

# PRINCIPIA

VOLUME 11 NUMBER 1 • 2019

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## Bridges and Ladders



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VOLUME 11 NUMBER I • 2019

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## EDITORIAL

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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

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

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Education is beyond just imparting knowledge. It has to be holistic. Increasingly, there is a rallying cry that a rounded education includes helping our students to develop the social, emotional and mental skills required to enable them to navigate life's challenges with resilience and a positive spirit. One of the building blocks in cultivating such a mind-set involves helping them to build bridges, not walls. As they grow and learn to take their place in society, we then give them the tools to climb the ladder set before them. This imagery of helping our students to cross bridges and climb ladders captures a small fraction of what we do as educators.

As school leaders, we spend much time observing, learning and planning for the schools that we lead. We are constantly designing bridges and ladders, ensuring that the structures we have put in place are well-supported and bring benefits that last beyond our term of leadership. Our joy comes when we see our students struggle to the top, catch a glimpse of how far they have climbed, and taste what it means to reach for the stars. In essence, what really matters to us is that the bridges and ladders have served their purpose to help our students grow.

In this issue of Principia, you will glean insights from fellow school leaders on how they defined their own bridges and ladders to bring out the best in their charges. You will also hear the *raison d'être* of our Director-General of Education (DGE) as he shares with us what it means to be true and steadfast to our calling as educators and school leaders. What's more, for ease of reference, we have pulled out quick leadership tips for you to take away as you browse these pages.

Come, celebrate with our colleagues as they journey to make a difference and cherish your own voyage in school leadership. It is in this fraternity that we can truly feel one another's pulse and share a common heartbeat. Enjoy the ride!

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# MR WONG SIEW HOONG

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF EDUCATION / MOE



BRIDGES AND LADDERS

## The New And The Old

*The phrase 'bridges and ladders' is not a new expression in Singapore's education system. In fact, bridges and ladders are the framework upon which our education landscape is built.*

It is an analogy of an intricate and complex system comprising many paths, with bridges inter-crossing one another and ladders criss-crossing as they lead to higher levels. The success of our education system today is the result of bridges and ladders that were built in the past. As leaders and educators, we continue the process of building new bridges and ladders so that our students can cross more chasms, make new roads and climb even higher. We are creating as many pathways as possible for every student so by the time he or she is an adult he or she would have the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes necessary to survive, and thrive, in an uncertain world.

Let's start from the past. In 1979, Dr Goh Keng Swee introduced the New Education System (NES) pioneering the idea that one size cannot fit all. One of the main issues identified in our education system then was that it was rigid and could not meet the needs of all students. Dr Goh introduced streaming in our schools to allow for differentiation and flexibility. The first bridges and ladders were built. Since then, our education environment has grown in tandem with the world, which has become more complex and volatile. Old bridges and ladders that are worn out have to be rebuilt or redesigned. New structures have to be built – some in the same places and others in new spaces. We have to also consider what curriculum materials, what pedagogical approaches to deploy, what new systems, structures and processes to build to support these efforts and what new destinations have our ladders to reach. Ultimately, we are creating multiple pathways so that within the structure of our education system, the possibilities are plentiful. What is the point of all this building and rebuilding? The end goal is so that all students, with all these bridges and ladders in place, can become the best they can be, from whatever point they start and at whatever point they are in their learning journeys.

If we look at the trajectory of education in Singapore, we can see how it has evolved to become more flexible over the course of time. From the introduction of lateral transfers across courses, to subject-based banding, to the Poly Foundation Programme, Direct School Admissions, and the newly initiated Early Admissions Exercise, all our policies have been formulated to cater to the changing needs, interests, and abilities of our students. With multiple pathways, the student has the advantage of making the

best choices according to his talents, capabilities and inclinations. This flexibility is an important bridge which will enable him to cross over to a path that recognises his strengths and develops them so that he can climb even higher ladders.

In a broader sense, multiple pathways in education also redefine our ideas of merit and success. They are no longer restricted to a narrow definition like grades, but become something broader and more dynamic. We shift from linear thinking to one where we consider many possibilities. The road to success is no longer a single route, but a journey where everyone travels in his own time and way, and where paths can cross.

#### **STUDENT-CENTRICITY AT THE CORE**

The bridges and ladders are already in place for our students, and more will be built as the world around us evolves. Globalisation, technological advances, changes in the geo-political environment and demographic shifts will influence the way we shape education for the future. Most of us are familiar with the 21st Century Competencies framework which forms an important part of our education work. But let me once again draw us back to where it all begins – student-centricity lies at the core. Change may be the new constant but one thing remains - the heart of education never changes and it is always about the student. Bridges and ladders are simply the mechanisms to make student-centricity come true. We have to keep asking ourselves if we are preparing our students well enough for the future and how we can help them to become the best that they can be.

First, start with the fundamentals – ensure that every child in school is given a strong foundation in literacy, numeracy and values. Focus on building strong and stable character. Upon this, develop the mental, emotional and social

competencies that are required in the real world. When we have these fundamentals in place we can then add on the other areas – the ‘soft skills’ to help them climb the ladders before them. These soft skills require a different type of literacy. Are our students able to think creatively and speak persuasively? Are they deft enough to handle looming issues like fake news? Have they got multi-cultural literacy which will enable them to interact comfortably with people of all ethnicities and backgrounds? Are the co-curricular activities in our schools meeting the objectives to develop well-roundedness, collaboration and teamwork? These are some of the questions that we have to ask ourselves as school leaders. How do we integrate such ‘soft skills’ into our curriculum and embed them in what we teach and share?

#### **EXERCISING OUR PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT CALL**

Beyond structural forms, school leaders need to possess that ‘special touch’ to help students successfully navigate the terrain in order to realise their potential. This is the ability to make professional judgement calls based on tacit knowledge and experience, while assessing and understanding the temperament, interests and abilities of their students. It is our responsibility to help our students discover their talents and have the confidence to realise their gifting. For example, a student who joins the school band may not have had any previous exposure to music. Yet, the band teacher observes that student’s instinctive sensitivity to music and ability to learn to play an instrument very quickly. Based on his years of experience, he is able to recognise that she has an innate talent for music and encourages her to pursue this path. If not for the teacher, the student would not have known this.

In the same way, it is a teacher’s professional judgement call that makes her tell a student who

has qualified to enter junior college that he would be happier in a polytechnic because of his strengths and interests in applied Physics and applied learning. Whether it is advising a student on what subject combination to choose, or if he should pursue triple sciences in upper secondary school despite borderline grades, the onus lies on the school leader and teacher to give the right guidance. Simply said, it is our professional call. School leaders have to be committed to work closely with teachers to ensure that they develop this ‘special touch’.

When we care enough to exercise our professional judgement call, we can become like one who holds the light to another in a darkened path. We can even influence a person’s destiny. Let me share a personal example. Some time ago, I was at a shopping centre at Marine Parade and a man greeted me. He said he was a student at Tanjong Katong Secondary School during the time when I served as Vice-Principal. I could remember him vaguely. He thanked me for changing the course of his life. He shared that he wanted to take A-Maths in Secondary Three but his grades were borderline. I had reviewed his case and exercised a judgement call to give him that chance to do A-Maths. Not only did he do well enough in this subject, but he went on to pursue Maths at a higher level in junior college and university. And today, he is a Maths teacher. What would have happened if I just stuck to the rules?

#### **EVERY CHILD CAN LEARN**

Most of us became educators because we wanted to make a difference in young lives. In my thirty-four years as an educator, my *raison d’être* has never changed. This is the belief that every child can learn. If a teacher cannot embrace this belief with all his heart, then honestly, he is not suited for the profession. We should

not be asking why a child cannot learn, but why we cannot teach him in a way that ensures he can.

Over the years, I have come across students who misbehave or completely lack interest and motivation in school. I believe that behind every misdemeanour lies a good boy or girl. As an educator, we have to care enough to understand the person inside. Every child can learn. Reality can often challenge this belief, but it is during such difficult moments that we have to search deep within ourselves and examine our own hearts. What do we really believe? Do we just throw in the towel? Never give up. Everyone can learn.

### THE POWER OF WORDS

Education happens at the point of contact between a teacher and a student. Our words can influence and shape lives. A few years ago, I was a member of the interview panel for scholarships and was reading through the portfolio statements of the applicants. When I opened the file, to my pleasant surprise, one of them was my former student. The first sentence in her personal statement struck me to the core. She wrote, “I believe it is important to always do the right thing, at the right time, and at the right place”. Her statement was a maxim that I had shared with my students very often

in my assembly talks as I reminded them about the importance of strong values and character. Little did I know she had embraced this philosophy so fully that it became her motto in life. The simple sentence I repeated became a young person’s life principle.

I have also personally experienced how a teacher’s words can bring hope in the midst of discouragement. When I was in pre-university and new to General Paper, I did not do well. I still remember that I was standing in the corridor and my teacher Miss Hee Piang Chin came up to me. She said, “Siew Hoong, don’t be discouraged. I know you can do better.” Her simple words of encouragement lifted me out of the doldrums, inspired me and most of all, gave me the impetus to do well. Miss Hee understood what it meant to be student-centric. She knew what I needed to hear and used her words wisely. To this day, she is a positive role-model for me.

When we are student-centric, we will align our beliefs, attitudes and words to what our students need and what is best of them. The student is the focus and centre of it all.

### IT’S ALWAYS ABOUT THE PEOPLE

Collectively, we have cast the vision for education in Singapore. The bridges, ladders, and roads have been built and are constantly

being improved. The map gets more complicated as more avenues are explored and new territories discovered. There will never be a point when we can say the work is done. We have to constantly re-evaluate old designs and create new ideas, based on the reality on the ground. As school leaders, it is our responsibility to walk the ground and understand it. We have to share our vision, give direction and persuade all to come on board. What do all these changes in our education landscape mean to the various departments in our schools? How do we translate the big picture into workable parts for our different teams so that by the time it gets to the classroom, there is a spark?

Everything converges to the point where teacher and student meet in the classroom. With all the systems and processes in place, we still need a human hand to light a spark. A teacher-student relationship built on mutual trust and belief is the pivot on which this whole system rests upon. A better teacher makes a better student, and a better student makes a better world. In effect, the essence of education is not just about building bridges, pathways or ladders. It is about human interaction and relationships and how these connections bring out the best in all who are involved.



#### IN A NUTSHELL

Student-centricity is the heart of education.

Our goal is to help our students become the best they can be.

Every child can learn.

Focus on teacher-student relationships.

Having flexibility opens up possibilities.

Start with the fundamentals and build upon them.

Exercise our professional judgement call.

Words have power – use them wisely.

#### MY HOPES FOR SINGAPORE’S YOUTH

To develop them to be the best they can be.

To help them realise their dreams and aspirations.

To give them courage to pursue their passions.

To teach them to be other-centred.

To nurture them to give back to society.

To instil in them a love for the community and for Singapore.





# MRS SARA DE SOUZA

PRINCIPAL / SHUQUN PRIMARY SCHOOL



## The Star Within

**BUILD THE RIGHT KIND OF BRIDGES AND LADDERS**

*Bridges and ladders are about how we connect with one another.*

*It involves getting different groups of people to come together for a purpose. As education is student-centric, the bridges and ladders we build should help our students climb higher and reach further.*

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In order to build the right bridges and ladders, we need to understand what makes our students tick. Everyone wants to feel good. When I make connections with my students, I always reinforce my belief in them, even if they misbehave. I will say positive words like 'I believe you are better than this' or 'I believe you can'. Understanding gender differences also help us make right connections. I was Vice-Principal at CHIJ Primary Toa Payoh from 2001 to 2004, Principal of St Joseph's Institution Junior from 2005 to 2012, and now Cedar Primary School.\* My experience serving in an all-girl, an all-boy and a co-ed school taught me that we cannot use a 'one size fits all' approach when it comes to building bridges with children. While boys like to be treated like young adults and be shown respect, girls are more sensitive and need to feel affirmed and cared for. With boys, I can speak straightforwardly and to the point; whereas for girls, I need to use a softer approach. While such information may seem very basic, it certainly enables us to be more effective communicators.

### **STRENGTHEN THE BRIDGES THAT HAVE ALREADY BEEN BUILT**

There is a strong family culture at Cedar Primary. We have close to 700 students and the teachers know their children well. Some of our staff have worked here for many years and even though they live far away, they still choose to stay with us. They say that the school is like family. When staff and students have strong bonds with one another, like family, the bridges that get built are stronger and last longer.

I try my best to build on the close bonds that my staff have with one another and with the children. When there is togetherness, there is a greater willingness to learn and to help one another. I consciously use staff meetings and seminars to reinforce skills that build teacher-student relationships as well as to equip teachers with knowledge to enhance their effectiveness. In a close-knit environment, it is easier to be open and people are more ready to receive.

As leaders, we have power. But this power should be one that instils respect and love, not fear. If we lose our temper and get away with it without being told that we are wrong, then we have failed as leaders. Building strong bridges means cherishing relationships and keeping in mind that as a family, we are all subject to the same rules of behaviour.

### **BUILD BRIDGES TO ENRICH OTHERS**

Bridges and ladders are also about what ideas you can bring to enrich and add value to what you do in school that is beyond the norm. One of our former Vice-Principals started the practice of attaching useful articles with his regular emails to staff about school updates. The articles covered wide-ranging topics from leadership to classroom management. We continue this practice to this day as the feedback from our staff has been positive. Sharing information enriches them and keeps them connected to what is happening in the local and global education arena.

As I am a movie buff, I like to share ideas using movie clips. There is a standing joke at school that 'movie time' means I talk less during staff meetings. I still remember distilling lessons from two of my favourite Meryl Streep movies 'Julia Julie' and 'Florence Forster Jenkins'. These two movies indirectly revealed right and wrong forms of teaching. They were entertaining ways to build bridges with my staff while enriching them in the process.

### **BUILD LADDERS TO REACH NEW HEIGHTS**

At Cedar, our children are familiar with the apple story. An apple tree looked to the sky and wanted a star. The apple tree fairy told her that she had stars in the fruit that hung on her branches. She cut an apple open and there was a star at the core. We believe that every child has a star inside. They just have to discover and realise it.

Discovering stars means we have to build bridges beyond our walls. Through our Talent Management initiative, we try our best to provide platforms for talented students to gain exposure and experience in areas not formally offered by the school. We support CCAs that are not offered in school to give students a chance to stretch themselves and develop their strengths. For example, CCAs like chess, swimming and martial arts are not offered as school CCAs but we field competitors when we have students who can make the cut. In this way we help talented and motivated students build ladders to climb higher. We believe that every child has a different starting point and it is important give them exposure. When we see a spark or star, we then give them even more opportunities to grow.

Helping children build ladders for themselves begins with building confidence in them. When they know they are good at something, it changes their whole attitude and translates to other areas in their lives. The key is to know your kids. When you know your kids, you can spot their strengths and talents. You can also notice when they feel too much pressure to perform. That's not all - you need to identify and groom second liners so that they can also step in readily when the time comes.

You can seed ideas but how do you get your staff to buy into them? If a student takes part in competitions that are not officially part of your CCA, will his teacher support him? What if the competition falls on a weekend or clashes with another school event? In order to help your student climb the ladder, you have to build bridges with all parties involved – other students, teachers and of course, parents.

Finally, if we want our children to climb ladders, we have to stop being umbrellas to them. We need to allow them to get wet or feel the heat of the sun. If teachers are there all the time, our children will never learn to climb for themselves.



*We believe that every child has a star inside. They just have to discover and realise it.*

#### SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

*'The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life'*  
by Benjamin and Rosamund Zander

*'Start with Why'* by Simon Sinek

*'The Talent Code: Unlocking the Secret of Skill in Maths, Art, Music, Sport and Just About Everything Else'* by Daniel Coyle

Books by Malcolm Gladwell

*Ms Chan Lai Peng, Director, Media Design for Learning at Educational Technology Division. She was a hands-on supervisor who showed great care and concern for her officers and was generous in sharing her knowledge and expertise.*

*Ms Magdalene Chin, Principal of CHIJ Primary School (Kellock). She is a dynamic multi-tasking leader with a wonderful sense of humour.*

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*\*In January 2019, Mrs De Souza was designated as Principal of Shuqun Primary School. At the time this article was written, she was still Principal of Cedar Primary School.*



#### HOW TO BUILD BRIDGES IN COMMUNICATION

Unpack what you communicate instead of just delivering a message.

Always give reasons and share goals.

Spend time listening and understanding needs in order to give the right support.

Give time for follow-up and mutual feedback.

Be consistent and fair.

Be open and real.

Affirm and encourage - no child should ever leave your office feeling lousy about himself/herself.

#### HOW TO BUILD BRIDGES WITH UPSET PARENTS

Learn from your experiences in handling different types of parents. What could you have done better or change?

Be circumspect and alert to what they may not say.

Ensure that you are in the right frame of mind before you engage them.

Understand their concerns.

Find out more about their child so you can have something positive to say.

Parents feel defensive, so allay their fears and let them speak their peace.

Take notes.

Seize every opportunity to change the direction and tone of the conversation.

Don't promise anything or agree upfront (unless there is clear misconduct involved).

Never take sides unless investigations are proven true.

Be sensitive in the way you follow-up.





# MR LIU EARNLER

PRINCIPAL / BOWEN SECONDARY SCHOOL



## Dare To Try

BRIDGES AND LADDERS TO CHANGE THE WORLD

*I chose to join the education service because I wanted  
to change the world.*

---

**D**uring my second year at university, I was inspired by my lecturer Dr Thiru Kandiah who lived through the time of Mahatma Gandhi. He told our class that there were two ways to change the world – we could either march the streets in protest, go on strike and burn flags, or join the establishment, work to become a trusted insider, and then change things from the inside-out. I had a passion to change society for the better and decided that education was the way to go.

### **BRIDGES THAT CONNECT WITH THOSE IN NEED**

Bridges are about helping people to get from one place to another when there are obvious obstacles. Our students are given the chance to build bridges with segments of people in society who need an extra hand. Bowen's signature programme ChANgeMakers – brings to bear design thinking (how to serve) with VIA (the actual service). Every year, students serve weekly at several VWOs for five to seven weeks. These sustained interactions between our students and those whom they serve help them to develop empathy, inclusivity and respect for the differently-abled. Our teachers also facilitate reflection sessions after each visit so that the students can internalise their experiences.

ChANgeMakers has borne fruit - our NE Indices surpasses the national average by a large margin. One out of three students also continues to serve as volunteers after their official service period. Looking ahead, I plan to deepen and broaden the learning experience, systematically document and celebrate our progress and share our good practices with others.

### **BRIDGES FOR GROWTH**

If we want to make society a better place for all, then we need to build special bridges for those who have wider gaps to cross. Bowen has another platform called Aforte, which is a suite of engagement and forward-looking programmes catered for students who need more support, especially from the Normal stream. Aforte has also been in place for many years, with the support of SHINE Children and Youth Service and Singapore Children's Society. My goal is to strengthen and

expand the bridges that have already been built by bringing greater coherence to programmes, such as having After-School Engagement activities. We have put in additional resources for these students such as giving Normal stream teachers extra support and having an exclusive Head / Normal Course to oversee this stream besides the usual four Year Heads.

#### **LADDERS TO REACH NEW HEIGHTS**

Ladders are about propelling people to see the next level and encouraging them to climb up. Ladders are needed to reach new heights, break new ground and forge new frontiers. My personal mantra to the staff is 'Dare to Try' – that is, 'if you have an idea that is educationally sound and there is no known reason not to do it – then bounce it off your HOD and go ahead'. I reiterate this whenever I can, and I make sure I manage the occasional mis-step by staff carefully, so that I do not come across as over-reacting. Instead, I am very careful to help the staff to learn from it, to admonish when there is a need to, but still uphold the necessary tone of encouraging risk-taking. I find that language like 'you take the decision' and 'I stand guided by you' and "why don't we give it a try and see what happens" are very helpful in encouraging staff to actually 'dare to try'.

Ladders are necessary for teams and organisations to push new boundaries whether in processes, structures or services. Some of the ladders we have established include strengthening communication channels through a bi-annual staff newsletter which ensures that everyone is kept on the same page and moves at the same pace. The newsletter also covers topics that are professionally and personally relevant to the staff such as 'Re-gearing teaching and learning to better nurture future-ready students' and 'Caring for our well-being'. We have also put in new structures to keep the school strategically focused and serving areas of need such as a new Learning Support Team for students with special needs.

#### **LADDERS TO NEW FRONTIERS**

One of the most significant experiences I had in building ladders was when I served as Director of the Pre-school Education Branch in 2013, and was tasked to set up MOE Kindergartens. At that time, the pre-school arena was completely uncharted territory for MOE.

To break new ground, you need to 'dare to try'. My philosophy is to always stand guided by the rules. However, exercise flexibility and adapt when needed. Unlike many kindergartens, MOE Kindergartens (MKs) have open-concept classrooms which give children much more learning space. This decision came as a result of gathering feedback from experienced kindergarten teachers and making a case to the bosses for it (who thankfully supported us; we are gratified that the open concept did work out!). We also started 'Kindergarten Care', to respond to the need for childcare services before and after kindergarten hours. This involved conceptualising new models (which had never existed before) of working with partners. I am proud to say that our 'dare to try' attitude has borne fruit – four years later, we established 15 MKs with our own unique curriculum, each helping the children climb the ladders of life!



**BRIDGES AND LADDERS TO BREAK NEW GROUND**

Stand guided by the rules, but exercise flexibility especially when innovating / piloting.

Work smart – think again, think across, think ahead.

Exercise professional autonomy and be prepared to be professionally accountable.

Dare to try – do what is educationally sound, and refuse to accept it cannot be done.

Seize first-mover advantage – map out the terrain, set out your routes, set your own rules.

Get the bosses to help – they want to help, but we have to tell them how and where to help.

Make time for self-care and family. “Family First” when it comes to ‘life moments’ such as serious family matters.

**UNDERLYING ALL THIS, SHOULD STILL BE THE ABCs OF LEADERSHIP – CARE FOR MY PEOPLE, BUILD MY TEAM, ADVANCE THE ORGANISATION (IN THAT ORDER).**

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*To break new ground,  
you need to ‘dare to try’.  
My philosophy is to always  
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However, exercise flexibility  
and adapt when needed.*

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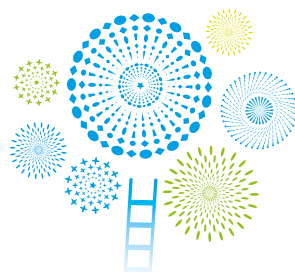
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# MRS TEO KHIN HIANG

PRINCIPAL / RIVER VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL



## Reach For The Sky

**BRIDGES AND LADDERS ARE NEEDED TO ACHIEVE OUR GOALS**

*Bridges and ladders are the important connections and leverage areas that help us to achieve the results we want.*

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These bridges are important connections between school leaders and staff, school leaders and students, teachers and students, school and parents, school to school, schools with overseas institutions and even schools with government agencies and industry. Ladders are what raises the profile of our school and what builds upward social mobility for our students and enhance the competencies of our staff. Building bridges and ladders are critical in achieving the desired outcome we have set for our school and students.

### **BUILDING BRIDGES AS THE FIRST STEP**

I was asked to establish the Singapore Teachers Academy for the Arts in 2009. Initially, I felt that I was unsuited for the position as I was trained in the sciences and did not have much exposure to the arts. However this turned out to be one of the best postings in my career. I had the chance to build something from scratch and work with passionate and talented individuals who taught me many things. We were given the challenge to develop our very own pedagogy for music and art education in Singapore. My first step was to build a bridge. I spent many hours collaborating with experts in these fields and connecting with leading practitioners in Singapore and overseas. I also built connections on the ground and identified teachers who shared a similar passion and vision to inculcate creativity, critical thinking and self-expression in students through the arts. Then I built other bridges with school leaders and Cluster Superintendents to enlist their help in deploying the right teachers and to support our initiatives. We had many long conversations sharing ideas. This is what building bridges is about.

When I was Principal of Pasir Ris Crest Secondary School in 2000, I wanted to create a distinctive school identity for the newly set up school. I took the first step to build a ladder where I saw the opportunity. By then I knew how the arts was integral in helping to develop students holistically and I set out to make the school a Centre of Excellence for Music. Pasir Ris Crest Secondary became the first Centre of Excellence which also served many students from other schools in the East Zone. Our school climbed the ladder and was put on the map as we helped build bridges for the students and helped them climb their own ladders in their education journey.

### **BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE FACE OF OBSTACLES**

I was Principal of Choa Chu Kang Secondary School from 1996 to 1999. This was the time when the Normal Technical Stream was first introduced. This young school had three classes of NT students. It was quite challenging to teach students who had low self-esteem and lacked self-discipline. Teachers experienced low morale - they were frustrated by the lack of results in their efforts and some felt incompetent to handle these students.

I started in small steps. First, I built bridges with the 'identified leaders' in school. I would find out who they were and try to get to know them personally. I would call them into my office, ask them what difficulties they faced and how I could help. I was sincere and authentic. The whole idea was to build relationship. Once we established an understanding and built trust, they began to cooperate and we could make agreements about behaviour. When order was established, some teachers were won over as well and morale improved.

Many youths have discipline issues because of low self-esteem. How do we change attitudes and bad behaviour? It is not just about handing out discipline to bring about change. Rather it is getting these youths to change their own mind-sets about themselves. How do we do this? By showing them that we believe in them. To do this, I also had to work hard to build bridges with my frustrated teachers to help them change their own biases. In addition, I worked with the parents. We introduced Aesthetics, giving the students guitar lessons and inviting their

parents to watch them perform. Their parents began to see the potential in their kids. We also started reading programmes in the mornings where teachers sat with students and read with them. These small steps led to long-term good habits.

In 1997, our students staged the first public performance 'Oliver Twist' at the Victoria Theatre. We brought all students to watch the musical. When I mooted the idea, many teachers were against it. They were not confident that our students were disciplined enough to sit through a performance and what more, in such a prestigious place like Victoria Theatre. Again, I built bridges in small steps. I gathered a group of like-minded teachers to support this project and walked through the journey with them. We used the concert as a teaching platform guiding the students on etiquette, social expectations and what it means to have consideration for others. Not only did this performance instil confidence in the students that we trusted them, but the teachers could see that the students could be completely well-behaved. It was a win-win situation and mind-sets were changed. Within three years CCKS moved from 122th (second last place) to 78th and finally to 58th position in the 'O' level school rankings! This was the result of teachers who believed in their students and students who learnt to have self-belief.

To this day, I still remember Peter, one of the 'leaders' whom we won over to our side. After he completed his 'NT' level exams, he showed his gratitude and volunteered to help paint the school on Sunday! Stories

like this make me feel that the time we spent trying to build bridges despite huge obstacles was well-worth it.

### **INSPIRING TEACHERS TO CLIMB THE LADDER**

When I was first appointed as the principal of Commonwealth Secondary School in 2005, the morale among the teachers was very low as the students performed below expectations despite all their efforts in preparing lessons and assignments. I discovered that many teachers' lessons were not engaging and effective. As a result, I introduced 'The Skilful Teachers Pedagogies' and implemented various important processes for enhancing teacher professional development. Within two years, our students' performance improved significantly and our teachers were very encouraged. In fact, a few key personnel were promoted to Vice-Principals in various schools.

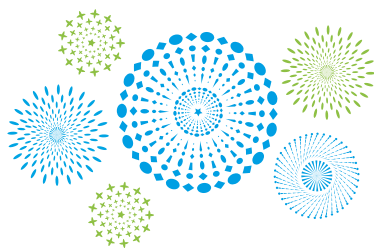
### **INSPIRING STUDENTS TO REACH FOR THE SKY**

River Valley High is an IP and SAP school. The students who entered these schools were mostly heart-landers with high PSLE scores and they could achieve good 'A' level grades. However I noticed one thing was missing – they did not have confidence and did not dare to dream. My priority was to give them the self-belief and the tools to climb the ladder set before them. In the last five years, I focussed on 21st Century Competencies emphasising a strong leadership component in the curriculum. Our premise at RV is that everyone is capable and can be a leader of distinction. We created different Academies for the students to

build on their interests and academic strengths while learning soft skills like interview and presentation skills, networking, organising and collaboration. Our teachers designed the curriculum and worked with students to organise events and competitions that were open to other schools.

We also established the Y. Lead Seminars in 2013. These are a series of leadership seminars led by our Year 5 students for teenagers between 15 and 17 from schools in Singapore and different parts of the world. Participants learn about global social challenges, develop a values-based understanding on the roles of leaders and the skills required in the 21st century. In June 2018, RV hosted the Pre-U seminar for the first time. We were taking our own steps up the ladder. Through these events, teachers and students also built bridges across cultures and schools. In addition, we built bridges with the community around us. Our students and staff have regular VIA programmes with the nearby Boon Lay Senior Citizen Day Care Centre. These experiences help us to mould leaders with empathy and a spirit of service.

Upward social mobility is also on my agenda for my students. I encourage them to think of climbing ladders for their future. I tell them to aim high and aspire to get a scholarship. I am proud to say that this year, RV produced our first President Scholar. This year, we have a total of 36 scholars out of a cohort of about 400. We are also heartened that for the class of 2017, 15 of them are now pursuing Medicine at local universities. RV also builds bridges with alumni through regular 'fireside chats' that provide guidance and internship opportunities for our students. All these bridges serve the purpose of developing our students with the long term goal of enabling them to climb the social ladder.



#### SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

*'The Fifth Discipline – The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization'* by Peter Senge

*My mentors – Mrs Goh Soo Geem, Principal of Jurong Institute (1995), who taught me the importance of building quality relationships and Mrs Yu Sing Tong, Cluster Superintendent of East One Schools (2000), who showed me the need for purpose and clarity in whatever we do.*



#### BUILDING BRIDGES WITH OTHERS

- Be warm and you set people at ease.
- Be humble and have the attitude of a servant leader.
- Always have an open mind. Spend time listening and asking questions.
- Focus on building quality relationships.
- Walk the ground to understand reality.
- Face-to-face meetings are often more effective than sending emails.
- Be consistent always.
- Appreciate those who work for you.
- Remember you need to spend time to gain time.

#### BUILDING LADDERS FOR YOUR SCHOOL

- Know your staff and leverage on their strengths.
- Don't be a people pleaser. To push upwards, you must have the courage to carry out right and difficult decisions despite knowing there could be a backlash.
- Lead by example and demonstrate how things should be done.
- Create a shared vision together with staff and students.
- Seize opportunities and dare to dream.

#### BUILDING BRIDGES WITH CHALLENGING PEOPLE

- Have compassion.
- Be authentic and sincere.
- Believe that everyone wants to feel good and have dignity.
- Understand what is troubling them or causing their negative behaviour.
- Give them attention and show genuine interest .
- Seek help from others.
- Start with small steps.







# MRS WEE-KWAN LIAM

PRINCIPAL / WATERWAY PRIMARY SCHOOL



## A Reason For Being

**BRIDGES AND LADDERS DEFINE LEADERSHIP**

*Leadership at different points is like standing on different steps of a ladder. The higher you are up the ladder, the better your vantage point. You will have a bird's eye view of what is happening on the ground.*

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Are people running around in circles or engaged meaningfully? Is there synergy or chaos below? When you are high up on the ladder, you can also see the vista before you. It is your onus to prepare those on the ground for what lies ahead and what they cannot see so they will not be caught off guard. As we climb higher up the ladder, we also connect with those who are even higher than us. Our exposure and learning through Cluster meetings, DOS meetings and conversations with other school leaders should give us an ever better view of what lies further from our vantage point. We should then share with those below us so they are well-equipped.

Leadership is also about building bridges and helping those under us to become the best they can be. I strongly believe in the concept of self-efficacy, which is the belief that everyone can affect or make a difference. This is one of the core tenets of Albert Bandura's social cognitive learning theories. Whether working with teachers, students or parents, we need to show them that their contribution can make a difference. Good teachers build bridges to help students believe in their ability to learn. Good school leaders build bridges to help their staff find meaning and purpose in their work. We build bridges to help others succeed and success begets success.

### **BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE MIND**

Waterway Primary was established in 2016 with five classes and 100 students. Now two years later, we have reached full capacity with ten classes despite the lack of new housing developments in our vicinity. Out of all our applicants for Primary 1, 30% live beyond the 1 km mark. Why has the school become so popular? It is because parents hear about our good teachers and programmes which are customised to extend learning beyond the classroom. For example, 'Good Morning School' is a daily pre-assembly programme students look forward to as teachers share on a wide range of topics such as current affairs, music, art and science. 'Orators@Waterway' aims to give students skill and confidence in public speaking; ICT and Robotics lessons are included in the curriculum; and Flipped Classrooms encourage learning at all times.

With technological advances and globalisation, the world that our students will grow up in is one where they will require skill-sets that cannot be taught by traditional methods. We have to build strong bridges and ladders for them now so that they can thrive in the future. Children do not learn the same way they did five or ten years ago. With the deluge of information they are exposed to, their brains have evolved and information processing takes place simultaneously via multiple pathways at high speeds. Our challenge is to provide learning opportunities and experiences to help them build and establish neural networks in their brains so that they can learn effectively, meaningfully, and in peak conditions.

#### **BUILDING BRIDGES IN HEARTS**

I embrace the philosophy of 'Ikigai' in my personal life and work. 'Ikigai' is a Japanese concept. It refers to the mental and emotional state which is attained when one is fully connected with his or her reason for being. There are four areas that compose our life or our work – what we love to do, what the world needs, what we are good at, and what we are paid for. When all the circles are connected and intersect equally, we reach a point of happiness and experience a deep sense of well-being. When we have a job that we love and are good at, as well as one that is valued by others and paid well, we find our 'ikigai'. My goal is to help my staff find purpose in their work and fulfilment in what they do. Teaching is a noble profession. We must all strive to be good at it and to enjoy doing it. When teachers have a sense of well-being, they are happier and happier teachers make better ones.

I try my best to develop my people to be the best they can be and

help them see that they can make a difference. Let them build their own bridges and be that scaffold for them to find their way and climb up. I believe everyone wants to do well and is driven to do well. Some people do not know what it is like to do well because they have never experienced doing well. Our job is to find opportunities and build ladders and bridges for them to taste success so that they can aspire to do even better.

#### **BUILDING BRIDGES WITH ONE ANOTHER**

I believe in building strong teams with a spirit of camaraderie. Team learning and support are critical in building bridges and ladders. When people feel they belong and are part of a team, they will naturally want to contribute to the team. I encourage my teachers to share their class lessons. When they share, they put in their best effort and when their peers affirm them, this becomes another leverage point for them to do well.

I also embrace diversity. When we expect people to think like us or have common attributes that are defined by the system, we become like Russian dolls and gradually become smaller than we are. As a Principal, I do not know everything and I may not be the best, but I tap into the diversity and strengths of my team to help me do my job better. Indeed, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and together, we can achieve more.

There is an ancient principle called '无为而无不为'. A direct translation means 'Doing nothing while doing everything' or 'doing nothing to achieve everything'. It is basically teaching us to lead behind the scenes. When people feel empowered and have a sense of efficacy, they can achieve great things. You look like

you are not leading upfront but that is because you have already laid the foundation and built the necessary bridges and ladders for your staff to perform well. Of course when there is a crisis, then a good leader needs to step out into the forefront.

#### **BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS WIDE CHASMS**

We have to understand that people can be held back by personal life challenges. Young children, elderly parents, family demands and negative experiences are some of the things that prevent people from crossing the bridge or climbing the ladder that we build for them. We need to recognise, accept and respect their situation. When they are ready, when that life phase is over and they have overcome their challenges, that innate desire to do well and sense of self-efficacy will surface. So even when the chasm is wide, continue building your bridge.

I also remember high points like when teachers affirm my leadership and share why they love coming to school or when a parent who disagreed with the school gets won over and becomes an ambassador for us. These positive thoughts serve as an impetus to keep me going.

I like to go back to 'ikigai' and remember my purpose as an educator. Our work is meaningful and parents entrust us to take care of their children and prepare them for the future. When parents are at peace, they work better in their respective jobs and contribute more to Singapore's economy! We have a noble calling indeed! Teaching is fulfilling. It is like giving birth - despite labour pains and the challenges involved in a raising a child, we always want another one!



Source: Marc Winn – <http://theviewinside.me> – 2014

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*I embrace the philosophy of 'Ikigai' in my personal life and work. 'Ikigai' is a Japanese concept. It refers to the mental and emotional state which is attained when one is fully connected with his or her reason for being.*

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#### LAY THE RIGHT FOUNDATION

Find your 'ikigai' –love what you do and be good at it.

Remember your purpose as an educator.

Everyone matters.

Everyone wants to do well.

The best is yet to be. Strive towards becoming and being the best you can be.

#### BRIDGING CHASMS

Communicate the meaning and purpose behind a job, not just how it is done.

Be quick to affirm and recognise the work done by others.

Celebrate small successes and improvements especially for those who are weaker.

Embrace diversity and tap on individual strengths.

The whole is always greater than the sum of its parts.

Lead from behind the scenes.







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