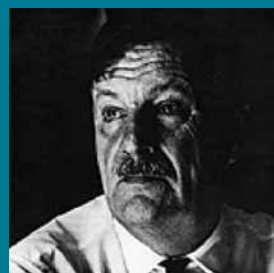
I have never forgotten this man, nor tried to forget him. His world was blind and deaf to his needs, and now he was blind and deaf to the world. As a Principal, I have tried not to be blind or deaf to the needs of those in the school. It is not enough to have a good scheme of work and development, to have the majority well looked after. There must be time and care for the weakest and most lost."

The challenge presented by children with "deep personality problems" led Thomas to join the Singapore Children's Society seeking to draw on psychologists' knowledge

and skills. Fortuitously, he was later asked by St Andrew's Cathedral to help set up a Welfare Council. As a result he was able to establish a valuable new service.

"...we were able to set up our Schools Counselling Service. This is similar to the work of the Children's Society in employing professional social workers to help children with their difficulties but our staff work direct to specific schools. This seems to me a much better plan, because the case worker has continuing contacts with the principals, staff and students. Through discussion of problems, they are able to make some impact on how the school is run. And they are easily available to staff when a problem is identified... .. If anything is the high point in my life, the establishment of our Schools Counselling Service is it. We have identified a new kind of need and we have been able to do something to meet it. It is an insecure achievement as we are currently near to bankruptcy. To survive we must make exceptional fund-raising efforts at a time when the fundraising market is over saturated. But the Aided system is always in something like that position. One grows hardened to the threat of financial weakness. One learns to go on in faith, sure that if one does what is right and necessary, in the end the good purpose will survive.

Work of this kind has to be fitted into whatever spare time and capacity can be found for it in days already well filled. I have given an idea of how a day may be filled. A different kind of pressure comes from the government's very vigorous development of policies of all kinds. Some of these are excellent and meet real needs. But they all mean some diversion of effort into new channels and some subordination of the life of the school to centralised planning."



"I am near the end of my work as Principal. Quite soon someone else will sit at this desk and deal in his way with the eternal problems that make the interest and pain of a teacher's life. It will be a very big task."

All extracts taken from "Memories of a Migrant" by Francis Thomas, University Education Press (1972)

Fuziah Taha: The Creative Touch

There's a lovely French expression, *sentir bien dans sa peau* – literally, to feel well in one's skin – which denotes a person who is happy with who she is. It is a quality apparent in Miss Fuziah bte Mohamad Taha, Principal of Fuhua Primary School. Her ease spreads comfort to those around her. She moves lightly through her school's corridors, cheerfully exchanging eye contact and greetings with staff and students alike.

Towards the end of her first stint as a principal, Fuziah was hoping her next posting could be somewhere a bit closer to her home on the East Coast. "I asked Ministry to post me east for my last tour of duty. Well, they sent me east," Fuziah recounts wryly. "To Jurong East! I joke with my friends that I got what I had wished for." As it turns out, the cross-island commute from her home in Changi to her office in Fuhua PS has proven to be a blessing in disguise. The drive provides a precious chance for quiet reflection in the otherwise demand-filled workday that is a school principal's lot: "I do a lot of that while driving," Fuziah observes,

"thinking about what I'm doing, what I can do more of, what I shouldn't be doing so much of..."

A CIRCUITOUS PATH

Fuziah came back to work in the school system following a lengthy stint with Ministry HQ. Despite her long hiatus, she quickly attained the steady, relaxed manner of a well-seasoned principal. Fuziah has come by such confidence rightly. The 'teacher gene' is abundantly expressed in her family: both her parents and all five of her siblings, plus another 9 members of her extended family either are or have been teachers, a fact celebrated many times by the Ministry of Education (MOE). Local newspapers have likewise featured hers as the family with "enough teachers... to start their own school." Her personal values, along with the belief she has in people, especially children, were shaped overwhelmingly by her family and are now at the service of her school and its community.

Today, the school is abuzz with activity and anticipation. As part of Singapore



For the Earth Day 2008 project, all the children used recycled paper to cut out the shape of their hands and then wrote their pledge on each. Fuhua's 'hands-on' project was uploaded onto the International Earth Day website, making Fuhua PS the only primary school that year to receive such a recognition.

International Water Week (SIWW), Fuhua PS agreed to play host to a special event. Teams of students from primary schools across the nation have come to display their entries in the H2O Project competition. Ms Grace Fu, Senior Minister of State for Information, Communication & the Arts, and Environment & Water Resources, is about to arrive to admire the students' efforts and present the awards.

Fuziah feels justly proud of Fuhua's environmental education programme, emerging now as a niche strength for the school. The constructed wetland is an outstanding hands-on learning lab where children can observe and measure the effects of natural filtration on acidified rainwater. If you accept a drink of bottled water while visiting Fuziah's office, your eventually discarded plastic container will likely be fashioned into an attractive vase for plants from their mini-greenhouse. Fuziah models her personal care for the environment with conviction.

Environmental projects are quite popular with children; the notion of saving our



After the H2O Projects awards, Fuhua's Primary 5 students S Dhanabalan and Marcus Loo proudly demonstrate the reduction of acidity level through natural filtration process to curious visitors.

beautiful planet is intuitively appealing to them. "Our librarian is very good at this," Fuziah remarks. "She works with the children and parent volunteers to come up with a project theme for each year's Earth Day." Their 'We've Got the Whole World in Our Hands' project garnered so much praise and attention that it was put up on the official International Earth Day website.

PHOTO AMBASSADORS

Eight-year-olds may not yet have the verbal skills to articulate their ideas and feelings about the environment, but they are clearly able to convey their message through more visual means. Looking to build on this natural interest and creativity, Fuziah hatched a plan whereby a group of children would use photography to express their environmental awareness and produce an exhibition. "I called the project 'Through Our Eyes'," she says, beaming. "Ten children would become our photo ambassadors for saving nature."

Canon Singapore Pte. Ltd. accepted an invitation to support the project, providing camera equipment and printing, with Fuhua Pr co-paying for a hired trainer. Fuziah handpicked 10 Primary Two students to participate. "I didn't simply choose our top pupils; I selected those who I felt had an eye for beauty – I interviewed them personally, asking how they felt about nature; what sorts of things they enjoyed looking at; and where they would most like to go for holidays."

Eight weeks later, amazed by the results, Fuziah picked the best photo taken by each



"When I came out from HQ and became a vice-principal and two years later a principal, the textbook the children were using included my name on the acknowledgment page: the children were so excited!"

child and sent them along to Canon to print for the exhibition. "After viewing the 10 selects, they asked their bosses to come down to see what all the excitement was about. Hearing that these photos had been taken by 8-year-olds from Fuhua Primary, Canon decided to provide complete funding for the training. "We'll be happy to pay for the whole project!" They were amazed at what the children could achieve."

STUDENTS TO STUDIOS

Fuziah's road to school leadership has certainly been a unique one. Although a college-trained art teacher, she began by teaching English language and literature. In her third year in teaching, she attended a script-writing course for educational television with ETV, a branch of the Ministry of Education. By then she had been appearing on national television with

her own art and craft segment in various television programmes for women and children. When ETV, later known as Singapore Educational Media Service, invited her to join them, without hesitation Fuziah accepted the posting, pleased with the prospect of a short stint working in MOE HQ.

Starting as a research assistant, Fuziah soon became an Associate Producer, Producer, Senior Producer, and then Senior Media Specialist with the Department of Educational Technology in the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS), when it was established as a division of MOE. Before she knew it, twenty years had elapsed. By then, in addition to being involved in the development of curriculum material for schools, she had gone overseas for courses and to present papers at international conferences.

Eager for fresh challenges, Fuziah felt a calling to return to teaching, to developing new skills and innovative ideas in a classroom setting. Her superiors at MOE, however, had a somewhat different take on her optimal career path.

"They said I was too senior to go back to being a teacher. I would have to run a school... a primary school." Puzzled,



"I want to be with the children." Fuziah admits, her own eyes lighting up. "Children are adorable, the little ones especially. They aren't afraid of the principal the way we used to be so afraid of our principals. They come down from the school bus and one waves at me and I wave, the next one comes and gives me a high-five and everybody after that will do the same. They're not afraid, they're so lovely."



"It's been quite a journey," Fuziah says, reflecting. "At CDIS, producing television programmes and such, the focus was the product. It was all related to the curriculum, but I couldn't see the impact of my work. Here, it's about the process. I can see the impact: the smile on a child's face, their eyes lighting up; I can connect with parents who come to see me about their children. Of course, I get less sleep now than when I was with HQ; I start work a lot earlier and end a lot later, but I don't feel tired. I still have the energy to go home and work on my computer – or at the weekends, I can squeeze some time for community work, welfare work; and it's just so fulfilling because you can see and literally feel the impact of your work."



Fuziah reminded them she had taught only briefly, and never in a primary school. "Nonetheless, my supervisors clearly believed in me; and because of that I felt I could do it. I didn't want to let them down." Indeed, their implicit faith in her ability resonated with the core values of her philosophy as an educator. Fuziah holds that believing in someone's ability is the critical enabler of learning and achievement. After a 9-month Diploma in Education Administration course and a stint as VP, Fuziah was appointed Principal of North View Primary School.

TEACHER GENES

"At first, I wasn't sure about the time I would need to adjust – because I had not been in a primary school at all. But I had very good role models: I had my father who was a principal; but of course he was no longer around when I left HQ in 1996. My father passed away in '94, but I'd grown up hearing about leadership. I saw what he was doing."

Role model may be an understatement. From childhood Fuziah was virtually steeped in the teaching profession. She was born in Wilkinson Rd in a MOE-provided house – a perk enjoyed if both parents were teachers. Her mother, Madam Marhamah Haji Arshad, who at age 14 had begun teaching at Geylang Malay Primary School, specialized in lower primary and taught all subjects in Malay. Teachers in those days were permitted to bring their own pre-school children into the classroom. Job-

shadowing one's mother at age 4 may seem precocious, but the profession's values were instilled. "Back then, in the late 50s, I don't think they had a common curriculum or common textbooks in vernacular schools," Fuziah explains. "It was all up to the teachers. I remember my mother would prepare and resource each lesson herself. She was really a 'sage on stage', rather than the 'guide on the side' approach we favour nowadays."

Her father, the late Mr Muhamad Taha Kasim,

a well-known and respected member of the Malay community, had a defining influence on Fuziah. Education was at the top of his priorities and he encouraged his children to continue along the same path. "He was a very strict disciplinarian, but non-violent. He did not believe in corporal punishment. He would never raise his voice, but used the silent treatment," recalls Fuziah, with a wistful smile. "In fact, he made me enter teaching, in the sense that he got my sister to get the form and fill it out for me. All I had to do was sign it!"

"She often brought me to visit," Fuziah recalls, "and I could sit at the back of the class and watch her teach – she was very good at it!" Fuziah was impressed by her mother's expectation of neatness in everything from penmanship to dress. Pupils came dressed in baju kurung, their long sleeves not rolled up, but precisely measured, folded, and meticulously pressed to precisely the same width on both sides. "She was so exacting! I think today they would say it's a bit too fastidious; like, 'What does it matter?' But, actually, I think it matters. Discipline matters. You know, if character is in place, if discipline is in place, everything else will fall in place. If you don't have to struggle with discipline, children can learn better."



Fuziah's mother Madam Marhamah Haji Arshad, with her Lower Primary class. "I dress up for you when I come to school," she told her pupils. "I hope you will do the same for me!"



Fuziah with Mr Sng Chern Wei, Deputy Director of Schools (West) discussing images with two of Fuhua's 'Photo Ambassadors'. The Through Our Eyes exhibition was part of "ShInE@Fuhua", the annual event showcasing the creative projects by the children working with Information Technology (IT), the school's niche strengths.



"These days we are too busy. When they start school children are expected to have basic literacy and numeracy. I don't think it should be that way – a 'requirement' – because not all children come in with the same level of math ability. If those skills are there... it's a bonus; perhaps we can stretch them, provide different activities to do; but it should not be an expectation for the others. They could be late bloomers. They could be children with no home support; children who come from dysfunctional homes. We should help them from scratch. They deserve an equal chance in school. We mustn't have expectations that say, "Oh, if you don't have it, you're going to be left behind."

COMMUNITY BOUND

Her father's career as a principal was cut tragically short at age 53 due to a stroke he had suffered a few days after having slipped while gathering rocks to beautify his school's garden. While recovering, he set about compensating for his right-side paralysis by teaching himself to write left-handed. He would turn on the radio and copy down recipes, an ideal pace for him to write. "Every day when we visited him in hospital," Fuziah recalls, "he would have a new recipe for us. The first few were illegible, of course, but we didn't want to tell him; but he got better and better, and by the time he was well enough to come home he could write with both right and left hand. That's the kind of man he was." Unable to resume his post, he took early retirement, boarded a ship to Mecca for his Haj, and came back with much of his mobility amazingly regained. "That was when he told us that he was living on borrowed time." Mr Taha began visiting people in hospital, those who had no family, bringing biscuits, fruit and companionship. He joined the Muslim Missionary Society and, in time, became its Vice-President, dedicating the balance of his life to community work, helping the poor and needy. "He was very kind and very generous, generous to a fault. He put the interests of other people ahead of his own health. My father was a wonderful man."

Even from his deathbed, father continued guiding his daughter. "He pressed some money into my hand, saying 'Go and buy

yourself some books.' The money is still in my wallet, in a special compartment. I couldn't bring myself to spend it when he died the next morning. I've never taken it out."

INTERWOVEN STRANDS

It was two years after her father's death that Fuziah left HQ to rejoin the school system. Inspired by his charitable spirit and active commitment to the community, Fuziah again followed his lead. "I decided not to wait until I retire to do that kind of work, but rather to contribute now while I can."

Through extensive involvement with the community surrounding Fuhua Primary, Fuziah has gained valuable insight while forging stronger links between the school and the community she serves. "I get to know the people in the neighbourhood which helps me see what more I can do as



"We are a very close-knit family. We grew up loving Singapore. We all gather at my place to watch the National Day Parade together and then go out to enjoy the fireworks. With so many teachers in the family, when we get together the children hear nothing but education and school. That's all we talk about!"



a principal for the families of the children who are in my school."

Ignited by her compassion for the underprivileged, Fuziah works tirelessly to level the playing field wherever she can. However she is clear-eyed about the social forces which often underlie distressing symptoms such as child absenteeism. The nature of the problem is usually deeper than the merely financial. "It's a question of priorities," she reckons. "There's a lot of support we can give if the family will agree to just meet with us and talk to us and let us help. We can give the students free books, free uniforms, even free shoes, food coupons, transport bursary, everything is provided. Literally the parents just have to bring the child through the school gate. But there are still a few families that we can't seem to reach..." Though such problems are not widespread – in a school of 2000 there are only a handful – they remain a struggle for Fuziah and her team. "I know I'm being idealistic to expect that it should be a perfect world, but for me, something like that, even one child out of school is one too many."

The school offers a vibrant School Family Education (SFE) programme (funded by MCYS, the Ministry of Community and Youth Services) with workshops for parents, teachers and pupils; the same cozy space is repurposed for 'latchkey children', those morning session children whose afternoons would otherwise be unsupervised at home. "I invite them to stay on in school," explains Fuziah. "Parent volunteers and the school counsellor help out, supervising homework, ensuring they get rest hour, then play a bit of football or learn craft-making."



"I try to make up for what I can't do in some areas, by contributing where I can make a difference. It has become a personal challenge: I must make a difference in whatever way I can. If I can't help everyone, I can help the few. If I can't help the children here, I can help the children somewhere else. As long as the problem exists, I feel a responsibility; even though I know we've done our best..."

PLANTING NARRATIVE SEEDS

It comes as no surprise that Fuziah has introduced programmes in dramatic arts and TV production to Fuhua, seeking to foster one more niche strength for her school. She has adapted the storytelling skills she mastered with ETD to her position as school leader.

"Do you know I can remember every teacher who has ever taught me? From P1 on; every teacher and principal I had. If I can remember and value every one, each must have enriched me in ways that I appreciate, and remember them for." By drawing on her own narrative, Fuziah exhorts her teachers to emulate that kind of impact. "They've heard me say it many times. 'Every child must leave me better than when he or she came to me' – a very simple concept, a promise to themselves about making a positive difference in children's lives." Each child will become better for having had me in his life."

Fuziah's message to the children is quite similar and simple. "I'm like a broken record," she admits, "but I say it over and over so that they will remember it well: 'Don't compete with other people. Just compete with yourself. If today you can be a better person than you were yesterday, then tomorrow you can be a better person than you are today – and you keep getting better and better. But if you try to compete with someone else, you may never be as good as that person. Then you will always feel like you have failed.' The children will nod their heads and you see their eyes sparkle, because all the time they're been told to compete with their cousin, their brother, their sister, their neighbour... 'Why can't you be like so-and-so?' But you don't

have to be like so-and-so. You just have to be better than yourself before."

Prior to becoming a principal, Fuziah had free time to enjoy her many interests: cooking, gardening, sewing her own clothes, craftwork, knitting and crochet. "I still have all those things in my cupboard – just no time; but the passion remains." Despite her time deficit, those elements which are so much a part of Fuziah inevitably find expression, spilling over into her various roles as leader, educator and community activist.

On top of her committee meetings on Saturdays at Darul Ihsan Orphanage, Fuziah spends Sunday mornings with children, helping them build up their confidence. "I work with a group of the older girls. For the first half, we do what I call 'Stand and Deliver' – public speaking skills – getting them to come out of their shell, to express opinions on social events, current affairs,

what's developing around them. The second half is artwork – self-expression. While painting they often talk about colours and about their feelings. With one particular piece they had to blow the paints to create lines and they started linking what they saw to their lives... and tears began to roll."

THE HOME STRETCH

Creativity and self-confidence are as natural to Fuziah as breathing; and something about her low-key approach encourages creativity in others. "I just want to show that it's not so difficult, not beyond them. It's a matter of experimenting and trying out. I think if we all believe we can do it, we can. It's just a matter of confidence. I never learned hair styling, but I can cut hair. I used to cut all my nieces' hair. Nobody believes me but I also cut my own hair unless I need to go to the hairdresser for a perm. When I sew, I don't use patterns – just a tape measure and scissors. I measure my body, I cut and I sew. I believe it will fit; and I can sew. Most people can't because they say they don't know how to. But I'm sure if they try, they will get better and better at it."

In 2012 Fuziah will have completed 40 years in the service. "When I retire I won't be looking at another career. I will just be looking at the full list of things I wanted to do and never had time for; and the list gets longer every year." While it's not difficult imagining Fuziah's day filled with such projects, it's hard to imagine her not maintaining her involvement with the community. Either way, Fuziah will remain *bien dans sa peau.*

Wishing to feature 'principals with talent', MOE invited Fuziah and three others to each create an artwork to put on show at a Principal's Appointment Ceremony 2009. Using flowers to represent beauty in diversity of children flourishing through learning together, she produced the second piece of batik painting she had ever done. Fuziah has shared her rediscovered enjoyment by teaching the technique to her girls at the orphanage. "But it's not about learning the skill of batik painting; with them it's always about how it helps them grow as a person, about building their confidence that they can do it."



Phua Huat Chuan: Leading to a Purpose

Meeting Phua Huat Chuan, a school principal whose previous career took him to the rank of Deputy Chief of the Guards, Singapore's elite infantry, one can hardly resist asking how the two experiences compare. Indeed, it is a question that has stayed with Huat Chuan throughout his leadership transition from an army context to an academic one. Could he successfully apply his military values, philosophy and beliefs to the task of leading a school?

"I had a fantastic first career; I wanted an equally fantastic second career. Through my 26 years in the military I was a person driven by purpose and values.

I felt my leadership experience would surely be applicable to leading a school." Strong though his hunch was that it would be a good fit,

he was not about to rely on gut instinct alone. Instead, he preferred to apply the principles derived from his military training before making any definitive evaluation. As with any undertaking, first he needed to reach a clear understanding of the purpose of the organisation he was joining. During his training with NIE and then as a vice-principal, Huat Chuan did plenty of reflecting about the purpose of schools and education in the context of Singapore. He reached the conclusion that leading schools was indeed the fantastic career he was looking for – largely because of one key commonality. "In both cases we are serving the nation. One, the military, is about today; schools are about serving the nation for tomorrow. Since I could provide leadership for today, I could do it for tomorrow."

MOTIVATION AND RESPECT

In finding common purpose between the military and the academic, Huat Chuan was also following valuable career transition advice offered by a good friend: to look in areas where he could put some of his existing skills to use, rather than starting from scratch. He found that he could immediately tap on two aspects of leadership, skills with which he was quite familiar: motivation and respect. "The first thing people told me in schools was, 'You cannot shout at students. You have to motivate them!' I took comfort from this because the same holds true in the army." Huat Chuan had learned early on that shouting and anger never value-add to a situation. To meet such a high challenge soldiers must feel motivated, not intimidated. "That's how ordinary people do extraordinary things," he adds, citing as an example the Guards' tsunami relief operation in Aceh, Indonesia, of which

CLARITY OF PURPOSE

"In any operation, first I need to know the purpose behind what I am doing. Then I need to know what the field looks like; and then I determine the key areas where I must pay attention. This is from my training. Before you derive a plan, you need to know all the factors in your theatre of operation: know the terrain, the people, the dynamics on the battlefield, the intelligence; and you need to know yourself. Then, at each phase of the operation, as the Commander, you must be at the place of influence."



Huat Chuan was Deputy Commander. "We were a group of ordinary soldiers; but from the simple things that we did – and we did them well – it was deemed an extraordinary effort."

Respect was the other key principle Huat Chuan could carry over. "In the military we practice respect as part of our daily life. As leaders we will go right down to the ground to really be present, to help our troops at the right place and time. Likewise in the school context: it is important that I mean what I say and I do what I mean; to be seen as a sincere person. That's how I earn respect." Huat Chuan makes it a point to be available to his students. He makes time to walk around to the classrooms. During recess, he takes a break from his office to go sit with students in the canteen, if only for a chit-chat. "It only takes 5 or 10 minutes. It is quite important that they feel my presence. Whenever they are out there performing in the community, the students know that Mr Phua will come." He extends the same availability and respect to his teachers. "I try to keep my desk clear and uncluttered. When a teacher comes I'll put everything aside. I owe it to them to listen rather than being distracted while the person is there. Giving time to our people is basic; and it reflects the first of our SPICE values: sincerity."

HELPFUL HANDS

When he arrived at the Ministry of Education (MOE) Huat Chuan immediately felt welcome and supported. His first posting as VP of Nan Hua High was under Principal Dr Foo Suan Fong. "I am very thankful to many people. Dr Foo, in particular, gave me a lot of leeway

to develop myself. It's like he had opened the whole school to me. And Mrs Ng Ai Lin, my first Superintendent, she also encouraged me to interface with people in the school by contributing from my strengths as a starting point."

Stepping into Broadrick Secondary School as its newly-appointed principal, the first thing Huat Chuan noticed was the motto: Ready to Serve. "My Guards motto is Ready to Strike," he points out. "I see things like mottos and mission statements as expressing what matters most – the values, beliefs and philosophy of an organisation. I wanted first to find out whether my Broadrick teaching staff believed in their school's Vision and Mission. If many were unable to string together the relevant words, then it clearly showed that deployment was an issue."

TEAM BELIEVER

"A lot of people say, 'What the Principal says goes,' but I refrain from that. I am capable of taking a lot of my decisions here in this office. But I don't; I take them in the conference room – with my Key Personnel; big decisions and small. I share the leadership. What I decide in here, I carry; something I decide in there, everybody carries... which is more powerful. I feel the school can progress if I have the time to build a community of leaders."



I never believed in 'hero-leader'; I believe in team. The military taught me that I cannot do it alone. One person cannot take a machine gun and overcome an adversary. You are always with your team. Your team helps you; you protect your team."

Knowing that beliefs shape what we see, Huat Chuan is always mindful of the pitfall of having a Mission statement that merely hangs on the foyer wall. "I was quite clear that our Mission needed to enter every sphere of our students' and teachers' lives. It must be deployed... to give us a common purpose."

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Huat Chuan knew that the successful deployment of the school's Mission would entail a strategic plan. After sizing up the people and the terrain, he called on an old companion: a military tactic known as the two-pronged, staggered simultaneous attack! "There was a lot of noise being generated by my NT students (Normal Technical) – behaviour and discipline problems. I felt I had to tackle that head on. I also wanted the Express students to deliver results – both academically and through their CCAs." As for the terrain, Huat Chuan already knew the ground around Broadrick quite well because he had previously been Commander of Guillemard Camp, 500 metres down the road, and he used to go for his run around the estate. "I was well aware of the long-standing image problem the school had with the neighbourhood. I needed to connect with the community at large to show that Broadrick was different now."

During a community function held in the school's auditorium, Phua buttonholed the area's Member of Parliament (MP), Mr Lim



“Our Mission? To mould achievers with strength of character. When I talked to our Management Committee, their first question was ‘Are you only looking after achievers?’ I replied that our underlying philosophy is to receive each person, student and staff, as achievers in their own right. There may have been blockages along the way, but potentially, all are achievers. Our job is to bring out the achievers in them.”

Biow Chuan, to pitch a proposal where students would become actively engaged with Singapore’s history by focusing on a fading neighbourhood treasure, Fort Tanjong Katong. The MP had for some time been eager to see an interpretative programme developed about the historic fort and, seeing a common interest, he was able to provide funding for the school’s project. The upshot was twofold: Timeless Treasures, an impressive book telling the story of Fort Tanjong Katong, produced by a team of Sec 4 students with guidance from one of the Singapore History Museum curators; as well as an associated History Trail around Tanjong Katong area designed by the school, creating a relevant, enriching way for Secondary 1 students to connect the nation’s history to their environs.

ROOTS TO ACHIEVEMENT

In considering how best to engender the school’s Mission in his NT students, Huat Chuan posed a provocative question to his HOD: Could they devise a programme whereby, for their first 3 months at Broadrick, instead of coming to the classroom, the NT students would have the context for their learning shifted to places beyond the school walls? Huat Chuan

Think big – do small.

“Whenever teachers or my leaders come to me with something big, we will discuss the idea and make it even bigger. Thinking big broadens perspective of an issue; it makes you consider the long term view of things, the direction, hence what really matters. Only then do I say ‘OK, now let’s do that one small thing that matters, and do it well. Then it will naturally grow and gravitate towards the bigger direction that you want.’

I knew I had to move Broadrick, the whole school; but as I looked at the big picture, I focused on that small but important thing to sort out first. Once I brought the NT student ‘noise level’ down, I could do the next small thing. We are a small country and in order for us to survive, we have to do small. But don’t do the peripheral things. Do the main thing, small but important.”



figured that, between their lacklustre PSLE scores and the reprimands they probably got from parents/teachers for their poor performance, his NT students already hated being in class. Perhaps if the starting point of their secondary education was away from the classroom and the negative connotations it held for them, their natural interest and curiosity would be stimulated and engaged, and later transferred back into a classroom setting.” Adhering to Huat Chuan’s ‘think big, act small’ principle, they agreed to try out this ambitious learning journey idea on a smaller more manageable scale – one day a week.

This programme for NT students has taken root, quite literally in some instances, as Phua explains. “Last year, the NT Secondary 1 classes visited a local farm and the owner

was so taken with them that he volunteered to help the students build a spice garden here at the school. As a Community Involvement/Service Learning Project the same group recently visited a post-tsunami orphanage in Phuket, Thailand, and helped plant a spice garden.”

These same students have likewise shared their new-found talent for floral arrangement, a skill they acquired with assistance from an instructor Huat Chuan hired, looking to build on the interest students had shown during one of their learning journeys. Seeing substantial progress, Huat Chuan invested in formal recognition for their achievement by enrolling them in a national level floral design competition. “Before the winners were announced I watched them fidget,

“By engaging our NT students, we are educating them. These hands on activities are about working hard, about the value of practice, about giving them positive habits of life. The learning journey process opens up and broadens their minds, building up their confidence. By acknowledging and celebrating their successes – that’s the form – we help improve their self-belief and get them to be interested in their own future. Substance, the academic achievement, will follow.”



FORM AND SUBSTANCE BUILD SELF-BELIEF

“When you deploy the Mission and Vision, some of the milestones will be to achieve awards. One teacher asked me, ‘Should we try to get the National Education (NE) award?’ I told him, ‘I don’t need the NE award. But what I do need is a very good NE Programme. Get me that.’ When you focus on the programme and you implement it well, the awards will come. But conversely, when we have achieved the substance, I must pay attention to the form. The moment we achieve something we must gun for the award. We must get the recognition for what we have done. Why? Because it builds self-belief.”



hopeful of getting a prize. They never imagined they would be named champions! Now, for our Speech Day and Teachers Day, these NT students do all the floral arrangements.”

EXPRESS MOTIVATION

Huat Chuan sought to motivate his Express students in several ways. His efforts to connect with students from each level cohort quickly transformed into twice yearly dialogue sessions. “It started off with me wanting to find out from them what they want for the school,” Huat Chuan recalls, “but later it became a two way thing. I tell them what I think. They tell me what they want me to know.”

During his second year with the school, Huat Chuan’s team implemented an Achiever Programme which included talks, especially by former Broadricians like the well-known motivational speaker, Christian Chua. After this initial success, the teachers carried the idea forward, arranging weekly talks by former students who now come to share with students about their lives and careers. “In telling their stories, each and every one of them will motivate our students. I tell the graduating class to remember to come back and talk to future students at Broadrick. This will become a tradition, a part of the school’s culture.”

CCAS DEVELOP CHARACTER

Cultivating passion is another strongly held value which informs Huat Chuan’s take on school leadership. “When a person is pursuing something that is their strength or their passionate interest, they become very self-directed. So it is worthwhile to identify our students’ passions and to build on them. It’s not easy to imbue passion in students and teachers. But I’m very happy every time I can. Within my area of responsibility, I try to let my people do that one thing they feel they must do.”

“The rigour of a CCA is really about moulding character. The student experiences success, failure, hard work, and how practice makes perfect; plus their teachers talking with them about determination, perseverance, etc. All this develops strength of character.



We have to make sure that we put in place long term/short term plans, in terms of substance, and by way of form, to celebrate all achievements, big and small. Students feel good when they can shake my hand and have everybody clap

for them. To me that’s a very important thing: a string of positive experiences over a period of time builds self-confidence and self-belief.”

Nothing in Huat Chuan’s six months of Officer Cadet training could have prepared the nineteen-year-old for the onslaught awaiting him as he stepped from Mumbai’s terminal. “Such a mass of people, taxi drivers all grabbing at my bags... it went through my mind that I’d flown from heaven to hell.” Huat Chuan’s initial culture shock soon subsided as he immersed himself in studies, at India’s National Defence Academy in



Pune (Poona) where he earned his Bachelor of Science, then a year of full time military training with the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, in the Lower Himalayas. “At first, India was quite traumatic for me; but I’m very thankful for the experience: it gave me a second reference point, quite different from Singapore. That alternative perspective helped me to become a person who asks why, who questions convention rather than one who simply accepts the organisational mindset.”

“I remember clearly when the Academy Commandant, a 3-star general, spoke personally about leadership and about being a professional. It set me to thinking about myself as a leader. To that point, I had thought of myself as just an average student; never as someone who could lead men onto the battlefield. So that was when it dawned on me that I was beginning a leadership journey. That particular lecture gave me the motivation to endure the training, which was quite tough, and competitive.”



“My military colleagues used to say that I’m the quiet kind of leader who doesn’t order you around to do things; but somehow, you have a lot to do. In developing people I give them a lot of responsibility, a lot of challenges. Whoever is with me will have to work hard. But I don’t demand any work. I convince you – in fact, you convince yourself. So when I have to make a decision, and we agree on the issue, but it’s a matter of whether to do it my style or your style, my decision is always: your style. You carry it. So my approach is: ‘Do it your way. I will support you.’ I’m not fixated. I tell my people my preference is not important. Getting the job done is important.”



Huat Chuan recounts how he put one teacher, a running enthusiast, in charge of the cross-country CCA despite having enrolled only six students. “What she said really lit up my face. ‘No problem, Mr Phua. I will make sure they enjoy running.’ And from 6 runners now they have 40 runners, in the span of less than 2 years. From nowhere, the ‘C-boys’ came in 6th National – and cross-country is a crowded field dominated by the top schools. She had told them not to worry about their times; just enjoy the run. But near competition time, she set some timing goals. For such a team, to reach 6th at National level, is an achievement, one born out of passion.”

A hidden passion to lead

As Huat Chuan’s own story illustrates, passion arises from experience. He joined the army because of his financial circumstances, not out of any sense of patriotism. When he was finishing National Service, three of his five siblings had a place

in the university. Huat Chuan reckoned his father, a taxi driver, could ill afford the added fees, so he applied for scholarships. The army was first to approve. “I didn’t love the country then,” he freely admits, “but I grew to love the country. I’ve become very passionate about doing something for my country. It need not be anything big; I just need to do something small, and do it very well. That’s my contribution. That’s why I believe in building passion.”

As 2010 and his third year with Broadrick SS were drawing to a close, Huat Chuan began to prepare for his next iteration of school leadership. Another transition; another opportunity to reflect, not so much on matters of commonality and fit, about which Huat Chuan feels very positive, but on his own development as a leader.

Huat Chuan approaches this self-evaluation process with much the same level-headed discernment that he used to add value to the community at Broadrick. “I haven’t come

to leadership with any academic grounding in leadership theories. That remains my challenge. I come as a practitioner who is trying to distil the theories and concepts, hoping that will ensure future success. I wish I had a set of leadership theories that I could just use.” Huat Chuan may feel a lack of a solid theoretical foundation but it does not detract from his self-belief.

“It is very important that I believe in what I say so that my action, my interpretation and my communication come across naturally. I never insist that my idea be followed. Yet in many situations I sort of win, because I keep quiet and listen to what’s happening. I think that’s what I have learned. It’s quite important to know when to say, and what to say. There is both a science and an art of leadership. The science part you can go read up, study and learn. But the art you need to cultivate. That part gets better with age, I suppose... like wine. I’m still undergoing this process.”

Huat Chuan points at some photos he keeps on his office wall. “These are my three kids: my son – the eldest – has taught me a lot. He’s intellectually disabled; massively blocked. He has been unable to learn skills like balance, or walking; things most children learn naturally just through play. There’s something wrong with his psycho-motor processing. But I’m very proud of him. He’s a national swimmer in the disabled community. He has represented Singapore competitively. Even as an intellectually disabled person, he can achieve. Therein lies the idea behind this philosophy: that everybody can achieve. I’m thankful; I’m humbled by having him as my son. I mean he’s not easy



to deal with – very challenging; but I understand human nature much better. I’ve learned a lot by having him as my son.

So you can imagine, if I have a son like that, I see my NT students as being so fortunate! They have all the abilities that my son doesn’t have! I tend to be very patient with them, with any student for that matter, because of my son. If I can be patient with him, I can be patient with anyone.”

Lim Yu Kee: Striking a Balance

Lim Yu Kee was one of last year’s winners of the APS Book Prize, an acknowledgment of his outstanding performance in the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP). Principia caught up with Yu Kee at Bedok Green Secondary School where he is currently the Vice Principal.

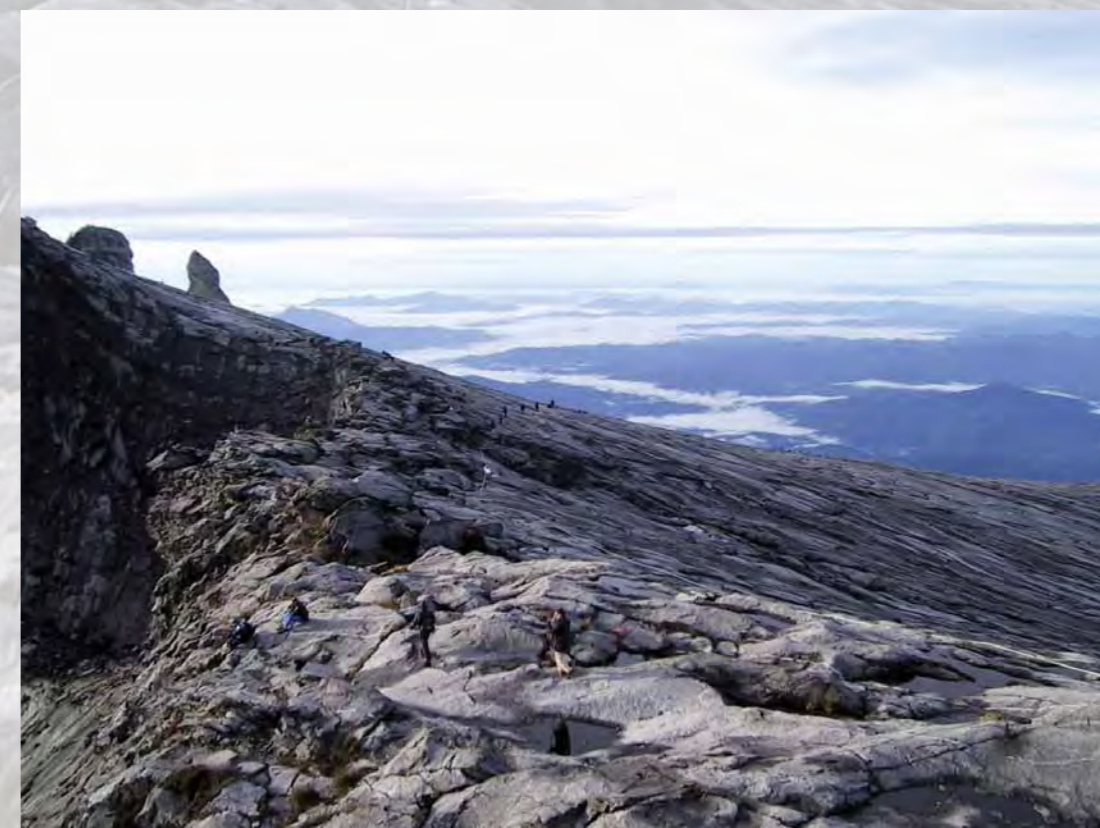
From his early school days, Yu Kee seemed destined to become an engineer. His facility for math and physics was second nature. On the strength of his excellent grades, Yu Kee had had no difficulty obtaining an open scholarship from Singapore’s Public Service Commission (PSC) to study overseas. Yet during his four years in California, first at University of California, Berkeley and then Stanford, the subjects that really excited him were not so much those linked to his major in electronics but electives like Greek & Celtic Mythology and Chinese History. This experience of being pulled in seemingly opposite directions has followed Yu Kee like a constant companion. On his journey to school leadership he has striven to balance those divergent forces.

CLAMBERING TO TEACH

The realization that he would actually rather teach than pursue a career in engineering came to Yu Kee while climbing to the summit of Mt Kinabalu. Having considered teaching as a possible career option, at the start of serving his bond with the public service, he indicated ‘education’ as a placement choice, although he was finally posted to the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA). Before the actual posting, though, Yu Kee accepted an invitation to

help guide a group of 20 young teens on a major outdoor adventure. “It was my first interaction with students – I’d never done any teaching. I discovered I was good at communicating with this group of 14-year-olds and I enjoyed motivating them to push themselves. They all made it to the top and I felt proud. I realised that teaching was something I would want to do.”

The expedition evoked for Yu Kee his own early years as a student at Raffles Institution where Leong Chee Mun, his Outdoor Activities Club CCA teacher,



made a lasting impact. Mr. Leong gave students the freedom and responsibility to plan their own camps and overseas activities, offering guidance from the side. "I think that transformed me – the way he interacted with us and treated us as independent young adults. He was the first to show me that there's more to being a teacher than standing up there and running through notes." This teacher's unorthodox approach may have planted the seed which germinated a decade later, drawing Yu Kee into the teaching profession.

Indeed, Yu Kee puts a lot down to the inspiring role models provided by the enthusiastic and passionate teachers he was fortunate enough to have had through his own school years: genuine, personable professionals who clearly loved to teach. In fact, he was surprised to discover that the creative, fun activities that he enjoyed in school – like figuring out how to drop an egg from a certain height without it cracking – were far from typical classroom experiences. "Back then such experiments were totally revolutionary. Without such models of progressive, enthusiastic teachers, becoming a teacher and trying to think out of the box would have been a struggle for me."

SCHOLAR SERVING HIS BOND

After training with NIE, Yu Kee began teaching physics and math at Anderson Secondary School followed by a two-year

stint with the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports as part of the dual career programme he was under. Yu Kee then happily returned to classroom teaching, this time with Fuhua Secondary School. But he was faced with an added expectation: that he move onto a leadership track, initially by assuming Head of Department (HOD) responsibilities, a role with which he was not entirely comfortable. "To be honest I struggled with being the HOD of People Welfare. I just wanted to teach and to spend as much time as possible interacting with my students. But now I couldn't; I had to do planning, and guide, counsel, mentor and coach the teachers."

Only in his second year as HOD did Yu Kee begin to appreciate that education is not just about focusing on one's students, but that it also involved working with and through the teachers. Energy invested to 'set the culture', to foster camaraderie, to build a family of teachers united by their passion for their work would ultimately benefit students – albeit through less direct methods. "I finally began resolving that question and felt that I would handle my third year as HOD much better."

ONE-WAY TICKET

Of course, no sooner had he struck this balance than his principal informed Yu Kee that he was being appointed as a VP the next year. "I said 'What? I have barely resolved this HOD issue!' I realised

that once they perceive that you are in your comfort zone, they push you out of it. It's good for your professional growth, I suppose. But for me, personally, I was only just starting to get comfortable."

STEPPING BACK TO LEAP FORWARD

When the call came inviting him to participate in the LEP, Yu Kee once again felt torn between opposing forces. The prospect of a reinvigorating intellectual retreat was certainly attractive; but due to a number of coinciding leadership transitions at his school he felt duty-bound to stick around and help provide continuity. His new principal, observing that Yu Kee had already been getting others involved with operational matters, felt they could now manage. She told him to seize the LEP opportunity.

And seize it he did. Yu Kee found the LEP exceeded his expectations: the outstanding wealth of ideas and experiences brought by both the lecturers and his fellow participants; the bouncing of ideas with other school leaders, opening up, sharing and comparing; and the chance to finally catch up on all those must-read articles, reading that pushed his thinking in new and different directions.

Refreshing in-depth discussions during the Values & Ethics module led Yu Kee to rethink his reasons for being an educator and to re-examine his core assumptions and beliefs. "We are always facing hard choices in school: dealing with a disruptive student, for instance. From a utilitarian perspective, the choice of action might seem obvious; but what about the rights of that student? Are there special needs? Are family problems a factor? How are we to be fair to this person, giving him the education he deserves, while still respecting the rights of others to a classroom free from disruption? Exploring these questions concerning ethics in education provided us with a fascinating exposure. LEP gave us a blend of theoretical grounding with fundamental questioning of values and principles."

The curriculum module gave Yu Kee a forum for sharing his concerns on other issues to do with science education. True to form, he was troubled by a tendency

"Regarding this issue about a school leader's interaction with students – if you want to be a principal who steps out into the school, walks around, meets with students, counsels them, that's your choice. If you want to be one of those Principals or VPs who sits in the office all day long, doing paperwork, again, it's a matter of choice. I came to teaching because of the students. If I want to take over a class, to stand at the gate and greet students, that's up to me. I still want to interact with students, to help them, guide them. And now that extends to teachers..."



he had come to observe: a dichotomy between teaching the discoveries of science and the processes of science. "For many teachers, it's easy to do the first, but extremely challenging to do the second. I worry about teachers who leave the impression that science is all about the fundamental discoveries, while neglecting how that knowledge is acquired. I think this a skill area we must strengthen in our students: to develop their thinking skills through the actual process of scientific inquiry." Yu Kee recognizes this imbalance is due in part to the exam-oriented reality of the school system; but he is encouraged by the inquiry-based approach that is incorporated into the new syllabus. "It remains largely a matter of raising teachers' consciousness," he suggests, "beginning with my own. This was an important aspect of LEP. It helped me to concretize my own thinking, and I believe that came through in my written

reflections. One of my conclusions is that many of these scientific skills are actually universal. Like art, science is also about the wonderment, the exploration, trial and error. This is all too often lost in science education." Yu Kee is clearly intent on helping teachers to bring more emphasis on the skills and discovery component.

Now ten years into his career as an educator, Yu Kee has transformed his early ambivalence about having school leadership thrust upon him into an enthusiastic embrace of its potential. He openly admits missing the simpler pleasures of teaching; but his once lingering regret about having to relinquish time with his students for the yoke of administration has given way to exhilaration about the prospect of shaping his school's learning culture to meet whatever lies ahead. He relishes the challenge.

While Yu Kee retains his knack for being at the nexus of divergent forces, this tendency seems well-matched by his relentless striving for balance and synthesis. He doesn't pretend to have all the answers, but welcomes stimulating questions. Open-minded and appreciative of the value in peoples' experience, his excitement about the challenge of teaching 21st century skills is infectious.

School leaders like Lim Yu Kee, infused as they are with the enthusiasm, passion and commitment of those teachers and mentors who have inspired them, bring a refreshing openness to each task they face. Theirs is an ongoing process of redefining what education means and discovering how to be effective in leading that transformation. Doubtless, their legacy will be the next generation of similarly inspired educators and leaders.

As VP, first of Chua Chu Kang Secondary and now of Bedok Green Secondary School, he sometimes sees HODs wrestling with similar issues, "Even after two years as HOD I still felt regret, because I hadn't fully transitioned from the teacher mindset. But now, looking back, I am glad. I wrote about this in my LEP, how



I eventually accepted my journey towards school leadership. So once you accept the added responsibility, you also accept the greater impact that you can have."



PRINCIPIA



Francis Thomas, Principal
St Andrew's School, 1962-1971

Past Voices:
**Engaged Principal, Reflective
Writer**



Miss Fuziah bte Mohamad Taha
Principal, Fuhua Primary School

The Creative Touch



Phua Huat Chuan
Principal, Broadrick Secondary School
2006-2009

Leading to a Purpose



Lim Yu Kee
Winner: APS Book Prize
Vice Principal, Bedok Green Secondary
School

Striking a Balance



Photo taken by 8-year-old
Lew Shi Qi of Fuhua Primary School