

PRINCIPIA

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Rethinking Fundamentals, Transforming Schools



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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

DR SHIRLEEN CHEE, PRESIDENT, ACADEMY OF PRINCIPALS (SINGAPORE)

As I write this message, Singapore has just emerged from almost two months of Circuit Breaker. In a span of a few weeks, stay-at-home, work-from-home and learn-from-home became the norm. The Covid-19 pandemic has turned our world upside down. With thousands of lives affected or lost and economies impacted, Covid-19 ushers us towards a future that is even more uncertain and unforeseen. Just a few months ago, we would not have imagined going into full home-based learning, teaching students with masks and face shields, or cancelling national sporting games and other competitions. As Singapore enters into a new “Covid-19 safe” normal, we continue to brace ourselves and prepare to adapt to unknown days ahead.

Our theme for 2020, “Rethinking Fundamentals, Transforming Schools” is set with the future in mind. Through the lens of various school leaders, we explore the fundamentals that education stands for and what needs to shift so that our students can be future-ready. We consider how schools should transform so that teaching and learning become relevant to the fluid environment today. Covid-19 has thrust us into the future overnight. Our emphasis on the use of digital technology was fast-tracked as online teaching and learning became the modus operandi for all schools. Ready or not, schools had to embrace new ways of working as teachers and students adapted and stepped up to instant change.

For many of us, this crisis proves our mettle as school leaders. We have had to manage changing situations and direction, lead colleagues who are stretched and exhausted, and encourage students who are anxious and concerned. Did all the leadership training we received prepare us for such daunting tasks? In these pages, I hope you will find strength and assurance as you learn from the leadership experiences of fellow school leaders. In such challenging times, the support and shared wisdom of the fraternity becomes even more invaluable. May their stories inspire and encourage you to press on.





The journey of transformation for education in Singapore is a continual one and different milestones will be achieved at different points according to the demands of an ever-changing world.



KOH CHIN THONG, MARTIN

HENRY PARK PRIMARY SCHOOL



The Heart of Transformation

Singapore's education system has undergone significant changes. When I first joined the education service in 1993, things were very different. In a span of almost three decades, I witnessed many important milestones in its transformation to where we are today.

In the early days, the staff rooms had no air-conditioning, were spartanly furnished with two teachers sharing a table. Female teachers were not allowed to wear pants and had to wear skirts or dresses all the time. We also had to purchase our own laptops and ICT training involved teaching us how to use email and Microsoft Word. Today, our staff have access to shelves, rooms for collaboration, and work in air-conditioned comfort. Staff room doors are secured by biometric security devices; every teacher is given a notebook and the school is Wi-Fi enabled. All teachers have access to the SLS (Student Learning Space) and video conferencing platforms to do blended and online teaching and learning.

The difference then and now is not just in infrastructure. In terms of education policies, we have seen significant transformation from a survival-driven mode to the innovation-driven focus today. Each of these reforms at various stages ("Thinking School, Learning Nation"; "Ability Driven Education", "Learn for Life", etc.) took into consideration how Singapore had progressed, and considered whether our T&L (teaching and learning) practices remained relevant as we prepared our students for a future that is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

CLARITY IN VISION AND PURPOSE

My first real understanding about the nature of transformation happened when I was directly involved in the "Thinking School, Learning Nation" movement in 1996-7. A Curriculum Review Committee was set up to review the learning styles of students, teaching methodologies and approaches to curriculum assessment from primary to junior college levels. I was a member of

the Humanities Practitioners curriculum team, working with the MOE HQ team to review the humanities curriculum. One of the review processes included reducing the time devoted to content knowledge and rote learning routines, with greater focus on developing learning and thinking skills.

As a young education officer then, I was deeply influenced by the rich interactions with senior officers over the course of the year. "Thinking School, Learning Nation" became the vision of the MOE. It shaped my ideas on what education should be and I realised that there was truth in the phrase "the pen is mightier than the sword". For the first time I saw how educators could transform our students' learning from a macro level and our impact went beyond the classroom. The right education policies have the power to transform schools. Transformed schools lead to a transformed nation.

"Learning Nation" aimed to encourage a supportive social and cultural environment, through the reorientation of the education system with the goal of developing and nurturing the development of one's moral, cognitive, physical and social abilities. This vision also supported the pre-existing education system inclined towards a total learning environment, such as the Masterplan for Information Technology (IT) in Education which was launched in the same year. The purpose for reforms and transformation was very clear - to prepare young Singaporeans for changes in the coming decades.

"Thinking School, Learning Nation" is a vision that still resonates with me today. I am now serving my third school as principal and this vision still remains as my beacon. A vision gives us the fundamental reason why we exist as a school and as a ministry, and why we do what we do. As school leaders, it is important to have clarity and to understand our purpose in running a school. Efficient and good leaders are clear about who they are and what their purpose is. Developing clarity is an important and necessary process so that we can keep sight of our goals and communicate them clearly to the ground.

SUCCESS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

All educators want their students to learn, excel and succeed. This is a fundamental goal but we have to first define success. Certainly, success is not about acing national examinations. There is a whole set of skills that our students need to have in order to thrive in the 21st century. The need to have these skillsets is even more evident with the outbreak of Covid-19. The pandemic has accelerated us into the future with its uncertainty, unpredictability and focus on technology. 21st century skills provide a framework for successful learning in the classroom, and will enable students to thrive in a world where change is constant and learning never stops. Our students represent the future workforce upon which our nation's well-being will depend on. School leaders and educators need to ensure that learners enter the world with an understanding of what it takes to be good citizens who are civically engaged, critically thinking, digitally literate, globally aware, and effective communicators.

This is not to say that literacy and numeracy are no longer important. They remain relevant but are insufficient alone in preparing our students for the future.

THE BALL IS IN YOUR COURT

All school leaders play a critical role in shaping and enabling the schools under their charge to become good schools. At the same time, we need to understand the ground. There should never be a one size fits all approach to leading a school as every school is different. In a way, school leaders are like tennis players playing a match in different courts. The type of court where we play our game affects our preparation and the way we play. Are we playing in a hard court, clay court or grass court? Is it indoor or outdoor? We have to deal with different conditions although we are still playing the same game.

In my first tour as a principal of Zhenghua Primary School, we fostered a niche area in dance for the school as a means to advance holistic education. The student profile at Zhenghua belonged to a lower social economic status (SES) and many of the children did not have much parental support. We planned to emphasise dance as part of transforming our culture to one that was more well-rounded. The process was difficult because even my strongest teachers believed that we should focus our time and effort to provide academic support to the students. Many students were struggling in academic areas and the teachers believed that we should make full use of available time to drill them in order to get good academic results. This was not wrong if academic excellence was only what we wanted to achieve.

As a school, we believed in a greater purpose - we wanted our children to enjoy education, grow affectively and have

a quality school experience. We hoped that they would be curious and possess a love for learning, and have the courage to think for themselves and follow their passions. Our dream was for them to leave school with confidence and purpose and ultimately contribute to the community. Such goals cannot be achieved by focussing only on the academic domain. The process of transformation requires changing mindsets and having the commitment to pursue a greater goal. School leaders have the responsibility to operationalise the direction set by MOE; in the process, we often have to make choices between two rights. More academic time may not necessarily translate to better results. On the other hand, if a child loves and enjoys school, he would naturally be passionate about doing well. We can move faster and further if we do things differently as opposed to always doing the same thing.

In order to find an effective balance, we spent a lot of effort and time fostering our Programme for School-based Excellence (PSE) and uplifted the children. As much as we focused on holistic education, we also kept our foot on the pedal in the academic area, with an eye especially on weaker students. One disagreement that we had among the school executive committee was due to my insistence on setting our targets in our strategic plans as 100% passes for the P6 children. The teachers told me that it was not realistic and some even felt that we were deliberately misleading (or lying to) our students! Intellectually, I understood their rationale, but in my heart, I believed that every student should be given the chance to do well. I did not allow the targets to be set any lower as I felt that we would be giving licence to the teachers and children to fail because we believed they would. At Zhenghua, I introduced the phrase "true lies" to teachers. In some of my teachers' mind, our weakest students could not pass their exams if we adopted a holistic approach in supporting them. But we continued to focus on possibilities, constantly speaking the language of hope and confidence to our students and making the exams something positive. Because the students embraced what we told them, they believed in themselves and did well. One of my best moments at Zhenghua was always the last day of school when students cried when they suddenly realized that they were about to leave their second home. The school was not just a place for their education, but a place where they grew up, forged meaningful bonds with friends and teachers, found joy in learning and overcame adversity. We turned the "lies" into truths.

As principal, it was important that my teachers believed what was fundamental in education – that every child can succeed and teachers do not give up on our children. The belief in uplifting the children and not leaving anyone behind was an important cog in the transformation that we were trying to achieve in our schools. This fundamental belief has not changed and serves as a source of inspiration and pride for our staff.

UNDERSTANDING THE GROUND

When I became principal of Henry Park Primary School, I used a different approach. The students were from a higher SES and there was evidently a lot more parental support. We looked for more opportunities to create unstructured spaces in the curriculum, to open minds to multiple pathways and seed lifelong learning. We wanted our children to realise that there were many routes to success and that it was not a sin to fail sometimes. Failure gives us the resilience, knowledge and humility to attain greater success later on. Some students came from families where failure was unacceptable. We encountered parents who openly shared that they expected their child to go to a particular school because it was “the best school” or because the parent was from there. We also had a child who needed the support of our school counsellor because he failed to get a T-score of 250 for PSLE. We realised that many of the children experienced immense pressure and decided that protecting our children’s mental well-being was a priority. Therefore, we reduced the emphasis on scores and made changes to our forms of assessment. By shifting our focus away from grades and exam/test preparations, teaching and learning became a more enriching and fulfilling experience. We also removed supplementary lessons as we felt that the students needed more breathing space. Only children who needed extra help were given remedial lessons which were held in the afternoon. Moreover, we removed Continual Assessment (CA) and introduced Term Reviews where the assessment was more diagnostic rather than summative.

Henry Park already has strong processes to achieve good academic and CCA results. In order to help our students grow holistically, we put in place processes where they learnt to redefine excellence and success. The school conceptualized

the INOVAT process in 2019 with the help of students and staff. INOVAT is a customised thinking model that equips students with the essential thinking skillsets, attitudes and values for life. Each letter making up INOVAT is distinctive with specific colours and character strength (based on Positive Education principles by Martin Seligman). The learning is purposeful and progressive as the students go through INOVAT (I – Ideate & Initiate; N – Navigate & Narrow; O – Organise & Optimise; V – Visualise & Verify; A – Adapt & Apply; T – Transform & Transfer) by phases. By going through the different phases of INOVAT, students pick up critical thinking skills to solve problems and learn about the 24 character strengths which will guide them through as lifelong learners. Positive Education aims to help students develop stronger self-management skills and resilient mindsets to persevere, and to be able to accept failure as a process for growth and character development.

Through the programme, our students are equipped with a spirit of dare, innovation and confidence. They move out of their comfort zone, think on their feet and solve problems. Students are given the opportunity to stand in front of a crowd to pitch their ideas and present their proposals. They are compelled to work in teams because some lessons are designed in the form of escape rooms. As a result of regular conversations and engagement with both staff and parents, INOVAT is well received by all stakeholders. The students also fully engaged in these lessons even though they do not count for their overall assessment.

Was there a contradiction in the ways that I led in these two schools? The fundamentals in education remained the same and I aligned my vision accordingly. However, the methods



to attain my goals were different because both schools were different. As school leaders, we have to understand the profile of our students and be well-informed about the realities on the ground. Once we know the pulse on the ground, we can craft our approach towards transformation. If we do not do that, we cannot initiate any significant changes for the better. As I reflected on my leadership experience in both schools, I also came to better understand the difference between equality and fairness. Being fair does not mean giving every child the same thing, rather, it means giving every child what he needs.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Leadership is often a lonely journey. Even with our best intentions, we are sometimes misread or misunderstood. Transforming a school cannot be done alone. It requires the support of the whole community. We need to get teachers, students and parents involved. Shifting the culture of an organisation requires a sustained period of engagement and adherence to robust processes. The question many a time is not what to do. It is what to do differently, and what not to do. Culture transformation in a school is a shift that takes place throughout the school and in individual departments and teams. It requires changing the hearts, minds, and skills of the staff to support the desired culture. Individuals must first have the conviction (heart) to change their behaviour. We must always engage the hearts of our people. To do this, we as leaders need to be ourselves -- real and vulnerable. The day the most passionate members of our staff keep silent in the decision-making process will mark the sounding of the death knell of what we want to achieve. The voices on the ground must always be heard and understood, and even if we

do not agree with their views. It is not sufficient to just value our teachers – they must feel that they are valued. School leaders also need to find personal support to keep our morale up. In moments of self-doubt, I am grateful to mentors and peers who share their perspectives and offer words of encouragement. There were many such moments.

LESSONS FROM A PANDEMIC

The Covid-19 pandemic has been devastating to our understanding of life as we know it. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that Singaporeans have to get used to a new normal, as returning to the previous state of affairs is no longer possible. I recently learnt from a friend who decided to establish a new law firm. She shared that a big office was an unnecessary burden. She would work from home in order to keep costs low; clients would pay only for her skills and not for her rent. Such thinking would have been inconceivable a few years ago.

Most of us are aware that nowadays a degree scroll is no silver bullet that enables our students to thrive in the future. Education should focus on building relevant knowledge and skills, instead of attaining qualifications. We should do our best to challenge this belief right from primary school. Much of the knowledge and technical skills acquired through degrees can become quickly obsolete in this fast-changing world. The knowledge economy no longer pays graduates for what they know but how they extrapolate from what they know and apply that knowledge to new situations. In the new normal, critical thinking skills and ability to discern information will be crucial.



Our Singapore schools are already focussing on “soft skills” (such as leadership skills, EQ and cultural intelligence) and this is something we should continue to build on. Schools can maximise white spaces to allow the students to work in authentic environments, where they learn to be adaptable, to work in multicultural teams and to communicate effectively. These are the skills which will enable an individual to not just land a job in the post-pandemic world, but also thrive in it.

The pandemic has also shown the importance of being tech-savvy. Technological skills will be required in the workplace (which can be at home) as digital tools become commonplace. AI, virtual and augmented reality, robotics, blockchain and more will become a part of our everyday experience. Our students need to be comfortable with these tools and to develop skills to work with them. I fully support MOE’s decision to fast track its plan for every Secondary 1 student to own a Personal Learning Device (PLD), and to even include primary school children in these plans if possible.

Schools should also pay more attention to fostering compassion and appreciation among the children. The pandemic illustrates the importance of enabling our students to empathise with fellow Singaporeans and all residents in Singapore. It has also brought to light issues about racism, how we perceive foreigners and social inequalities. As school leaders, we must strive to foster a school climate in which everyone shows empathy and care. In the post-Covid world, learning to work with and appreciate others will become even more important in order to succeed in life.

Recently, Henry Park adopted the migrant worker dormitory located at the former Nexus International School. I saw this as an opportunity for our students to build knowledge and understanding of the role of migrant workers in Singapore. At the same time, we could nurture the children in learning to do good for others especially those neglected by society. The students reflected how their own ancestors came to Singapore as migrant workers and how their forefathers laboured to build modern Singapore. The students then penned their notes of appreciation to the workers. As part of their VIA, the students will also be collecting essential items for the residents of the dormitory. They will also make masks during art lessons to donate to these workers.

The journey of transformation for education in Singapore is a continual one and different milestones will be achieved at different points according to the demands of an ever-changing world. As our leaders revisit and adapt fundamentals, it is up to us as school leaders to carry out the work of transformation in our schools. To do this effectively, we have to be clear about the goals of education and understand the nature of the schools we lead. We also need to have the full involvement of the community around us. Most of all, in our hearts, we have to fully believe in what we do and find meaning in our role as leaders. A principal has great influence to change things for the better. Truly, our leadership journey is a continual one and as Covid-19 has shown us, we have to always be ready to adapt and learn.



MY LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

Know your vision

– be clear about your purpose and be committed to fulfil it

Know the ground

– understand where you play and adapt your strategies accordingly

Define your mission

– have clear goals and work persistently towards them

Get support

– get your team and stakeholders involved

Have a big heart

– value, appreciate and believe in others

Embrace the unknown

– the VUCA future is now, embrace it or be left behind



We can process this experience and use the learning as opportunities to reflect and recalibrate what is important to us. When we return to some level of normalcy, we will not be the same.



SITA SINGH

NAVAL BASE PRIMARY SCHOOL



The Evolution of Education

Education has existed since the beginning of human history. It is part of the process of instilling skills and knowledge to prepare the young for adulthood. With each succeeding generation, education evolved. The goal of these transformations is to ensure that children will be well-equipped to face and contribute to the world when they grow up.

In today's dynamic environment with ever-changing needs and situations, the process of transforming education to suit the times is even more critical. Educators need to imbue in students the values, skills and attitudes that will help them navigate the unknown. With such a goal in mind, school leaders need to focus on the process – the 'hows' and not make the mistake of just seeing what needs to be addressed, which will constantly change over time. One of my mentors used to say, "we as educators must be ahead of time so that our students will arrive on time". As educators, we need to project as far as we can see into the future so that our charges will be ready. It is said that the best teacher is the one that the student does not need anymore. In today's context, we need to produce independent, self-directed and resilient lifelong learners who will have the confidence to overcome whatever comes their way.

In Singapore's context, compared to a decade or so ago, we are far more child-centred and values-focused. We are more intentional in delivering holistic education and there is a broader definition of success. These notions were bandied around in the past, but we have taken bold steps in that direction with changes such as reducing the emphasis on exams and grades as well as implementing the revised PSLE scoring, Full Subject Based Banding and other initiatives. In addition, we now believe in the benefit of partnerships – working closely with parents as well as partners in the community and industry. It truly takes a village to raise a child and reaching out beyond the school for opportunities and support can only be beneficial to our students. Leveraging technology also has

made communication much easier as workload is reduced in school. Besides, using Parents Gateway or SLS for teaching and learning fits perfectly with the digital natives in our classrooms today.

REFRAMING FUNDAMENTALS

While transformation is necessary in order to remain relevant to times, certain core fundamentals will always remain. These include the basics in education namely literacy and numeracy. Without mastering these abilities, how can one be useful to society? A good grounding in literacy and numeracy is necessary for all other learning to take place. This is as true today as it was in the past.

However, in today's setting the definition of literacy has expanded and goes beyond just mastering a language but also having appropriate communication skills to persuade, negotiate, debate and convince. It also includes digital literacy – being adept at using technology both in teaching and learning as well as in the workplace. Digital literacy has become even more important especially in recent times where the world grapples with the Covid-19 pandemic. Imagine how different (and deprived) our lives would have been under circuit breaker if we did not have any access to or competence in using technology!

Another key fundamental that all educators should uphold is the inculcation of right values which will see our students through life's ups and downs. Besides values like integrity, respect, diligence and discipline, we also need to teach our students how to deal with mistakes and failures so that we can develop resilience. When I was growing up failure had a negative connotation and as a result I avoided taking risks. I always wanted to be sure of the answer before attempting to respond to questions in order to avoid a rebuke from the teacher. That was a common thinking among students in the past. Today, we need to consciously help our students see

failure as a minor glitch along life's journey and embrace the positive learning that comes from making mistakes. Teachers need to have a mindset shift so that students will not fear failure. It is said that "your best teacher is your last mistake". We need to teach our students to question and allow them to make mistakes so that they can learn. When students see failing or making mistakes as part of education, learning becomes fun.

REDEFINING FUNDAMENTALS

Some fundamentals have to be changed so that schools can be transformed and relevant today. One would be the definition of success. Academic results are often seen as the gauge of success and if one gained entry into certain courses or professions one is deemed to have "made it". Such thinking serves only to divide society and create distinctions between those who have and those who have not. We need to look at our students holistically, not just at their cognitive strengths or academic ability. As school leaders, we should encourage our charges to go as far as they can in their areas of strength and celebrate successes beyond academics. We help students to identify their interests and strengths, which we then nurture through their CCAs, which they can eventually use for Direct School Admission (DSA). It is not just left to chance especially for students from humble backgrounds who may need extra support. We need to continue to do this more intentionally, so that students do not miss out on opportunities because of their family backgrounds. Every child is a gift to celebrate including those who are not academically inclined or have special learning needs.

Some years ago, we had a student at Naval Base Primary who had special learning needs and did not pass the PSLE. However, while he was a student here, his teachers and the Allied Educator (Learning and Behavioural Support) continued to nurture him in his areas of strength which included acting. He continued his education at Northlight School and is today a successful actor who appears in a daily television serial on Channel 5. His achievement is a great success!

Besides redefining success, another fundamental area close to my heart is Affective Education. This field is often neglected but it has become even more important in today's challenging environment. While our students today are privileged to have more opportunities and enjoy new forms of learning, they also face greater pressures mentally and emotionally. Life has become more stressful and fast-paced. Students compete to excel and have to juggle heavier workloads besides CCA and other activities. They need to be empowered with skills and knowledge to take care of their own wellbeing.

Affective education is not a woolly concept but a core fundamental in the development of all human beings. Affective learning stays with the student long after the

academics have been forgotten or "returned to the teacher" as they say. These include social emotional competencies, values inculcation and character development. All these, if done well and consistently taught throughout the education of our young, will help them deal with issues from bullying, peer pressure and failure, to managing and building diverse relationships and developing strong work ethics. We need to prepare every child for success. Affective learning trains children to navigate life by cultivating their strengths, maximising their wellbeing and developing skills to effectively cope with life's inevitable challenges.

TRANSFORMATION IS ONGOING

Having been in service for more than three decades, I am very encouraged to see how schools in Singapore have evolved. For transformation to be effective and far-reaching, it is necessary to take measured and well-calibrated steps versus applying quick fixes. Our nation's education journey will always remain a work in progress considering how our environment is in a constant state of change. I like to describe this process of transformation as a butterfly emerging from its cocoon. Today, parents can trust that schools value their children and strive to cultivate their strengths and interests so that they can fulfil their potential in life. Education now includes multiple pathways and is no longer one size fits all.

As school leaders, we need to continue to uphold this spirit of looking out at the world around us and then looking in to examine where we are so that we can always remain true to the students and nation we serve. Personally, I have found my journey as a teacher and school leader to be very rewarding and meaningful. It is indeed a privilege to serve.

TRUST AND BELIEF IN CHALLENGING TIMES

The Covid-19 pandemic is an opportunity for us to demonstrate good leadership and to reframe what is negative into something positive. In such stressful times, exercising the right leadership principles can make a difference between success and failure in coping with a crisis.

The first principle in leadership during uncertain times is to trust in your team and believe in your organisation/school. We must trust our teachers and staff. All they need are broad directions and support. Empower them and they will rise to the occasion to serve our students' needs. We must also believe that we can overcome as a school. I am thankful that Naval Base Primary was able to transit smoothly into digital learning as we had focussed on the SLS and encouraged our teachers to use it when it was launched. The SLS certainly helped when we had to go into full home-based learning (FHBL) at short notice. As our teachers were comfortable with the use of technology in Teaching and Learning (T&L), they were able to quickly pick up other technologies such as Zoom, Loom, as well as Google Meet and integrate them into their lessons.



MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

Leaders must also manage expectations, while being open to surprises. The Covid-19 experience gave us better understanding of the varied responses from both staff and students/parents in terms of coping with FHBL as well as the support required. It was a steep learning curve for some. Leaders need to expect failure and be open to mistakes. Some students did not have access to laptops and/or Wi-Fi; some parents struggled with supervising and monitoring their children's work; and students with special education needs (SEN) struggled with the new ways of learning.

Even in the midst of these setbacks, there were positive stories such as the rich sharing of resources and lesson ideas among colleagues within the school and the wider education fraternity through the SG Learning Designers Circle Public Group (SGLDC). The camaraderie and unity offered us great support.

I was also pleasantly surprised at how some students who usually had disciplinary issues in school became engaged and submitted good quality work during FHBL. I was touched when an upper primary student who had issues with absenteeism from school turned around during FHBL and submitted her work promptly. In another instance, a difficult Primary 2 student with special needs teamed up with his Primary 1 brother to perform a song written by their mother in support of healthcare workers. The performance was video recorded with props

and submitted as part of a Social Studies assignment! Therefore, we should never underestimate our students (or their parents!). Every child is capable of excellence and they often show up in the unlikeliest of times.

COMMUNICATE TO BUILD CONFIDENCE

The importance of communication cannot be undermined especially in times of crisis. Communicate regularly, calmly and clearly with staff and parents to let them know what to expect, how they can move forward and how they will be supported. Take time to also listen to and address their needs and concerns. By doing so, we will give them confidence. Some practical ways to ease communication include standardising processes across the school and providing a platform for clarification. It is also necessary to regularly check on staff well being and show affirmation and appreciation to keep them motivated in the midst of the uncertainty.

FORM PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORKS

The Covid-19 crisis strengthened the partnership between school and home as students, and parents developed a greater understanding, empathy and respect for one another. School leaders should leverage these strengthened ties beyond Covid-19 to enable greater communication and synergy between school and home.

Besides support from parents and colleagues, school leaders should have their own networks of fellow school leaders to

confer with. Besides the usual cluster colleagues, I also had my informal network of friends from other clusters and zones who proved to be a great resource for brainstorming and getting inputs for dealing with the crisis. There is power in collaboration and where we lack experience, others can guide us.

Having experienced SARS as a newly minted school leader in 2003, I am optimistic that we will overcome this pandemic and emerge stronger and nimbler. We are already better at dealing with Covid-19 because many of our school leaders went through SARS. We need to be positive and give our people hope and reassurance. Through this crisis, we will emerge better and more robust as a nation. Never fear!

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SCHOOLING

The Covid-19 experience has highlighted some of the social and economic inequalities existing in our schools. It gave us the impetus to close gaps especially where access to technology was concerned. If education is a universal leveller then we certainly cannot afford to ignore the needs of less privileged children. I am grateful that this became a quick priority for our service and many students from humble backgrounds in schools like mine were able to get their hands on laptops easily and without cost. School leaders need to continue to be advocates for such children to ensure they are not left behind. We need to have strong safety nets in place in order for schools and families to help every child reach their full potential. School leaders need to deploy resources strategically and invest in what we value.

This crisis has also helped us to recognise the limitations of HBL for some groups of students such as those with SEN. We realise that beyond supporting these students, we need to support their parents and families too. Teachers who work with students with learning difficulties have been forced to build new skills in supporting families and students online. The crisis is a wakeup call for school leaders to come together to do better for every single child.

Without the mid-year exams, our teachers' learning in terms of alternative assessment was enhanced as they had to find other ways to know if their students had achieved mastery in what they had taught. They explored new models of evaluation to measure and applied differentiated instruction techniques for their students. Lessons have become more personalised.

Some other transformative experiences during this period included the stress and high priority given to personal hygiene which hopefully will continue to be part of our modus operandi in the future. There was also much curiosity and learning about viruses and how they were transmitted as well as the role of individual habits and responsibility in the spread of diseases. The whole experience also became a teachable moment in terms of developing compassion, empathy and even respect for people such as healthcare workers and cleaners.



I see even greater use and reliance on technology as we move forward post-Covid. The virus situation has given teachers a boost in mastering e-pedagogy. Education models will shift towards other modes of delivery such as virtual platforms. Schools will need to develop and implement an alternative education strategy that allows the continuity of instruction remotely, when required. The quick shift to FHBL was a good time to reshape our understanding of what learning could be. On the other hand, we need to engage in professional development to provide space for reflective dialogue and generative conversations around making some of these changes permanent. How do we use technology better as students cannot be expected to be glued to their computers for hours (although they may actually like it)? We need to explore pedagogies that work and also discern what is suitable for different age groups.

I see even greater collaboration between teachers and parents for the benefit of the children. The Covid-19 experience forced two groups of people to work together. In the process, greater understanding and empathy were established and new possibilities for collaboration created. I see the term “we” being used more meaningfully when we talk about parents and teachers working together to serve our students.

As educators relied on caregivers and parents to support student learning during FHBL, the urgency for schools to be more welcoming to families as partners has never become greater. We need to make academic content and school resources more accessible. We also need to provide information in easy and comprehensible ways so that any parent or caregiver can support their children without feeling overwhelmed.

The virus also brought out the best in both teachers and students. Teachers took care of one another and collaborated on the same mission to do their best for their students. They built networks and shared best practices within the school and across the service via technology. Students also became more independent and self-directed in their learning.

We can process this experience and use the learning as opportunities to reflect and recalibrate what is important to us. When we return to some level of normalcy, we will not be the same. In the new normal, we will perhaps be more paranoid about hygiene and social distancing but also learn to be more deliberate in deepening human connections and more purposeful about educating all children well. We will also be more aware about the power of human goodness and more focused on partnering families and external organisations to educate the young. One of the pandemic’s major legacies will certainly be resilience as leaders learn to handle challenges at all fronts from students and parents to teachers and supervisors. Indeed, the training gained from this crisis is worth much more than lessons learnt from textbooks.



LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES IN A CRISIS

Trust your team

– give broad directions and empower your team.

Believe in your organisation

– believe that together you can overcome.

Manage expectations

– expect failure and be willing to learn from mistakes.

Communicate to build confidence

– let people know what to expect.

Always be calm and take time to listen.

Form partnerships and networks

– tap on the support of peers and community.



What remains central and timeless will be our mission-mindedness as a fraternity to ensure that education remains a public good accessible to all generations of Singaporeans. By fixing our gaze on this North Star, we would not veer from fulfilling our obligation to all our children and our children to come.



TEO KOK HONG

NGEE ANN SECONDARY SCHOOL



Starting from Purpose

Education is “the obligation that the existence of children entails for every human society”. These words from Hannah Arendt resonated with me when I first read them. To me, Arendt lays out the first cause and purpose of education. Education is each society’s obligation to its young and every generation has a right to quality education. Education is thus a public good and it is the sacrosanct duty of educators to ensure that quality education remains a reality accessible to succeeding generations of Singaporeans.

Schooling has long served the purposes of facilitating the self-actualisation, preparation, and socialisation of every child for life, work and citizenship. In so far as each of these purposes of schooling constitutes a fundamental of education, rethinking fundamentals would warrant rethinking these purposes of schooling in the light of meeting future needs, as we move into the “Learn for Life” phase of education.

SELF-ACTUALISATION

As a fundamental of education, supporting the self-actualisation of every child comes from the recognition that each child is unique and calls for the education we provide to be learner-centric. Unlocking and nurturing students’ unique potential constitutes every educator’s blood and calling. As we guide students to discover and carve their own niche based on their strengths, passions and talents, we help them find their place and purpose in the world.

Going forward, this fundamental of facilitating the self-actualisation of learners through personal discovery and development becomes even more salient. As a system, we want to better recognise the diverse strengths and aspirations of our learners through broadening the definitions of success and providing multiple pathways for further development. We also want to normalise skills learning and mastery as

a natural part of the process of learning, discovery and development of one’s potential and strengths, in line with lifelong learning. Beyond self-actualisation, students will also be more future-ready and able to tap into the vast opportunities of a global economy with its demand for diverse skillsets.

To realise this need for greater learner-centricity to support self-actualisation, our key shift as a system has been to make our curriculum even more strengths-based in the form of Full Subject-Based Banding (FSBB). By removing streams, we also invite all stakeholders to take a more strengths-based perspective by seeing each child as a talent, in different ways, and at different stages of development. I believe that over time FSBB will go some way in shaping Singaporean perspectives to education as the removal of the EM1-3 streams in primary school has shown. The rethinking of fundamentals here is one of perspective, driven by structural change in curriculum to change societal view of learners and learning.

In response to these shifts, Ngee Ann Secondary has designed our curriculum and programmes to further cater for students to discover and develop their unique strengths, interests and talents. We are introducing elective modules that promote skills learning and strengths discovery. We are also expanding and enhancing our talent development programmes to recognise more talent areas and to better cater to students who demonstrate higher potential and performance in specific areas. As a school, we have started professional development for the key personnel in Differentiated Instruction, with plans to scale the training to all staff. This will equip us to better support our students according to their diverse profiles, as they grow and develop in our programmes and classrooms. It will also better position us for the implementation of FSBB. In the course of our school conversations, we found that our staff fully believe in the intent of FSBB as a strength-based means to

better help every student develop to his or her full potential. Our vision is for our students to emerge from our school system with confidence and an understanding of the strengths they possess, and having the desire to make a positive difference to society by using their strengths. It is with this goal in mind that we will courageously embrace the coming FSBB as a school.

PREPARATION

The concept of preparation as a fundamental of education involves equipping our children with the mindsets, skillsets and toolsets for the long term, and to succeed long after they have graduated from school. While the idea of preparation remains relevant, what students will need to be future-ready evolves with the external environment.

For the hyper-VUCA future that our students will inherit, we know that academics alone will not future-proof the child, even as academic rigour remains important. Our students will need to go beyond being book-smart. In tandem with “Learn for Life”, schools are moving into laying the foundation for lifelong learning in all students. This includes cultivating in them the growth mindset, resilience and adaptability to learn, relearn and unlearn in order to embrace lifelong career mobility. With the onset of Industrial Revolution 4.0, students also need the 21st Century Competencies (21CC), which underscores the creative and social capacities of humans that automation cannot replace. Finally, students will require digital literacy to navigate and tap into the opportunities that arise in the digital era and economy, even as Singapore moves towards Smart Nation 2030.

To support these new foci, we have made several structural changes as a system to help students be ready for the tests of life and not just a life of tests. The changes include shifts in school-based assessments to reduce an over-emphasis on examinations and grades, the PSLE changes, and the promotion of the joy of learning, among others.

At the school level, these shifts have given us the impetus to revisit how we will engender the joy of learning and facilitate growth in students as lifelong learners with 21CC as an integral part of our curriculum. My team and I visited various emerging industries and heard professionals echoing the same 21CC and lifelong learning attributes as vital for success at the workplace. In calibrating our curriculum, we realise that these competencies are less tangible and harder to formally “teach”. It calls for us to place greater primacy on the process as opposed to the product of learning, which may or may not show up as improved grades. We have embarked on efforts to more deeply integrate 21CC into our everyday curriculum to ensure pervasiveness and sustained opportunities for practice by the students. As part of the process of transformation, we constantly explore how to enhance our total curriculum to

be more authentic, applied and experiential. This involves how we design learning experiences, apply pedagogies, provide practice opportunities and give formative feedback for students’ learning. In the course of their years with us, our aspiration is that students will have the ability to reason, analyse and apply to life situations the mindsets and competencies they have learnt.

In addition, we cast a vision for subject-based learning to nourish and spark wonder, curiosity and imagination, so that students not only master, but are inspired by the beauty of the subjects they are studying. While we strive to achieve this in the classroom, we also plan to introduce subject-based days to further promote authentic, applied, experiential and out-of-the-box learning. The subject-based days give our department teachers the autonomy to collaborate as designers and artists, as they create engaging and effective learning experiences to augment learning in the classroom and cultivate a deeper appreciation for the intrinsic value of every subject students learn. Ultimately, we hope to produce graduates who are not only skilled learners, but also a future workforce who possesses a deep love and joy for learning.

SOCIALISATION

As a fundamental of education, socialisation is about inducting students to our way of life through an appreciation of our social, cultural and national contexts. It is about cultivating in students sound values, and engendering in them a sense of identity and belonging as citizens who have the desire to give back and pay it forward to family, community and nation. Character work, moral reasoning and ethical development mainly occur under the socialisation purpose of education, as these are concepts that find their life and value only in relation to the other, in the fact that others exist beyond self.

Peering ahead, Singaporean society is aging, growing more heterogeneous, and becoming more stratified as meritocracy matures, with social mixing thinning out. Students are also exposed to diverse perspectives and value systems as they grow up. They will have more opportunities to live, study or work abroad. Even if they stay in Singapore, they will invariably interface with a multi-national workforce. These factors necessitate that we nurture in students a strong Singaporean heartbeat, respect and empathy for others, and also develop them into future citizens who actively contribute to social good so as to build a more cohesive, caring and inclusive Singaporean society.

There are many things one can emphasise in rethinking the socialisation function of schools. As a system and in schools, we are doing many of these parts well. I choose to share my thoughts on the teaching of care and agency. I choose care because I believe it is the most fundamental

relational quality that expands into all facets of character and citizenship education, including the promotion of overall well-being. To complement care, student's character, citizenry and leadership development can further hone on student agency to nurture future Singaporeans who have strong conviction, initiative and ownership to effect social good, regardless of their chosen field. I believe that by focusing on teaching care and agency, we will be able to transform the graduates we produce as a system to meet the challenges and opportunities of Society 4.0, and make a difference to the future outcome for Singapore.

Noddings' notion of teaching care strongly resonates with me. At its core, the aim of teaching care is to teach students to care for self and others. To help students build a Singaporean society that is cohesive, caring and inclusive, we need most fundamentally to help children learn how to care for others. Central to care is empathy and relation, for which care may germinate and operate. Care begins when one starts to feel for the well-being of the other, and should be nourished to fully blossom into social action for social good. Care for the other should permeate all relationships in school: student-student, student-staff and staff-staff. That in itself will be the best teacher of care. It should be the school culture. The concept of care is not all touchy-feely and soft. Care can be tough as needed, such as when we care enough to correct and discipline. To engender an understanding of our society beyond school, we need to develop agency in students to venture out into the public space to cultivate and exercise their empathetic and relational capacities to understand, care and contribute to the diverse other, such as through Values-In-Action programmes. Through social action borne of care and agency and facilitated by teachers, our hope is for students to develop a sense of our shared identity and destiny, tethered by a love for Singapore through the bonds of citizenship.

In our school, we are more intentionally deepening our culture of care and embarking to further hone student agency in our character and leadership development programmes. My key personnel and I engaged in deep conversations with young millennial social entrepreneurs who are good examples of youth with agency, to better understand the values and passion that drive them, and how schools can contribute to the lives of young people in this regard. Nurturing care and agency in our students is our way of contributing to the bigger nation-building efforts, as we prepare our graduates to be the future pioneers and architects of Singapore.

LEADERSHIP IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

"It is possible to prepare for a future without knowing what it will be. The primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend to the quality of our relationships, to how well we know and trust one another." – Margaret Wheatley.

This quote sums up what I believe to be true about meeting our current challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic and of taking on an uncertain future, with its emphasis on people and the quality of relationships as a leadership principle in VUCA times.

KEY LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

People – The key group that needs to be maximally supported and encouraged throughout crisis or change management is the staff. Only when the staff is fully supported can they in turn fully support the students to keep them safe and learning. Take care of the staff at all times, not just during a crisis. Nurture sincere and strong relationships. Build trust, teamwork and mission-mindedness to stand the stead when the test comes. I am blessed that when I came to Ngee Ann Secondary, there was already a strong staff culture of trust, collegiality and professionalism, which is a key fundamental for an effective school.





Purpose – Keep the purpose clear and communicate rationale to give everyone a clear understanding about the actions needed from them and why. In the Covid-19 situation, everyone has to be clear that the mission is securing safety and learning continuity, and they must be able to rationalise all the follow up actions on their part in light of the mission.

Presence –The leadership team needs to step up and be fully present to support the staff who are learning intensely to run all the new ops. Dedication and due diligence to know the details of implementation issues are needful because it is a novel situation. Only then can we be a pillar of support for our staff and give them the assurance they need to carry out their duties. In all this, the principal has to be the point person to take on the bulk of fronting the operations and the one to bite the bullet and face the music when needed.

Pause – In highly uncertain times, information comes and changes quickly, as everyone is figuring out the best approach in tandem with rapid developments. While there is a need to be responsive, waiting time is not wasting time. Giving wait time where we can afford helps in change management, and may in fact optimise time and energy for the staff. It ensures that when the information is finally passed on to the staff, it is more or less finalised. This reduces confusion for staff arising from many rounds of communication and optimises their effort in implementing the intense series of changes.

Process – In a novel, rapidly developing situation, many new processes will need to be set up. It is helpful to be mindful to apply Occam's razor in setting up new processes. Keep them simple and ride as much as possible on existing processes to achieve synergy and reduced addition of unnecessary workload.

I am conscious that even as I share this, the pandemic is ongoing. But the key lesson I learnt this season is to be grateful. I appreciate the immense support that staff, coaches, parents, our school management committee, school cluster and the Ministry of Education has given to ensure our school's business continuity.

EDUCATION IN A POST COVID-19 FUTURE

If we read the media, many have spoken about the new normal until a vaccine is found. In the context of education, Covid-19 has really sped up the learning curve for our fraternity. If we can go by the fact that the implementation completion of the Personalised Digital Learning Programme (PDLP) has been brought forward from 2028 to 2021 for all secondary school students, we have compressed seven years of learning! The more direct short term impact of Covid-19 is likely the normalisation and mainstreaming of blended learning comprising face-to-face and Home-Based Learning until a vaccine is found.

In the longer term post-Covid, taking a leaf from extant distance learning courses offered by Institutes of Higher

Learning, it may not be that far-fetched to think that we may begin to adopt online learning as a regular feature in planning teaching and learning, rather than as an afterthought. There is scope to consider whether certain parts of learning can be permanently held online. This is possible because the competence and comfort level of our teachers in the use of video-conferencing for teaching has increased tremendously, leading to more effective learning. The HBL experience may have also crystallised the efficacies of certain learning activities that may be better delivered online to give productivity gains. For instance, one issue that plague schools is the constraints placed on timetabling in order to cater to students who have lessons at external centres in the afternoon. After our online learning experience, might it be better that some of these lessons be held permanently online? Or for other activities that may involve participants from many schools? During Home-Based Learning, we held our Career Awareness Talks online. Though there were a number of invited speakers, we eschewed the need for as many venues. Speakers could also share without physically coming to school, which helped with their busy schedules. Online learning has also opened up the possibility for cross-school collaborations, be it at the staff or student level, especially if the number of persons and distance involved are large, or when many venues are needed for break out discussions. One example is how the student councils from a few schools collaborated to produce a video that encouraged the students from their respective schools, while staying at home. There are indeed many collaboration possibilities. However, while we remove barriers for online learning, we must not introduce new ones for disadvantaged students on the other side of the digital divide.

Beyond changes to learning formats, and in anticipation of future pandemics, there may be a need to factor in the necessity for social distancing and contactless school practices and operations in going forward. This may mean that the design specifications for school infrastructure may need to be rethought to account for the additional space or protective barriers needed on campus to achieve decongestion or segregation. At the same time, there may be push for a fuller use of contactless strategies to cover even more aspects of school life. Simple examples include full e-payment for canteen food for all or a move towards electronic handling and marking of students' work. In short, the full gamut of school life ranging from the delivery of teaching and learning to other school operations that involve physical human-to-human interaction may need to be redesigned and made contactless, as far as practicable.

Fundamentals may need to be rethought with the times to transform what we emphasise with respect to the purpose and format of education and schooling. What remains central and timeless will be our mission-mindedness as a fraternity to ensure that education remains a public good accessible to all generations of Singaporeans. By fixing our gaze on this North Star, we would not veer from fulfilling our obligation to all our children and our children to come. In so doing, we fulfil our noblest mission to "Mould the Future of Our Nation".



THE 5Ps OF LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES IN A CRISIS

People:

*Fully support your team.
Build trust, teamwork and mission-mindedness.
Foster strong relationships.*

Purpose: *Keep the purpose clear and communicate rationale so that your team has a clear understanding about actions needed and why.*

Presence:

*Step up and be fully engaged.
Be present so that you staff have assurance.
Take responsibility for all decisions made.*

Pause:

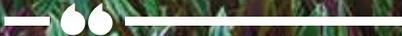
*Waiting time is not wasting time.
Give the wait time that can be afforded to optimise time and energy of staff especially in a rapidly evolving situation.*

Process:

Keep processes simple and ride on existing processes as much as possible to achieve synergy and reduce additional work.

A woman with short dark hair, wearing a black sleeveless dress and dark shoes, stands smiling in a lush green garden. Behind her is a modern building with a white facade and a large green wall of plants. The scene is bright and vibrant.

If I revisit the fundamentals of education, it is about helping our young generation to learn, and to succeed. Just as each day brings new changes and challenges, our educational goals and methods need to adapt and transform so that we keep on course.



WONG-CHEANG MEI HENG

EUNOIA JUNIOR COLLEGE



Fundamentals and Transformation

Our educational mission, moulding the future of the nation, demands that we have a long view of education so that we can focus on equipping our students to learn continuously, empowering them to take personal leadership in finding their purpose and contributing to a society that will be different from that which they are born into.

Our educational landscape has evolved through different phases (survival-driven, efficiency-driven, ability-based, aspiration-driven and student-centric, values-driven phase) in tandem with the growth of our nation. Its evolution bears testimony to the need for leaders to adapt to present affordances in anticipation of future challenges and opportunities our students will face. It is inevitable that school leadership also adapt to new goals and aspirations in order to create new and life-affirming possibilities for our students and staff.

However, in all its changes through the different phases, I noted that enduring purposes of education remain fiercely focussed on helping the young and malleable youth to sharpen and discipline their minds (to learn), to discover and develop their strengths, interests and passion (to succeed), and to identify their future as individuals with the future of the community (to contribute). It is my opinion that when we safeguard the fundamentals, the community will be able to take hold of opportunities, and ride over different waves and types of challenges and crisis to emerge a better and more resilient society. Safeguarding the fundamentals and transforming schools are not dichotomous; the former provides the purpose, the latter ensures that the processes are relevant to the present environment and the emerging and future needs. It is in safeguarding the fundamentals that our innovations are transformative and made purposeful, and it is in transforming our educational experiences that our fundamentals are made relevant in the present and future environment.

THEN AND NOW

I started schooling in the mid- sixties. I was too young then to think about why I needed to go to school, except that it was natural for me to do so at that age. My mother said that I was fortunate to be educated as a girl. She wanted me to be English educated so that I could make a decent living as a white-collar worker and have a better life. In fact she had the same ambition for all her children in contrast to her own life of manual labour, washing clothes and taking up ad hoc work in the cottage industry so that she could provide for her eight children. As a widow who laboured to put food on the table, she saw education as hope for a better future for all her children. While she was not hoping for us to attain great scholastic achievement, she made it clear that each failing grade would translate to harsh reprimand and caning.

My motivation to learn was to ensure I was not caned too badly every half a year, so I often just sufficiently memorised chunks of information to survive the test. Oblivious to national efforts of building social cohesion through shared schooling experiences, values and citizenship education, I received an education that placed emphasis on languages, science and mathematics. It was compulsory to take Malay as the national language and there were enjoyable citizenship lessons where role-play was the main pedagogy.

In my later years as an educator, I learnt that our Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, met school principals and highlighted the key role principals and teachers played in schools. On hindsight, I was not only fortunate to be educated as a girl, but also privileged to be born in a period where access to education for all was the national agenda and teacher quality was emphasised. In all, education was transformative for me. Born in a monolingual environment into a family with little resources, schooling gave me the opportunity to build cognitive skills so that I could access further learning, and to use two languages comfortably

in social interactions. Experiences in school helped me to uncover my creative strengths and interests, and mixing with others allowed me to grow an appreciation of otherness and develop formative values of citizenry, and a sense of my place and contribution in the country. Education was an uplifting force for me.



Forty years later in the early 2000's when my children started school, they were already fairly fluent in English and able to sing Chinese nursery songs. They started ballet and music lessons at their nursery years and had travelled with the family for overseas holidays. It was not surprising that many of their classmates had similar early exposure to learning and other enrichment experiences. They were not subject to finely delineated ability groups like their seniors born in the eighties and nineties where educational wastage and the need for closer education-economy fit saw reforms that led to the streaming of students into different abilities and aptitudes. Against the backdrop of globalisation and technological advancement, my children benefitted from IT Masterplans where they learned computer applications in schools, and were encouraged to develop creative and critical thinking skills. They participated in community service programmes and went on internationalisation trips to gain a better appreciation of their identity as Singaporeans as they evaluated the lives of their counterparts in other countries and the social, cultural and economic growth of other countries. They had more choices in the programmes offered in a period where deregulation resulted in more school types. Independent schools, autonomous schools, IP schools were established because of an emphasis on creating multiple pathways to cater to various abilities.

As a school leader then, I recalled attending training courses on IT skills as part of teacher-upgrading, and inspired to building thinking schools and a learning nation. My daughter who has entered the workforce and my son who is still at the university have found their lives inextricably impacted by the globalisation and facilitated by technological advancement. Their life forward will demand responses that I would not have imagined when I was at their age. As I observe them dealing with the recent pandemic, there is quiet confidence that education has uplifted them through the skillsets and disposition they developed, enabling them to access the knowledge economy, enlarging their capacities to deal with dynamic situations, and allowing them to remain optimistic as they forge into the future.

A SYNERGISTIC RELATIONSHIP

In a simple illustration comparing my educational experience with that of my children, I like to draw three broad observations on the interplay between fundamentals and transformation.

First, in educational transformation, the fundamental purpose of maximising learner potential remains consistent. Whether it is to introduce streaming so that different abilities are catered for, to engage every learner regardless of their background or ability, or to give voice and agency to students as co-owners of their educational experiences, the core focus goes back to what we can do best for our students given the sociocultural and economic context of the period.

Efforts on educational transformation focus on growth and improvements from across different levels, from student to teacher to system. From the concept of life-long learning for our students, to the idea of life-long training and re-training for our teachers and school leaders, we must recognise that abilities and potential of our students and teachers are not fixed for all time, but are fluid and capable of learning and development. Thus growth mindsets can be cultivated with intention. Similarly, adaptive system capabilities rest on the understanding of continual redesign and restructuring in order to be responsive to future needs. Capacity building is one of the fundamentals we safeguard in order for educational transformation to be successful.

Finally, successful educational transformations often rest on the presence of strong fundamentals. Strong fundamentals propel us to explore and to create besides just surviving and problem solving. The affordances of strong fundamentals that have been built up over time facilitate the generation of new value propositions in innovations and improvements to existing practices.

INSIGHTS FROM A CRISIS

The Covid-19 pandemic shows us how important adaptability is in coping with sudden changes or crisis situations, and puts to test the capability that we have been building in our students and teachers to deal with learning through technology. From lecture recording, to conducting synchronous online lessons, and using interactive tools and platforms to engage the students, our teachers were picking up new skills each day so that they could use them the next day in order to provide assurance and confidence to our students in their new learning. Through learning, trying, failing and trying again, they exemplified life-long learning. Our students responded with sensibility that spoke well of their growth. While we might have assumed that they would take to online learning like fish to water, some of them shared that it was the first time they learnt to use digital tools extensively and purposefully for learning. They came to understand and experience how the internet could be harnessed for greater things like collaboration, advocacy and culture building beyond entertainment and retail therapy. That transformation of sensibility and efficacy in teachers and students helped me appreciate the intangible strengths that education has been building in the capacity and adaptability of our people. Perhaps much that has been

spoken about building resilience in our people to future-proof our identity, nationhood, economy and social cohesion, lies in the everyday fundamentals of holistic learning, character building and citizenship education.

LEADING TRANSFORMATION

I do not have big theories about leadership transformation; however, I am convinced that the fundamentals of transformative educational leadership involve the creation of shared purpose and values among the school community, the commitment to growing people, and the tenacity and drive to lead and manage change.

I have been fortunate to lead two schools in their founding years, Compassvale Secondary and Eunoia Junior College, and build the purpose of these schools together with the staff from its formation years. Contrary to the belief that there are no traditions and practices to deal with in leading a new school, I have to relate to different expectations and experiences each staff brings to the new environment. Everyone who comes to a new school wants to replicate an aspiration they brought along with them from the previous school. Bringing the disparate good together to form a coherent purpose requires a “more of others, less of self”



orientation, and often in embracing the voices of others, we form a better and more coherent and forward-looking purpose. Anyone who starts a new school would want it to be transformative – after all, education is about transforming lives! As much as we want the school to be different, to be experimental, or to be unique we cannot ignore the enduring values of education – learning, character building and growth. I have also led Serangoon Junior College which had about 25 years of history then. While I was not involved in shaping the ethos of the college at its beginning, I saw to it that existing ethos were the ones that the school community believed in and could resonate with. We, too, wanted the students to learn deeply, to develop imagination, character and values. We believed those were the building blocks to a good education and to the development of useful citizens who contribute to society.

In the recent years, there has been much discussion about the unknown future, and the need to build skills and dispositions that are future proof such as resilience, adaptability and having a global outlook. We have entered a new phase of education that calls for us to learn for life. I resonate with this aspiration because it is only when our students who graduate from our schools continue to be curious and to learn, can we then truly claim that we have nurtured a growth mindset. This mindset will propel ongoing innovation and growth in order to deal with the future unknowns.

BUILDING CAPACITY

Capacity building is the true work of education, and this happens both at the student and teacher level. When I think about how our teachers quickly embraced ICT platforms and tools to support students' learning during the full home-based learning period, I am convinced that all the efforts to equip and encourage teachers to use e-pedagogy for self-directed and independent learning in the IT Masterplans have yielded good returns. Certainly, many teachers would not have seen how all those years of building capacity in ICT have built their resilient to handle the Covid-19 situation with such fortitude during full home-based learning.

I had a recent exchange with a young man about whether preparedness and resilient are similar, and we came to the conclusion that being prepared is somewhat different from being resilient. If we approach individual and system development from a "preparedness" angle, then we think about the possible challenges and prepare the individual and system for them, including building spare capacity. If we approach from the idea of a "resilience" angle, then we first acknowledge we cannot predict the challenges, and we start thinking about what the individual or system need regardless of the situation that one finds himself in and develop that capacity that is flexible. Learning to learn, learning for life is one example of such a capacity.



AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

While it has become a cliché to say that change is constant, it is a fact that leaders must drive and lead change. The tenacity and drive to lead change, be it in a crisis or for the future, is often greatly dependent on the level of self-awareness a leader has. I have been in education for almost 40 years and when the going was tough, there were times I felt pressured to abandon an ideal, a community or an initiative that was frustrating to handle. Such feelings often had to do with a lack of connection with my inner self. When I was a young school leader, I often felt stressed by the need to manage the external ego – the all-knowing principal, the great problem solver, the awe-inspiring orator while my inner reality was quite the contrary. I could not say confidently I knew all about leading schools and would likely to have come up with better solutions if I poured over issues with some heads. I was learning to find my voice as a leader.

My own inner world up till now is still one of searching, exploring and learning as I make the routine more colourful and deeper, and the novel more predictable. It was after I gained understanding and confidence of my inner world that I was able to lead more authentically. The leadership of co-creating, team building, and continuous learning is as legitimate as that of the charismatic, in the forefront leader. I learnt to care about things that I cared about – such as connecting with others and growing alongside with them. In short, I defined my sense of purpose. Adding to that, I also cared about what mattered to others so that in the intersection of that connection, a shared purpose can be forged be it to ride over a crisis, re-design existing practices to leverage present affordances, or to transform mindsets to bring the community into the future unknowns with confidence.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

As for what I hope to see transformed in school and education, I hope that education remains a social leveller and an uplifting force for all. We can do so by ensuring that the pathways created in education do not stay at the rhetoric level, but that we recognise the different talents and groom these talents along different pathways. I hope that schools will continue to provide spaces for students to think for themselves, and cultivate in them a willingness to experiment and try different things even if they don't succeed at first. In this way they will grow traits of tenacity and be exceptional in original thinking. Finally, I think schools can impact the social culture of our youth so that they will reach out to others and be kind to one another.

If I revisit the fundamentals of education, it is about helping our young generation to learn, and succeed. Just as each day brings new changes and challenges, our educational goals and methods need to adapt and transform so that we keep on course. Education has the power to transform lives and at every season in our nation's history, education has been the greatest leverage to prepare each generation to face the trials of their day. As school leaders, it is our privilege and responsibility to lead in change, managing the synergy between fundamentals and transformation, such that every child, at every stage, will succeed in life and ultimately contribute to make the world a better place.



MY LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

Have a Purpose

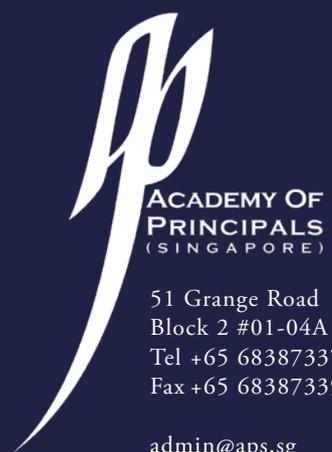
Our purpose is what we care about. If we know what we care about, we will find out the needs, plan for long term solutions, and create possibilities. We will work from conviction and remain tenacious even when things have become exhausting. Purpose feeds our ambition, helps us to communicate bold directions and enables us to commit ourselves to achieve them.

Grow the People

The heart of education is found in the people and nothing is as essential as growing our people. We can take beginning steps by listening attentively, speaking candidly and treating others respectfully. When we build a culture of openness and honesty through sharing and appreciative inquiry, energy will be focussed on learning and improvement. Growing leaders who takes their role in coaching others seriously will also create a reinforcing loop of organisational growth.

Enjoy Learning

We are hardly done learning, as we often find ourselves needing to lead change and manage challenges. When we are curious about new possibilities, explore them, and act on them. We develop self-efficacy and positive affect that permeates our relationships and decision making as a leader.



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