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**Brother Director Kevin Byrne**  
St Joseph's Institution 1979-1991

**Past Voices:  
SJI's Enduring Vision**



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**Heng Boey Hong**  
Principal: Nanyang Girls' High School

**Leading through Language**



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**Constance Wong**  
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**We Lead Who We Are**



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**Neo Tick Watt**  
Retired Principal

**Does One Ever Retire?**



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# President's Message



Each of us can remember the day we first began as teachers – one of those moments of clarity in life that remain unaltered by the passage of time.

For many of us, the journey which led us from student's to teacher's desk was set in motion by one special person – a teacher whose imagination infected our imagination, a significant adult figure whose belief in our potential quickened our young hearts.

A few of us experience a singular moment where past and future briefly converge, when we stand in the same halls and classrooms that were the setting of our awakening as youths, which now become the setting of our professional challenge and growth. Reading about Boey Hong, Constance and Neo, I imagine each of them being filled with a sense of having come full circle by serving their alma mater.

There is another thread of connection that weaves through their three separate stories, namely the strength of their conviction and devotion to that calling, something which finds resonance with SJI's voices from the past. However disparate our personalities, backgrounds and interests, we seem to share that burning desire to shape and inspire young lives.

We at APS hope that you will enjoy reading this issue as much as you have done so for previous issues. Here's wishing all of you a great and meaningful year ahead!

## Chan Poh Meng

President of Academy of Principals (Singapore)

# Past Voices: SJI's Enduring Vision - Moving with the Times

Scouring the centenary *Souvenir Magazine (1852-1952)* for a message from the principal, there was none to be found from Brother Ignatius who was at the helm then. This self-effacing characteristic of the Brother Directors is underscored by the absence of a *Principal's Message* per se in the *SJI News (Issue 13)*, which reported on "A day to remember" in the history of SJI, the big move to its new premises on Malcolm Road. Brother Kevin Byrne's speech on its opening, April 7, 1989 was quoted as marking SJI's return full circle to the Independence of 1852:

*"As the new SJI buildings took shape we concerned ourselves with the RENEWAL OF THE SPIRIT and thrust of SJI. With the Government's search of Excellence in Education and the promotion of Innovation and Creativity in Secondary Schools the Independent School proposal was put to us just in time for us to consider it and put up our own proposal for Independence of operation of our school. We saw this as a means to achieve our own form of Excellence, with stress on Character Formation and Academic Performance."*



The role of donor-founders was emphasized. Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam, then Minister for Education, was the first of 1547 founders of the new SJI. In his speech, Dr Tony Tan highlighted the Founder's (Father Beurel's) Vision in a prospectus issued in 1848: "St Joseph's will be open to everyone, whatever his creed may be; and should, for instance, a boy of a persuasion different from that of Roman Catholics attend it, no interference will take place with his religion, unless his parents express their wishes to have him instructed in the Catholic religion... but at all times, the Masters (of the school) will most carefully watch over the morals of the whole, whatever their religious persuasion may be." Dr Tan pointed out that, "it would be difficult to imagine a more far-sighted and enlightened policy" in a multi-racial, multi-religious society like Singapore's.

## The bid for offering the Integrated Programme (2010)

*"The IP matters to many parents and students. They want to enjoy the wider breadth of education the IP promises. SJI is a dynamic organisation and needs to respond to changing needs."*

Mr Michael Sng,  
 former president of the SJI Old Boys' Association, quoted in the *Straits Times*, April 16, 2010

*"We are pleased to share with you that MOE has approved our proposal to offer a Josephian IP track leading to the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma. SJI is the only school, among the new IP schools, to extend to Years 5-6 to offer the IB Diploma instead of the A-levels."*

Mr Noel Hon, Chairman, SJI Board of Governors, announcing success in becoming one of the seven new schools to offer the Integrated Programmes, SJI website ([www.sji.edu.sg](http://www.sji.edu.sg)), September 3, 2010.



Memorial plaque to Father Jean-Marie Beurel. Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, Singapore.

In his monograph, *The Letters of Fr. J.M. Beurel Relating to the Establishment of St. Joseph's Institution Singapore* (1987), Rev. Brother Anthony (McNamara) of St Xavier Institution, Penang, quotes a biographical note on Fr Beurel who brought the first six Brothers to set up a Christian Brothers' school "at a time when the conditions were primitive":

*"Of an unalterable calm, a combination of human philosophy and saintly resignation, of perseverance that nothing could deter, neither blind opposition nor active hostility; neither the anger of the great nor the menaces of the small, he was one of those that know that in the affairs of this life, a direct line is not necessarily the shortest road from one point to another; when an obstacle stood in his path and he could not clear it in a single bound, he would go round it gently and quietly, with a smile that bore witness to his confidence in the future."* He was recognized as "an indefatigable worker, gifted

*with the spirit of initiative rich in results... He was sometimes hurt but most occasions he patiently waited for the storm to pass..."*

In his speech at St Joseph Institution's *Founder's Day Academic Assembly* on April 6, 2001, Mr Teo Chee Hean, former Minister for Education (himself a fourth-generation Josephian and the father of a fifth-generation Josephian) observed, "...The schools that they (Brothers of the Christian Schools) built stand as testimony to their pioneering spirit to serve through education. SJI is also testimony to the commitment and involvement of the community here to help make sure that SJI continues to have the resources and facilities to provide education to its students in the finest traditions of SJI..." Mr Teo pointed out,

*"...SJI has a long and proud history. However, while remembering to cherish the past, we need to focus our hearts and minds on the future as well... Against this backdrop of constant change, I must commend SJI for having mapped out its Strategic Directions for the New Millennium, which set the school on a path of dynamic growth while still remaining faithful to its heritage..."*



In his "Farewell Bouquet" to Brother Kevin Byrne on his retirement in December 1991, the late Mr Goh Sin Tub, then Chairman of the SJI Board of Governors, gives tribute to his low key style of leadership: *"When the opportunity came for SJI to be re-built, to be born again,... you did not hesitate one moment. You boldly seized the chance to give new life to the school, and in your own quiet way, you began to inspire an army of old boys, some 1500 of us, to help you make your dream of a new SJI come true. The result... the magnificent New SJI on Malcolm Road... Opportunity knocked a second time when SJI was offered the chance to become an independent school. You supported the proposal but only on the terms you and your team prudently insisted upon, namely that independence would mean operational independence only, i.e. Government aid would remain intact."*

*"At the beginning when the potential benefits were not obvious to everybody, your own vision was crystal clear and you stood solidly with the School Governors to champion the Independent Option.... Your mild manner of management helped immeasurably to calm and reassure both staff as well as parents worried by the pace and uncertainties of change."*

So it would appear that mild-mannered Brother Kevin shared at least two traits with tenacious Founder Fr Beurel: Clear Vision and Calm! The days of brother directors may have passed, but as lay principals take the helm, a constant challenge for the new leaders of SJI is probably to find that *"path of dynamic growth while still remaining faithful to its heritage"* (Mr Teo, 2001). It will most certainly continue to seek and receive support from the De La Salle Brothers, its devoted Board of Governors, powerful Alumni, donor-founders and the community it has so carefully nurtured.

## DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI

The list of distinguished SJI alumni attests to its delivery of just such men in Singapore's service:

Dr Tony Tan (Class of 1958 – State Scholar)	Former Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore
Mr Mah Bow Tan (Class of 1966 – President's Scholar)	Minister for National Development
Mr Teo Chee Hean (Class of 1972 - President's Scholar)	Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence
Mr George Yeo Yong Boon (Class of 1972 - President's Scholar)	Minister for Foreign Affairs

Besides politics, Josephians have made their mark as notable leaders in Public Service (Mr Philip Yeo, Mr Lim Soo Ping), Education (Mr John Yip, Prof Tan Chorh Chuan, Prof Leo Tan), Business (Dr Ee Peng Liang, Tan Sri Khoo Teck Puat), Law (Justice Chan Seng Oon, Mr Davinder Singh) the Arts, Media and Entertainment (Mr Warren Fernandez, Mr Dick Lee, Prof Jeremy Monteiro) among others.

## Boey Hong: Leading Through Language

Photo: Michael Liew

Language sits at the heart of learning. A truism, perhaps; but for Mdm Heng Boey Hong a truism which resonates with her own story, both professional and personal. Boey Hong grew up in a landscape filled with shifts, struggles, epiphanies and triumphs, mostly having to do with language. As an educator, her appreciation of the beauty and expressive power of language has been her anchor and inspiration. Boey Hong shares her love of language with her community of teachers, learners and leaders, through lessons drawn from her own experience.

In many ways, Boey Hong's personal "linguistic voyage" mirrors an entire generation of Singaporeans with Chinese heritage. Her grandmother, a Teochew speaker, arrived here in the 1930s, a young married lady seeking a better life. Like so many Chinese immigrants at that time, she had never been taught reading or writing skills. Her daughter, (Boey Hong's mother), learned to speak and read Mandarin well enough, and picked up a smattering of English, despite starting formal schooling late. "Being in Primary School at 16 years of age, my mother felt really out of place" Boey Hong muses, "because her classmates were all children! She had missed the 'golden age' for school, not just because of the disruption caused by World War II, but also because not as much importance was given to educating females at that time." Her mother married a Malaysian and moved there, relinquishing

Singaporean citizenship in the process. Boey Hong was born in Malaysia, but was raised back in Singapore from age five by her grandmother. Teochew was her 'home' language and spoken by all her schoolmates and neighbours. In her kampong primary school Chinese was the main language of instruction. She also received some limited exposure to English through primary subjects like math and science but with absolutely zero reinforcement outside of the classroom what little English she had was quickly forgotten. Today Boey Hong's own two children (the fourth generation) will soon reach university age. They are by far most proficient in English, speaking Mandarin as their second language. And Teochew? Not at all.

### HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

While Boey Hong's grandmother provided as best she could, there was certainly no money for extras. One expense, however, was considered essential: school. Somehow, between her uncle, parents and grandparents, enough money was scraped together for textbooks; brand new, still smelling of ink, paper and binding. "Going out to buy new textbooks was the highlight of my life! I was the only child in my grandmother's home so I never used old textbooks. The first thing I would do was to carefully wrap the cover up to protect it. (That way, at the

end of the year when I took off the wrapper, the book was still brand new.) Then I would read all the Chinese texts right through." Such was her appetite that by the first day of school her inquiring mind had already absorbed every page.

To Boey Hong one thing was tacitly clear: not only was school learning of paramount importance, it was a privilege. This idea provided a solid and passionate foundation to her worldview. Even though she would face many obstacles and struggles her sense of deep gratitude to the educational system never wavered. To this day she embodies and espouses those ideals and values, with much of the same wide-eyed, infectious enthusiasm she exuded in her youth.

In her kampong primary school Boey Hong found the stimulation that her grandmother simply couldn't provide. Her curiosity grew. Her appetite for words became insatiable. She flourished. At home she read: newspapers, books, anything she could put her hands on. "I may not have understood the meaning of everything I read," Boey Hong comments, "but I could read the national papers with no difficulty even at Primary 2. I started writing, just creating my own journals, a kind of diary. Words became part of my life." Above all, she enjoyed listening to the radio: weekly Chinese programmes from Singapore Broadcasting Corporation with skits for children, and serial dramas for teenagers.

"I wanted to be a teacher partly because of having been separated from my parents and coming to Singapore at an early age. My parents weren't able to visit me on a regular basis, so I treasured my friendships, and I especially treasured my teachers. They were the ones I looked up to. At home, my grandmother took very good care of my daily needs, of course, and gave me lots of attention, but she couldn't really share my interests. As far as my emotional development and cognitive needs were concerned, it was really the school that provided that... and I feel very lucky that I met such good teachers along the way."



These broadcasts were quite popular in Singapore at the time. They captivated her young imagination. "I followed those programmes diligently. Sometimes, I would be sweeping the floor and I became so absorbed by the drama I was listening to, I would just freeze. My grandmother would scold me, of course. 'Can't you pay attention to your house chores?' I enjoyed those programmes so much. They were a big part of my life. If I did something wrong, as punishment I wouldn't be allowed to listen to the radio!"

### FINDING INSPIRATION

In Primary 5, Boey Hong found in the person of her Chinese language teacher, Mr. Tham, a perfect reinforcement to her budding passion for her adoptive mother tongue. His influence proved to be life-shaping. Interestingly, the profound impact was mutual. On paper, Tham was somewhat of a dubious prospect: a self-described juvenile delinquent, as he had often got into trouble as a child. He had reluctantly accepted a career path to teaching only to placate his mother. She had insisted that he at least find a stable income. In truth, Tham felt no calling to teach and seriously doubted his own suitability. "Mr Tham was a trainee teacher when we met, barely 12 years older than us. We were the first group of students he encountered," recalls Boey Hong. "He later said that it was because of us that he

decided to stay in teaching. When he looked at us he could see how eager to learn we all were. Every single thing he came up with was received with such appreciation, enthusiasm and engagement. We weren't passive receivers but became immediately involved, actively making each lesson a success. He didn't actually have to 'teach' us because we all knew what was in the textbook already. We acted out the stories we were reading. We recited poems. All of us had a chance to speak. Mr Tham was our PE and Art teacher as well, so we spent a lot of time together. We would venture out of the classroom to discuss different topics, sitting around in the canteen. I began to realise, 'Wow! This teacher has got such power, to transform lessons into such interesting ways of learning.' Mr Tham inspired me. I knew right from that point not just that I wanted to be a teacher, but a Chinese language teacher. He was that impactful. I still keep in regular touch with him; he's like my mentor, the one I turn to for advice."

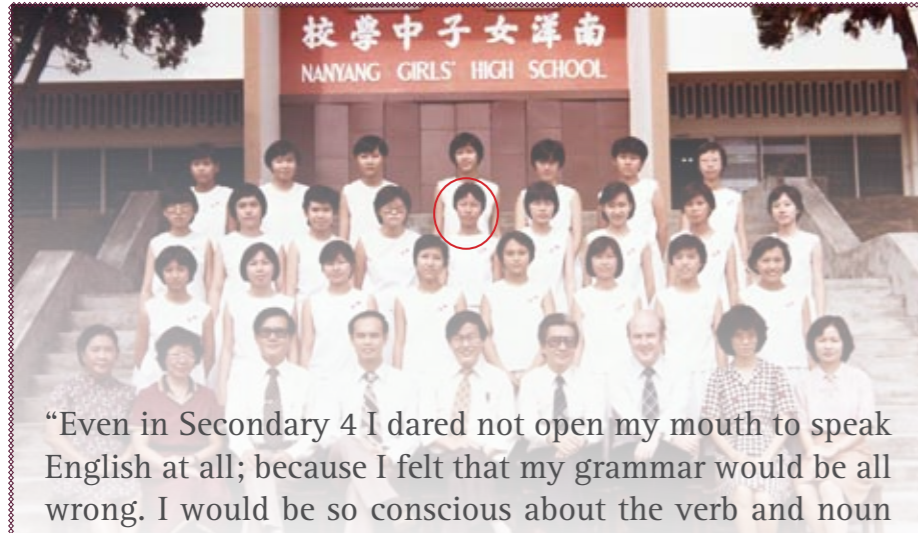
This is another lesson drawn from her own life experience that Boey Hong tries to impress upon all students: their own enthusiasm and eagerness to learn greatly influence the quality of learning in their classrooms. "In his own words, Mr Tham told us that we were the ones that made him into a great teacher." She believes the sense of satisfaction to be found in the classroom is mutually created and mutually enjoyed.

### A SECOND FIRST LANGUAGE

Boey Hong's completion of Primary 6 (P6) coincided with the rollout of the new Special Assistance Programme (SAP). "Somehow, I did well enough in primary school to get into this top 8% cohort chosen and I was sent to Nanyang Girls' High (NYGH) one of nine SAP schools. In the afternoon, I also attended school at St Margaret's for two years, which made the school day very long. Suddenly, for the first time in my life, I was meeting students from English medium schools. It opened my eyes. Their English was so much better than mine! I remember us reading *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. I had to check through the dictionary for practically all the words, while the students from St Margaret's were already learning to appreciate the use of metaphors and symbolism. So you can see the kind of gap I was experiencing..."



"Radio was a huge part of my learning Chinese. One of my favourite pastimes was to try to capture the lyrics of Chinese popular songs. I would transcribe them into my journal. I can still sing all those songs from that era. I grew up in an age that was very pro-China, pro-communist; and the songs were about love of country, working hard for a good life, about values. Radio provided my model for well-spoken Mandarin."



“Even in Secondary 4 I dared not open my mouth to speak English at all; because I felt that my grammar would be all wrong. I would be so conscious about the verb and noun agreement; or whether it’s ‘he’ or a ‘she’ or ‘his’ or a ‘her’; and even today I still make those mistakes. So for me it has been a great burden, but I have actually turned it to my advantage, sharing my past learning experience with my NYGH girls. I mean these days their difficulties are mainly with mother tongue. So, if I could pick up English with a family background where there was absolutely no English, then they can learn Mandarin *very well*, because no matter what, in Singapore, you still have so many opportunities to learn the language.”

In NYGH, Boey Hong decided to join the English Society CCA. She found herself learning nursery songs like My Grandfather’s Clock and such – much like the ordeal her own mother had undergone as a teenager! “English was really a very steep learning curve for me; but I had to do it to survive in the system. I kept a vocabulary book with me all the time, writing words down and struggling to memorize all these words that didn’t mean anything to me. Actually, I never learned phonics. I would find my Chinese word with the closest sound and write it above the English word to help me remember. That’s how I learned pronunciation.”

Despite such obstacles, nothing, it would seem, could dampen Boey Hong’s appetite for learning or diminish her appreciation of the opportunities school life afforded. Later, at National Junior College, Boey Hong was nominated to join a school adventure trip to far-away Nepal. Naturally, she was exhilarated by such a rare opportunity. When the school realized she was Malaysian and therefore ineligible for the subsidy, the task of breaking the news to Boey Hong

was given to her PE teacher Miss Elizabeth Poey (who still remembered this incident years later, and re-counted this to her when they met at a meeting when she was the



“Throughout my school life I had this fear: if my father cannot bring enough food to the table, I will have to find work and support my family. But I was lucky enough – with my uncle’s help – to continue my education through to university. I still remember as a trainee teacher, we received a \$1600 monthly allowance, so I was able to support my younger sister with her university education. I’m the eldest of four sisters. Actually, that made my mother’s life very tough because my father was the eldest in his family; and for the eldest daughter-in-law not to produce a son... that was seen as a great sin. From young I could see how she struggled.”

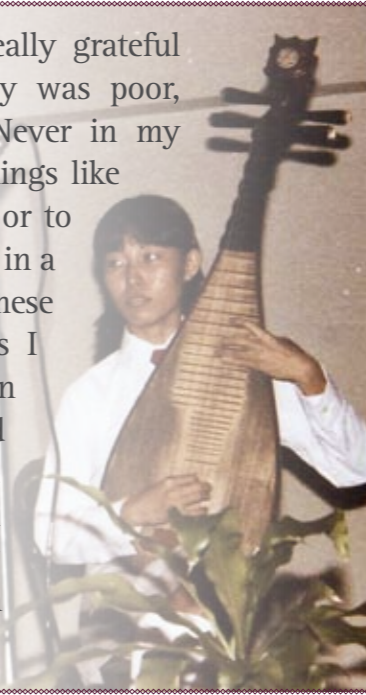
Principal of Naval Base Primary School). Although shattered, Boey Hong responded with characteristic grace. “I think that shows the ‘Chinese-educated’ part of me,” she reflects. “We *never* complain about such things. If something is not given to us, then we will work harder the next time. But I always told my mother that she had made a grave mistake in converting her citizenship because that meant I was deprived of the chance to get the scholarships enjoyed by my Singaporean friends, even those who weren’t doing as well as me.”

Eventually, her maturity, ethics and resolve were all duly recognized and rewarded. In each of her four years at National University of Singapore (NUS) Boey Hong applied for and received a privately endowed scholarship – with no strings attached. Her first chance to “fly out of Singapore” came as a pipa player with the NUS Chinese Orchestra. “We performed in Hong Kong; and then in Beijing – a very prestigious venue!”

#### A ROAD OF NO RETURN

Boey Hong provides another truism: “None of us come into teaching because we aspire to be a principal one day.” Typically, it just happens: one falls into the role, or is gently nudged. Mind you, the fact that Boey Hong had been class monitress all ten years when she was in Primary and Secondary School may suggest a certain pre-disposition.

“That’s another reason why I’m really grateful to the system: because my family was poor, I didn’t have any extra tuition. Never in my dreams would I be able to learn things like calligraphy, dance, and languages; or to learn a musical instrument and play in a Chinese Orchestra. I picked up all these things in school. Even baking! As I was in the immersion programme in Secondary School, I never attended Home Economics. Hence I learned to bake when I was 36, when I took my very first break from teaching to attend the Leaders in Education Programme!”



Boey Hong launched her career as a Chinese Language teacher at the newly opened Jurong Institute (JI) one of several Centralised Institutes the Ministry had established to provide a 3-year ‘Pre-U’ option for students who couldn’t meet the requirements of the faster-paced Junior Colleges (JC). She quickly discovered that in reality most of the 700 plus students saw themselves as rejects of the system. Many hadn’t made the cut to enter the Polytechnics either. Most of the boys were simply waiting to be called up for National Service. For the girls, Pre-U was more like a refuge of last resort until their parents really needed them to start earning their keep. To make matters worse, most of Boey

Hong’s Chinese language students arrived in her class already firmly turned off by their own mother tongue.

Once again, Boey Hong found ways to turn such potentially defeating circumstances to her advantage. She refused to succumb to the prevailing gloom. “We were very fortunate because in the nine years that I was in JI all four principals were visionary. They never gave up on these students; accordingly, we never let ourselves think that they weren’t capable. We just felt it was a matter of changing attitudes, getting them to work a little harder, to pay a bit more attention. We pushed them – very hard! Some did quite well. In our class of

Science students, 40% of them actually made it to university.”

After just two years, despite being the youngest among JI’s Chinese Language teachers, Boey Hong was made Head of Department. “Nobody in their right mind would want to be saddled with that job. You’re paid an extra \$300 allowance; that’s it. With all the added responsibilities you are effectively drawing a much lower pay rate. But somehow, because I had been a class monitor from Primary 1 to Secondary 4, maybe it was already a part of me that I should become a leader. I accepted the role. It’s a road of no return. You just move forward.”

With only 700 students, the school was too small to warrant having a Vice Principal assigned by the Ministry. In her sixth year of teaching, the principal appointed Boey Hong, ‘internally’, to cover VP duties as well. “Later on, in 1999 when I was invited to be Vice Principal at a primary school I was able to get into my role quite smoothly.”

#### TRADITIONAL CULTURAL VALUES

In fact, when Boey Hong moved from Jurong Institute to Nanyang Primary School (NYPS), she experienced a sharp contrast: for starters, the sheer number of students – from 700 to 2700 – not to mention big differences in age and socio-economic status. Her administrative role underwent a near 180° shift in focus – from students to parents. “In Jurong Institute I had to beg parents to show any concern about their own children’s education; and that was when I



Boey Hong blends in with her Jurong Institute form students.

“If I hadn’t been posted to JI, I might not have turned out to be who I am today. I felt that all the extra effort I put into class, into interacting with the students, was genuinely appreciated. When I first joined teaching I was just 23. Some of the boys in my class were already 20; their “wealth of experience” in life was a lot richer than mine. They had already learned to survive the streets. In the class photo I am the one that looks like a student!”

Every day, I could see clearly the *value* in education. I was able to help students discover that there were still opportunities for them. Those were very good years. I had *taught*; I’d made an impact, a difference.”

was lucky enough to even find the parents. Often they would tell me, 'You do whatever you want with them. I have already given up!' Whereas in NYPS my office always had a long queue of parents wanting to talk with me about their children."

Ever the Chinese language teacher, Boey Hong found NYPS a perfectly natural progression. At JI she often wondered what happened in their primary school days that students came to school hating their own mother tongue. Now was her chance to explore the question first hand, and who knows, perhaps to improve matters.

Traditional Chinese cultural values form a cornerstone of the Nanyang family of schools. Yet Chinese language learning was often a central concern voiced by many parents. "By and large parents want their children to do well; but sometimes they simply do not know *how*. My message has been consistent: if parents don't speak the language themselves, they have to create the environment by exposing their children to a higher level of good Mandarin." Indeed her own scan of NYPS's 'Mandarin environment' revealed numerous shortfalls. Addressing these became a top priority and Boey Hong went about putting in place a series of concrete measures: some commonsensical, others innovative, all aimed at enhancing effective learning of Mandarin.

Not surprisingly, the school library was among the first places Boey Hong targeted.



"In my career, I've only had one form class: that was during my second year at JI. There were 34 students. Six of them subsequently became teachers. Of those six, three became Chinese language teachers. So whatever it was that Mr Tham rubbed off onto me, I rubbed off onto some others. They still get in touch with me, too. That's the type of satisfaction that you get. We'll bump into each other at certain functions and I can tell that they are just so happy to see me; and I am very, very happy to catch up with them."

"We started a new pictorial section of the school library: adding books containing fewer Chinese words, but with very good drawings and interesting illustrations. That's one way to enrich the environment: with visual, meaningful story telling. After a while the children are quite able to pick up the story lines."

She started a programme whereby for one whole month Primary 4 students could spend their after-school and weekend time at the Nanyang Girls' High School Hostel with teenage scholars from China. "By interacting

with those older students the younger ones learn about their culture back in China. They pick up even simple things that parents may not teach them such as how to hold chopsticks in the right manner. They visit our clan associations together, participate in debates, and use the language a lot more. In NYPS itself, of course we celebrate all the festivals: Chinese New Year, the Dragon Boat Festival, the Mid Autumn Festival. The children are given opportunities to have fun and at the same time are exposed to all these cultural traditions that they should know about and understand."

With the Chinese Language (CL) department Boey Hong took even bolder steps. Rather than their usual three class load, she insisted her teachers drop one so they could do a *better* job with their two Chinese classes. The extra CL teachers required as a result were hired on a contract basis using her MOE Manpower Grant – funds most principals direct towards administration. On top of that she instituted a Level System whereby each teacher would only teach one Grade Level in a given year. "That's how I created smaller schools within a big school of 2700," observes Boey Hong. "Each level is already 400 students; with that number you can form a school easily." This approach met with some resistance because the prevailing scheme was based on a 'fair' distribution of the marking load across all the CL teachers. "Cognitive development in primary children is very fast. The difference between P1 and P2 is dramatic. I feel

"If the goal is to use Mandarin accurately, to instil a higher level of appreciation for the beauty of the language, you have to put the child in the environment. I felt we were still not providing enough modeling. I believe there is



no way the child can master Mandarin if you're going to teach the language in English. Now NYPS students in P5 and P6 get a chance to go to China for up to 2 months, and become really immersed in the language. We purposely twin with schools that provide hostel facilities so the students stay with locals after school and continue to interact. We were one of the first to insist: no hotels."

teachers need to relate to the children quite differently at each Level. When teachers no longer have to straddle other levels they can get to know the kids at one level much better. Yes, the P1 marking will be less hectic than the P6 graduating class, but the classroom rigor is just as great if not greater. One level isn't easier than another. They are just different sets of challenges. In that sense there's really no such thing as 'equal' load in teaching a language. Over time, I managed to persuade the teachers to see the merits of that approach; and also to change their mind set about what is fair and equal."

The idea of schools within a school was something Boey Hong gleaned from Hwa Chong sharing about their Consortium System. "It excited me. I could see how the system could really value-add, and could close some of the gaps that I perceived. I felt that in NYPS it was even more critical because of the sheer numbers that we were handling. To really make the school run effectively and for us to meet the needs of the students better, we need to be closer to them."

Another facet of the Principal's job, one which Boey Hong tackles with signature flair, is the role she plays in fostering leadership amongst her staff. The Ministry provides training, of course, but only a limited number can be sent each year. "At NYPS, the demand was such that we needed to develop people much faster, to take on higher responsibilities," recalls Boey Hong. "So, I designed my own internal Leadership Development Programme which continued to evolve over five years." Using this 'local' approach Boey Hong identified potential leaders – 'Heads' as she refers to them – and had them sit in on all the School Steering Committee meetings over a half year period. "They get to see the real thing: how policies are conceptualized, argued about, given shape and implemented."

Sensitive to her relatively limited experience as a principal and role model, Boey Hong arranged for Heads to have dialogue sessions with industry leaders who had extensive experience in a range of sectors: banking, advertising, hospitality, and the like. As a third training component, she brought the "Heads" together as a kind of support group to reflect mutually on their own leadership styles, aspirations, motivation, fears and inner struggles. "I would take them out of their routine, somewhere overseas – Taiwan,

Bangkok, or Hong Kong – to spar off ideas, share observations about one another's sincerity, or their glaring shortcomings in school. These were very deep, frank conversations. Some Heads would then be sent for NIE courses; others may just be appointed directly after that experience."

"I constantly struggle with that idea: whether leadership is by nature or through nurture. To be a successful leader or to find satisfaction being a leader, you must want to do it, very much. You need to view every situation as an opportunity to learn."

#### EVER THE CHINESE LANGUAGE TEACHER


In Singapore's educational system, it's rare enough to find an educator who has gone from a Pre-U to a primary school. Yet as if to ensure the uniqueness of her career path, in 2010 Boey Hong began her current attachment as Principal of a secondary school: NYGH. "My Vice Principals have told me, early on, that they don't feel that I am new here. This is my alma mater; I already know the school and many of my colleagues as well."

In 2009 Boey Hong was told about a book Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew was preparing about Singapore's language policy over the last 40 years. "The editor contacted me to ask if I would contribute an article about my personal language

learning experience; I suppose because I happened to be in the first batch of SAP students. I wrote it in Chinese but was later asked to translate to English as well."

There is almost a fairy tale quality to this story: Boey Hong heading her alma mater, a school to which she feels such deep loyalty and gratitude. Once again, her role has changed emphasis: this was really the brightest group of students. How would she stretch them? How would Boey Hong make sure they too appreciate the opportunities that the system has given them? Would her influence instil a similar sense of rootedness and loyalty?

"I grew up in Singapore; received my whole education here, ever since kindergarten. Yet, in the streets, when I speak proper standard Mandarin, people think that I'm from China. That saddens me a great deal." Boey Hong's sense of indignation is poignant. Indeed, how did we, in a country where we pride ourselves in doing things right and doing things well, end up setting such low expectations for the way we speak our mother tongue, adopted or not. How did we let that happen?

"I am a Chinese language teacher and one day if I do not continue to be a principal, I will go back to the classroom to be a Chinese language teacher. I think I am very good at that," says Boey Hong, smiling. Now, who wouldn't want to be part of her class, with such a role model? 

"NYGH has a mission to carry on our strong Chinese *heritage*. But if the girls don't even speak the language well, what sort of heritage are we talking about? As principal I have made it a point to speak a lot more Mandarin, to role model; and my colleagues, especially the Chinese Department, really welcome that. And the girls also; I mean they are very intelligent girls. This year, our cut-off point for Secondary One posting is the highest in the nation. They pick up very quickly. So if they see their principal being able to switch from English to Chinese, effortlessly, hopefully, I think that will also inspire them to want to do the same."





NATIONS UNIES  
UNITED NATIONS



## Constance Wong: We Lead Who We Are

Toward the end of 2009 Constance Wong was awarded the *APS Book Prize* for exemplifying “the highest level of learning” among participants in the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP). Upon hearing the news, her tutor, Dr Jude Chua, told Constance she had probably been singled out due to her ‘eutrapelian’ journal writing.

“‘Eutrapelian’ means seriously playful. He said that my journal was both scholarly and adventurous,” explains Constance.

A quick scan of her résumé amply confirms the scholarly side, and a closer look reveals an artistic bent, especially for playing the violin and piano, enjoying literature and the arts. Above all, it describes a woman intent on contributing back to her educational community the fruits of her own holistic learning.

### SCHOOLING THINKERS

A student in the Methodist Girls School for 10 years, Constance was blessed with wonderfully passionate teachers whose explicit care for each individual student had a formative impact. “The creativity we experienced there was so exciting, and the feeling of independence that gave us; especially with one of my music teachers, Miss Kon Mei Leen. We composed music, wrote operas, and produced radio programmes about music... teachers like Miss Kon were seminal; really engaging and nurturing us as individuals; That’s really why I became a teacher. My teachers

did so much for me. I want to do the same for the next generation of pupils.” [Miss Kon later became principal of MGS.]

At Raffles Junior College (RJC), Constance found particular emphasis being placed on critical thinking. She and her classmates were encouraged to challenge assumptions and to think independently. “In the Asian context we normally defer to authority, so it was quite refreshing to hear our Humanities teachers saying, ‘Don’t just believe what we say. Question! Think for yourself!’ An important part of my independent nature was fostered there.” Indeed; so much so, that by the time she was overseas on scholarship at the University of Birmingham, Constance had acquired the occasional temerity to disagree with the textbooks – a textbook authored by none other than her professor. “They liked that. Our professors didn’t just want us citing scholars and agreeing with them; they valued independent thinking and inquiring minds.”

### A BAPTISM OF FIRE

Back from her UK adventure, Constance completed her teacher training at NIE and stepped into her first teaching post at Yuan Ching Secondary School, a rough neighborhood school rife with discipline problems. “That was a huge culture shock because, for the first time, I encountered students who had values quite different from mine: I mean doing well in school, going to university; these were simply not a priority for them. It was tough; a baptism of fire.”

Undaunted, Constance drew on her passion for music – the pipeline through which she connected with her students, many of whom had never even *seen* a piano let alone been uplifted by music’s beauty. Constance was intent on showing them that music could be a source of deep enjoyment in life, hoping such pleasure would extend to literature. “I took them to symphony orchestra concerts; I brought a jazz group into school; then a string quartet; and a Chinese opera, just to expose them to the world of music. When I played the piano for them in the music room, they were like, ‘Wow!’ I was teaching them how to appreciate music, to listen in a more informed manner. It clearly gave them enjoyment – and an alternative to just hanging out at the amusement arcade.”



The following year Constance found herself working at the other end of the educational spectrum, teaching the Music Elective Programme (MEP) to high-ability ‘A’ level students at her *alma mater*, RJC, less than 10 years after she had crossed its threshold as a graduate. Over the next 3 years, as Subject Coordinator for Music, Constance taught what she most loved.

She organized recitals, directed the Raffles Chamber Orchestra to a Gold medal at the 1997 Singapore Youth Festival, and later she joined the ‘Thinking Schools, Learning Nation’ project team for Art and Music.

### MODEL LEADERS



“When I joined the profession I felt so fulfilled and happy as a teacher; all I wanted to do was teach. Becoming a school leader never even crossed my mind. Then, in 1998, I was asked to participate in policy work in the Higher Education Division, my first stint with the Ministry of Education (MOE) HQ. I was reluctant to leave the school, but this was a wonderful opportunity. Developments were taking shape in tertiary arts education, like setting up the Conservatory of Music, things that I’d been passionate about; so it was timely. Actually, I felt I *had* to be there, to participate in what was going on. I think they also needed someone who understood and was sympathetic to the arts and was able to do policy analysis and write the papers. It was a fantastic learning experience. I interacted with some of the most enlightened minds on policymaking; people like then Minister of Education Teo Chee Hean; and Mrs Tan Ching Yee, who was then Deputy Secretary, Policy – a wonderful leader. She has been a great role model in leadership for me.” [Mrs Tan Ching Yee is now Permanent Secretary, Education.]

What touched Constance was how Mrs Tan Ching Yee clearly cared about all her officers, making time to talk with each one, individually. “That didn’t mean that you could do slipshod work. She set very high standards, insisting that nothing was beyond us – or beneath us either.” Drafting ministerial speeches or cabinet documents at

one moment, officers could well be laying out cups and tables for a meeting the next. Either way, Mrs Tan inspired us to produce work of high quality. “She really challenged us to do things that were beyond our comfort zone. I thought to myself, how am I ever going to do this? I don’t know this stuff. But at the end of it all you feel that you’ve grown a lot.”

As is the practice for HQ Officers, Constance accompanied some of the Directors and the Permanent Secretary on school visits and was a note taker during dialogue sessions with school leaders and teachers. A seed was planted when she saw the crucial difference that a principal makes in bridging the gap between policy and practice.

### NEW YORK, NEW YORK

The word ‘journey’ might just go down as the most overused metaphor in Singapore education circles. More’s the pity, because in describing the developmental arc of Constance’s prodigious mind from talented student to accomplished musician, scholar, classroom teacher and incipient principal, journey seems a particularly apt image. It is certainly her word of choice, especially when referring to her recent transition into school leadership.

Constance took educational leave in 2002 to join her husband in New York where he was completing his doctoral studies in law. She had enrolled in the Education Leadership Program at Teachers College, Columbia University and was a Resident Fellow at International House, where Constance experienced a full dose of the global, multicultural tapestry that is Manhattan.

“As part of my course I was attached to local instructional superintendents in the New York school system and did about 200 hours of fieldwork. We would visit classrooms; and the superintendents would talk with the principals about how they could improve instruction in literacy, in math, etc. Principals were seen as instructional leaders. (Back in Singapore, ‘Principal as CEO’ was still the prevailing model.) There, I found that teachers were quite involved in curriculum design. What really struck me at one of the schools was how at the end of the school day when the students had gone home, the teachers would be reviewing their notes and then making adjustments to how they would teach the next day. It was real-time assessment for learning.”

### WORK/LIFE BALANCE

Returning to Singapore, Constance spent another two years at MOE HQ in the Schools Division. “When I think about Mrs Tan Ching Yee, and the Deputy Directors and the superintendents that I worked with in Schools Division, these are the people who have inspired many of the beliefs I have acquired about school leadership. I think that I have been very enriched in this journey.”

Upon “going back in”, this time as the Vice-Principal of Townsville Primary School, Constance turned her talents to the challenge of running a school working, with teachers, with parents, and doing strategic planning. The second of two principals she worked with at Townsville, Mr Eugene Ong, had a particularly timely and career-shaping influence. Constance had been invited to join the LEP session starting in mid-2009 and while not all LEP candidates go onto become principals, she had no illusions about where it was leading. But as a mother of 2 young children, the age old work/life dilemma loomed.



Constance had seen too many instances over the years of school principals being totally consumed by the demands of their position – at the expense of their personal lives. She needed to know that it was possible to achieve balance. As a role model, Eugene Ong tipped the balance. He embodied the ability to run a school well and have work/life harmony.

“I was trying to decide ‘Is this is really something that I want to do?’ I was clear about why I would want to: the impact, the positive impact that you can make on a generation of students and teachers. But at the same time we all need to have work/life balance. If I’m unhappy or feeling guilty as



a mother, I don't think, in the long run, I will make a good principal. Working with and observing Mr Eugene Ong, I saw that balance was possible; so that gave me the assurance I needed to go on this journey. And I do have a life now, as a principal, I still have a life."

#### LEP LESSONS

"I think what you take away from the LEP really depends on what you put into it. LEP was a good opportunity to read and reflect; and for hands-on learning particularly through our school attachment." True to form, Constance immersed herself in the life of the school: sitting in on contact time and management meetings, learning through observing the day-to-day goings on.

What Constance found perhaps most valuable was drawn from her reading: that many of her own instincts and beliefs about leadership had a solid theoretical basis. "Many things crystallized for me during LEP as I saw the connections with theory. I poured that into my journal writing. What I'm doing now, as a school leader, is not just based on what I think is right, or better, or learned through experience; it has a basis in the leadership literature. So I feel like I'm standing on more solid ground. Personally, and professionally."

#### MINDING THE TEACHERS

"Principals are always talking about placing the child at the centre; but we must

also think of the teachers. We can't expect teachers to give and give until they are all burnt out." Constance believes taking care of our teachers means striving to create an environment that enables them to do what they are good at and provides room for their ideas and their professionalism to grow. Teachers who feel supported love coming to work and can't help but place the child at the centre. "I experienced that as a teacher myself when I was in RJC under Mr. Lee Fong Sing. He created an environment

"Sergiovanni talks a lot about the forces of leadership, especially the symbolic force of principal as chief. The things that we do and say as principals send a very strong signal about what is important. The things that I say at the beginning of the day, at flag raising, at assembly, at Speech Day, the values that I'm trying to convey, the teachable moments, these are the things that signal what's important.

So, when I drop by their CCAs or House Practice, or when I go to the canteen and just talk with the kids and get to know them and find out how they are, get feedback, these things that we do as a school leaders show them that we think they are important. I want to hear the students' voices. I want to hear the teachers' voices."



of trust, empowerment and autonomy that allowed the teachers to do their best for the students. 'You are the music teacher in charge,' he told me. 'You know best what to do in your area. Go ahead, and I will give you the resources.' There was just so much room for the teachers to initiate innovative instructional programmes that benefited the kids. I am working to create that kind of environment for our teachers here at Haig Girls School. I believe that every teacher can contribute. There is no failing teacher. It's a question of my role in drawing out the best in them and mitigating what they're not so "strong at."

#### NIPPING IT IN THE BUD

Not every teacher is filled with such a deep sense of calling. While Constance acknowledges this, she is not about to lower the bar. "Ideally we can nip the problem in the bud. To trainees or contract teachers – those who are heading into this profession – I say this: if you're not coming into teaching because you want to do your best for students, because you feel this strong calling, then don't do it. Without that conviction, you will find it awful, a pain – for yourself and for your students."

To those already in the school – and Constance knows there may be a few, in

all schools, who don't feel that sense of calling – she applies the same principle she learned from Mrs Tan at HQ: get to know the person, discover their interests and leverage on those to draw out the best in them. "I haven't had to do it yet but some principals 'counsel' out such teachers. It's not a question of being Draconian or 'going after them'. It's a matter of building their self-awareness, that maybe teaching is really not their cup of tea, and they should think of doing something else."

#### THE BIG PICTURE

"Our policymakers are serious about the importance of holistic education. The Minister, the Permanent Secretary (PS), and the Director General of Education (DGE) are all saying this very clearly. But whether it happens or not actually depends on us, the school leaders. Will we actually buy into it and do it?"

Constance recalls the PS's briefing about changing the deployment practice of giving priority to English, Math and Science, then using Music, Art and PE as 'fillers'. "Minister announced the idea of using specialist teachers to support learning in these areas. So, it is not just lip service. MOE is providing extra time, money and people, those three keys. Still, school leaders must first of all *believe* in the educational value of Music, Art and PE and the importance of social and emotional skills." One certainly feels that wholehearted support of holistic education is anything but lip service for Constance. The depth of Constance's conviction is palpable. "I have told the teachers," she admits, "that Music, Arts and PE are sacrosanct! You cannot 'steal' these periods and use them for English, Maths and Science," expressing an uncompromising stance on the matter.

"Leadership is not about driving people to achieve the school's vision and mission. Effective leaders inspire the school community to a shared vision and bring meaning and purpose to everything that we do. It is about building people up and drawing out the best in people. Leadership means helping teachers to see the connection between what they do and the bigger picture."

Haig Girls School is one of the 16 schools selected by the Primary Education Review Implementation Committee (PERI) to prototype holistic assessment. Constance



has worked closely with the teachers to develop assessment tools that both measure and support learning. "We've looked at what our learning outcomes are, how we want to assess learning by embedding assessment into instruction. Together we have produced a holistic development report to send to parents which includes social emotional competencies as well as PE, arts, music and not just academic subjects. These are very exciting times to be in."

Constance found the essence of school leadership encapsulated in the letter the

DGE gave to all the newly-appointed principals: that leadership is about stewardship and responsibility, not position or privilege; that it is a calling, a mission of love and care. "I totally believe in that. How you are as a leader directly affects the lives of the students and the teachers and their families, because if people are happy coming to school and coming to work, they will go home being happy as mothers and daughters and wives; as fathers, sons and husbands. That thought is what gives me energy and drives me every day."

#### STYLE AND SUBSTANCE



"We lead who we are. I have to be who I am so that my teachers and students can be who they are. I want them to be themselves when they are with me. In LEP we talked about performativity issues, about people's need to "wayang" because they know they're

being assessed. When you are comfortable with your school and can be yourself, when students and teachers see that their school leader cares and seeks to develop them as a people, then they can be who they are without having to put on a show. I think that when we de-privatize the classroom, when teachers get more and more comfortable with people popping in – other teachers, peers, visitors, the principal dropping by – then we get to see what's happening on an everyday basis, rather than the alternative."



## Neo: Does One Ever Retire?

Neo Tick Watt's eyes automatically open at his usual 4:45a.m. - no help needed from the alarm clock. Sheer force of habit. As the haze of sleep lifts, and reality clicks in, a soft smile slowly spreads. It's "new chapter time" in Neo's narrative - a 46-year career in education... is now over. You can close your eyes, Neo, and relax; you're officially retired! An image of his favorite chair at the local library comes to mind. What a delicious thought: an afternoon of undisturbed reading.

Gazing at the screen over a hot coffee, Neo sees his inbox is full of bursting: friends

and well-wishers, mostly, plus two from MOE Headquarters and another from Montfort School, carrying suggestions of 'business' in their subject lines. Oh yes, and a calendar alert about today's interview with *Principia*. So it's true after all: principals are not actually allowed to retire: they simply know too much. You can forget that leisurely loll about at the library, Neo boy.

"It's really about stories," offers Neo, as he settles into the couch at the country club where he has enjoyed membership for years. Mind you, this is probably only the third time he's actually been here. "I'm more of a hands-on person rather than a very 'articulate' type. If you want anything from me about high-level philosophy or management theories, you can forget it. Go and read the book. If you want snippets of stories, what I've picked up from here and there, perhaps I could give a couple." There you have it. Enjoy some shared

snippets and tacit know-how from one savvy survivor.

### MY SCHOOL - MY SANCTUARY

"I come from a very, very poor family in the Hougang area - a huge compound near the Serangoon River. That's where I learned how to swim. We practically lived off that river, catching fish, prawns, crabs and what have you. My father drove a lorry sometimes, but usually he was jobless. Both my parents were illiterate. They raised pigs and chickens to sell. Ours was a big family: 11 boys and 1 girl. My older siblings were all Chinese educated. I was seventh and the first to be sent to an English language school, the only one in the neighborhood, Montfort School."

"My father signed my report book - in Chinese - the first term; from that point onwards nobody at home knew whether I had done well in studies or not... and with so many in the family, it didn't really matter; you just learned to take challenges, take responsibility, be independent, from very young. I signed my report book myself."

"Hey, boy. Don't you have a home?" It's not difficult to see how or why young Neo became a fixture around Montfort. His teachers gave new shape and scope to his life: Montfort old boys like the Teo brothers, Joo Meng, his Scoutmaster, and Joo Poh, his Primary 5 form teacher of history and geography, famous for the field trips he led. "He'd have us wait by the side of Upper Serangoon Road; then, in his small car, drive us to Bras Basah Rd. I mean, we were so poor, that was my first time going into town; and then to the museum. Wow! I don't suppose anyone told him to do that; he was just naturally a fantastic, hardworking, great teacher."

"I think what truly shaped my life and my passion for teaching was my Secondary 4 form teacher, Brother Bernadine, whom I will never forget. He would call us by our number, writing it on the chalk board; and my number was 24. These days, teachers talk about assessment for learning; well, Brother Bernadine was it. He made sure that you learned. He would assign a piece of work, an essay, for example. We'd do it, hand it in, and I tell you, it was marvelous. Because he lived right in the school, in the brothers' quarters, the very next morning at 7:00 a.m. you'd see your script on your table. Everybody's marks were posted up at the back of the class, so there was a bit of competition. If you'd not done well, Brother would have you see him and he would tutor you personally. I remember once, I didn't attend his extra class because of soccer. He called me in and said, 'You missed my lessons. Come back at 5:00 p.m.' We went over my script and fixed any errors I'd made. This was really teaching and learning."

### BECOMING A TEACHER

Despite attaining a Grade 1 on his 'O' Levels, Neo didn't pursue post-secondary education at the time, basically because he couldn't afford it. Brother Bernadine, seeing Neo's natural gift, had suggested he try teaching. "So I filled in the form... and was called up for an interview that January; I started relief teaching before I had even received my 'O' Levels results: a peevish school boy - becoming a teacher in the Primary school! Can you beat it?"

"I remember one of my teachers came up to me when I went to get my results and he told me, 'Neo boy, you're making the greatest mistake by becoming a teacher. Why don't



"I endeared myself to the teachers. They addressed me as 'Neo boy', including the principal, the late Mrs. Chiang. I was very active in school: in sports and games: you name it, I'd done it. I was good at studying, as well. By Secondary 1, neighbors would look at me and say, 'Hey, you are quite good in studies. Why don't you come and tutor my son and daughter? They're in primary one & two.'" So I would earn about \$15 (a month). In those days \$15 was a lot of money. After the second year they increased my pay to \$20. That paid for my books, my uniform, or whatever. I hardly got money from my parents; I was on my own. In Secondary 3, I was making \$30 a month, quite a tidy sum. In those days, at the hawker centre, you could buy a plate of char kuay teow for thirty cents!"

you continue, with Pre-U? We will pay for your education.' So generous in spirit, teachers in those days... I replied, 'All my life I have not received a single cent in charity, and I can't come up with a reason to do so now.' Besides, I actually wanted to teach."

Proud and determined, Neo went to Teachers' Training College (TTC) - "Teacher Torture Chamber" as he refers to it impishly.

"In those days teaching was about passion - not that we don't have passionate teachers today; but back then, we spent a great deal of time in the school, especially at Elling North Primary School, one of the new English/Chinese Integrated schools where I was fortunate enough to be sent - we taught Monday through to Saturday. Plus I was in charge of the Scouts which was on Sundays, so I worked Monday through to Sunday. Talk about a work/life balance! Back then, Co-curricular Activities (CCAs) were not a high priority for the Ministry; but the teachers? I can tell you, those in charge of CCAs took them very seriously. Back then, many schools had their niche event where they traditionally dominated. When the school entered a tournament, a semifinal or a final championship competition, wow! The whole school came out in support. Real school spirit."

I felt I was part of a new generation of teachers, doing experiments, the 'playroom method' we called it. Teaching of mathematics was not just chalk and

talk. Science teaching was really science. I used a lot of different methods. I remember one former student wrote in *If Not for My Teacher*, a booklet they gave us on Teachers Day, 'Long before project work was introduced in schools, Mr Neo was already doing it! I was so surprised.'

### BECOMING PRINCIPAL NEO

After a decade of teaching primary school, Neo caught wind of the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) being offered at the National Institute of Education (NIE). His application was accepted but teaching at secondary level was a pre-requisite, so Neo was quickly posted to Whitley Secondary School where he taught while studying part-time at NIE. Sensing an aspiring talent, Whitley's principal, Miss Jenny Yong, took Neo under her wing, probing his affinity for greater responsibility and stretching his administrative competencies. She cast him as both secretary and scribe of Whitley's "Rolling Plans" - the strategic planning and the internal/external school appraisal processes of the day.

"Miss Jenny Yong was big lady; but she could really dance! And she led various courses in drama, and so on. For some reason, she expected me to write even though my handwriting was so bad! I still remember after my English-language paper for 'O' levels, Brother Bernadine waiting

outside the hall and asking me 'How did you write?' I said, 'Big, bold writing; just as you advised me Brother!' Anyway, I did my best for Miss Yong and learned a lot from a very nice principal."

No sooner had Neo completed his ACE than Principal Jenny and her Senior Management Team began wondering aloud why he had never gone to university. "Money," would no longer stand up as an excuse; so Neo dutifully filled out the forms Jenny had brought in, and suddenly found himself pursuing a major in Chemistry at NUS. Upon graduating in 1984 Neo was posted to Victoria Secondary School, and sure enough less than one month later, MOE invited him for an interview about become a primary school principal. Neo may have been in some denial about the grooming process that was under way, but now it was time to face the music.



"I felt I didn't want any of that. I just wanted to be a teacher – a plain teacher. In the interview I set about presenting myself as a poor candidate, giving less than coherent answers, dodging questions, any excuse as to why I wasn't suitable for the post. 'I'm a mathematics teacher,' I said, 'science-trained. I don't write well; I'm not very articulate.' The interviewer looked at me. 'Excuse me? You have good communicative skills.' So I switched tactics. 'Can you leave me alone for the next two years? I might want to work my way up, OK?'"

Neo gained some breathing room, but the cat was out of the bag. Mr Andrew Ng, the principal back at Victoria School, noticed MOE's interest and began hinting to Neo that the shoes of his recently retired Senior Assistant (a 'pillar' of the school) needed filling. Neo demurred. Mr Ng persisted. Neo agreed to think it over '...long and hard', and

then immediately adopted a simple strategy: avoidance. "That wasn't too difficult because Victoria was an old colonial-style building with double corridors. In class, I'd have my students alert me if the Principal was coming. 'Could you tell Mr Ng that I've gone to the gents?' The Principal would walk past and glance in: no teacher; but the class was okay. Then a week into the December holiday my phone rang. 'Good morning Mr Neo. Mr Ng here, Principal of Victoria School.' So formal. 'I want you to come to school now to see me. Otherwise I am sending you a memo.' Now, in those days a memo was like a warning letter. I had no reason to be sent a memo! When I reached his office, Mr Ng told me, "For a man, National Service is for life. If you're a lady you have a choice. Unfortunately, you are a man; you have no choice."

#### ADMINISTRATION 101

The remainder of Neo's holiday break was spent coordinating logistics for the school's move to its new location, then mapping the next term's timetable (without a computer – desktops were unheard of), organising the collection of school fees, all with zero guidance or training, and that was just for starters. Quite an initiation; but Neo was beginning to accept this turn in his career as inevitable, and he took all this "learning on the job" in stride.

Instinctively, Neo knew he wasn't quite ready for the real-world challenges of school leadership. Not that one can ever be truly ready; being prepared for leadership isn't like being prepared for an exam. It is precisely those unexpected 'surprises' that test one's mettle as a leader. So however much he may have grumbled to himself about being unfairly saddled with administrative duties, Neo knew that by serving in this way he was gaining valuable perspective on leadership, while honing his thinking and developing his own personal style. It was time well invested.

Thus during his tenure as Senior Assistant – essentially Vice-Principal – Neo gained valuable experience and skill in managing people and stakeholder expectations. From all he had been learning, at NIE, at NUS, from Miss Yong at Whitley, and now from Mr Ng, Neo began to see that merely being passionate about teaching and having a handle on the administrative processes were

not by themselves sufficient to providing real leadership.

After Neo had spent nearly 4 years as Senior Assistant, MOE implemented administrative restructuring. Neo became a Head of Department, then took another year to get his Diploma in Education Administration (DEA). He then served as Vice-Principal of Maris Stella High School under Tan Kim Hock, better known as Brother Anthony.

"I learned so much from him about running a Government Aided School: about the philosophy, the processes and procedures, the need to raise funds, and how very prudent you must be about your spending. Brother Tan let me manage a lot of the processes in the school. Some things I learned the hard way. At first I would tell parents, 'Your son has done this or that offence.' I tell you, little problems would escalate. Parents were defensive and determined to exonerate their child. From that I learned to first eat humble pie. I'd say, 'Thank you for coming...,' then focus on the student's plus points; and how we should work together to help their child. Only then do I raise the particular issue of concern. With parents, if there's nothing to be gained by being inflexible, it is best to give way. Mind you, when you have a parent intent on giving 'feedback', be sure to record all instances. Don't dismiss it as a small problem. I've dealt with parents whose child, from Day One, gave me problems. By keeping a record you've got a good picture. You can manage the parents better; because there are wicked ones too!"

In 1994, Neo was invited to an interview with two members of Montfort's Board: both alumni; in fact both were Neo's former classmates: Mr Lim Boon Heng, by then a Cabinet Minister, and Mr Ng Kok Song, the Director of Investment, GIC. January 1st 1995, Neo boy became Principal of his alma mater, Montfort School.

#### COMING HOME

At Neo's core, there's an eager boy scout who tries to live by the "Be Prepared" motto. Nearly 30 years had passed since Neo was "fostered out" as he wryly described his absence from the fold, and, consciously or not, much of that time was spent preparing for his eventual return. The school had relocated and recently upgraded with new construction. As he stood before

"Schools are organic places. You can't go around "forcing" people to do things. School leaders need to nurture and gradually convince people, allowing them space, time and energy. Hopefully you can tap their intellectual capacity to help strategize, to realize the school's intentions. I am very excited when I see groups of teachers taking initiatives in teaching and learning.

I find those with natural leadership even more exciting – the next generation. With the changing education landscape there are so many more avenues and options compared to my day. New principals must understand their challenges, meaning not just the management processes or dealing with parents or with teachers; but being creative, innovative, and more resilient. Parents are far better educated today and have higher expectations. They want to be included, involved. Where you cannot compromise is on teaching and learning. That's the key to everything, our core business."

his new team, Neo recognized many faces from his boyhood at Montfort: some were schoolmates who had joined the teaching ranks, and surprisingly many of his former teachers were still serving. One such teacher was among the first to greet him, with a comment Neo hadn't anticipated.

"I heard you brought a parang along with you from Maris Stella!"

While understanding the metaphorical jest, Neo found the comment disturbing because it invoked the sort of old-school thinking, the authoritarian image that over the years he had worked so hard to shed. Of all people surely Gabrielite Brothers would appreciate that Neo's 'must do' task was unambiguous: to bring up Montfort's academic profile and standing. Neo decided to use this moment to unveil the carefully wrought principle that would guide his tenure. "I'm here

for a task. That task is my philosophy: 'Schools exist for children. Teachers are professionals.' If you are a teacher and you are not professional enough, then I have to try ways and means to persuade you to be professional." Message delivered.

Serving his alma mater as leader affirmed what Neo had long recognized: that loyalty is the lifeblood of Government Aided Schools. Teachers' sense of mission is manifest in their undying service to one school. As the emcee of many retirement fetes for his former teachers Neo felt overwhelmed in paying tribute to those who had shaped him. "It's not uncommon for students to return as teachers – at Montfort as many as 20 or 30. Many are 'niche' teachers who know how to get results: they deliver!"

School alumni are crucial to Mission schools and Neo has proven a deft handler


of these all-important relationships, adding a personalized touch, trading shamelessly on his old boy status. "My hidden agenda? Fundraising. But those writing the cheques have a hidden agenda as well: they expect high academic performance and standing for their school. That makes them proud and strengthens their loyalty." Achievement is therefore implicit in Neo's 'Teachers are Professionals' motto.

His other adage, 'Schools are for Children', found expression in his day to day policy. "I spent a lot of time talking with students. They would come to 'interview' me because my office was open; don't need to make an appointment. Anybody – from parents, to teachers and especially children could just walk in... but not to complain! "Just tell me what your problem is, what you want." Neo literally practised a walk-in policy.

#### SERVING EXTRA TIME

"If I had come from a family that could have sent me to school for my 'A' Levels, would I have chosen teaching? Actually, as a kid, I thought of being an Inspector of Police! The teacher who told me I was making the 'biggest mistake' by joining the profession was still at Montfort when I returned as Principal. And honestly, I still salute him; one of those caring teachers who recognise students' potential, say to be a CEO one day. A principal is a CEO. So if you asked have I achieved my potential? I think I have!" Before sending this to print, *Principia* emailed Mr Neo Tick Watt with a request to fact-check the article, and to ask how retirement suited him. His reply included this postscript:

...busy fund raising for Montfort Secondary School."

Does one ever retire from a Mission School? 



"In my last few days before retiring, at Tampines Secondary School, three kids came in, I thought for a 'settlement talk'. After all, this same three had given us endless problems, one had tattoos all over, and almost every day they were in my office. When I saw them walking from a distance, I thought, 'Not again. Were they to torment me on my last day?' But they came in, this time knocking instead of just walking in, and said, 'Thank you Mr. Neo, thank you very much for giving us a chance and allowing us to continue and get our certificate. That's what you told us: we must finish our education and get a certificate. In other schools, the Principal would have expelled us,' they said. I was really touched."