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ELEMENTS OF LEADERSHIP

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Comments and suggestions are most welcome.



Vision
To excite the human spirit, affirming the thinking, feeling principal who can ignite and sustain passion and transform lives.

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President's Message



I have received many positive comments about our inaugural issue but more importantly, I have received comments about the richness of the fraternity that we are part of.

Many enjoyed the stories of our three colleagues because each was so different, followed such atypical paths and encountered such varied challenges that we all as a fraternity became wonderfully aware of the richness in educational leadership.

In this second issue, we have an update on the Mentoring Programme that the Academy initiated this year, an undertaking we were specially positioned to embark on because of the non-supervisory peer status we have amongst you all.

I trust you will find this installment a pleasurable and edifying read as we have taken care to feature another different threesome, with yet again a wonderful fabric of schools helmed in a diversity of ways. While Lok Oon expresses a fiery stickwithitness in his determination to raise standards and never give up on those students who falter or quit the system, Govin shares his down-to-earth wisdom about striving and achieving personal balance. We get an insight into how intellectual modeling and facilitation by a research-believer like Bee Yann can spur a teaching staff on to vibrant and reflective practice, and launch a school on its flight towards the future. Finally, The *Mentor Diaries* speak of the nurturance of the fluid symbiotic relationships being experienced among the current mentor-mentee twosomes.

The stuff of elemental leadership!

Belinda Charles

President of Academy of Principals (Singapore)

p.s. Since receiving so many supportively critical comments after the first issue, we have decided to open a column for you to post your comments electronically so that we can continue to capture the heart of our fraternity. Please email these to: info@aps.org

On Striving for Balance:

Personal Notes



Traffic on the CTE was heavier than usual for a Saturday afternoon. Looking in the rear-view mirror, Govin noticed his 13-year-old fidgeting anxiously. "Don't worry, son. Still twenty minutes before our tee-off time. Everybody else is probably running late too." Just as he was returning his attention to the road ahead, he spotted a car tearing up along the left shoulder. Without warning, the driver cut directly in front of them, so closely that Govin had to veer sharply and brake to avoid being knocked. "Sorry about that!" he said to his slightly rattled family. "Is everyone alright? That fellow certainly has a more important appointment to keep than we do!" Such exemplary patience did not always come so easily to Mr. K. Govindan. Quite the opposite, in fact.



"I didn't actually buy a car until we first had our kids, about 12 years ago. I used to get quite annoyed with all these people who cut into my lane, and other silly things that Singapore drivers are famous for. I would get cross, swear and curse, which upset my wife sitting next to me. I'd have a headache by the end of the day. Then it came to me: Why am I empowering this guy to leave me in this state of anger, spoiling my day? Right there and then I decided that, henceforth, I would not be bothered by such people, but just take extra care on the road." By taking control of the situation and being 'proactive' rather than assigning blame, Govin has been a much happier driver (with relaxed passengers) ever since. It is something he applies to other aspects of his life as well.

It was about the same time that he similarly resolved to make lunch an essential part of his working day. Hardly revolutionary. But just one year into his official appointment as HOD of Science at Shuqun Primary School, Govin was finding that, with the added demands of the position, he had slipped into the habit of skipping lunch altogether. "And then one day I sat down and said to myself, 'I'm working so hard that I don't even have time for *lunch*?! That's crazy, isn't it? It doesn't matter if I have lunch at 3 o'clock; I'll need to take at least half-an-hour in the day to just sit down and have my lunch, and to reflect. Half an hour 'lost'

could potentially be many hours gained by being more effective in my work."

Govin refers to the notion of 'sharpening the saw', the phrase coined by management guru, Steven R. Covey, whose philosophy about work and life increasingly resonates with his own views, along with 'being proactive'. "That doesn't mean that if you get slapped on one cheek, you turn the other. It means to best facilitate what you want to do."

MOTHER NATURE'S SON

"Actually, I'm not a Science person. My forte has been in English all along. But I like Science; life sciences, actually." As a young lad he was forever asking what his brother



"From my verandah, sometimes beautiful colourful spiders would build their webs which caught the morning sunlight. I have some pictures at home of those. I was very much in love with the countryside."

called 'silly questions' about the natural world that surrounded their kampong home. It was a squatter's house built in the Bukit Panjang woods by their father, where Govin was actually born, delivered by a midwife in 1960. In this setting, he developed an early passion for the unspoilt aspects of living close to nature: picking wild fruits, rambutan and bananas was a favorite hobby. "I'd ask my brother, 'If we walked and walked and walked when would we come to an edge?' My brother was already at school; he told me the earth was round. Then I'd look up at the stars – in the kampong they were so brightly lit; so beautiful – and I'd say, 'Look. How far is that?' I was fascinated by the natural world."

Govin's affectionate nostalgia evokes the simple pleasures of childhood. "I enjoyed the walk along the mud lane from our house to the main road and on to our Primary school. On rainy days it was so muddy; we'd walk by the railway track, even though our parents discouraged it because you could get knocked down by a train." Govin reminisces: "Mother always packed a sandwich & coffee for our recess, which I'd have in a corner outside the tuck shop. After that we could run and play games."

“ Just a year ago, I was waiting to see a doctor and the nurse called out 'Mr. Goh Kok Sui'; and I thought, 'that sounds like my teacher's name.' I looked around and saw him sitting there in a wheelchair – he had suffered a stroke – his hair had turned snowy-white and he was looking very old. His wife and son told me he was only 65 and had retired 3 years earlier. I felt sure he wouldn't remember me but I went up to him anyway. 'Hello Mr. Goh. I'm Govindan.' He just nodded. 'I remember how, as my teacher in Sec 4, you really encouraged me.' He smiled; I could see his eyes light up slightly. It was sad to see him in that condition; but when I gave him my name card and said, 'You know, I am now the principal of a school' he was even happier. ”

His father was not literate, but was nevertheless a strict disciplinarian who believed in the value of education and was actually far-sighted in guiding his sons' schooling. In 1963 he steered Govin's brother into the Malay Language session because he thought it would give some advantage. His mother was fully literate in Tamil. When he started school, Govin actually had next to no English and fondly remembers his Primary One teacher introducing him to the alphabet. His PSLE results were sufficient for acceptance into Bukit Panjang Govt High School, which was the best option in the neighbourhood. He struggled for the first two years; but once he came under the influence of one Mr. Goh he felt encouraged and did reasonably well in his 'O' Levels.

BASIC TRAINING

National Service (NS) had a big impact in surprising ways. At that time drug abuse was a problem for a number of NS men and Govin found himself drawn to a vocational track with the Drug Abuse Rehab Unit. He was selected for training to counsel and supervise 'after-service' offenders: ensuring they attended their urine tests, visiting their homes, talking with their parents. "I was very young, only 18 or 19, and seeing these boys leading such difficult lives opened my eyes. Although I was from a poor family myself, it was a stable family and 'whole' – my mother, my father, my sister and my brother. I had never seen situations like two divorced parents, or parents who were criminals."

Meanwhile, a colleague who was organizing tuition for the poor kids in his constituency needed a volunteer tutor. "So that's when I tried my hand at teaching, and I really enjoyed that." Spending evenings with disadvantaged kids, Govin soon realized that

one of the root causes of his after-service clients' difficulties was probably their lack of a good education. "Somehow they were never motivated to learn... and some of these guys were pretty smart! Really smart! One of them slipped back into drugs – heroin, ganja, serious addiction; he was caught through urine samples – and when he was hauled back to Court 26 this guy actually defended *himself!*"

TURNING POINTS

By the time Govin was ready to leave the army, teaching was his ambition and he decided to apply to NIE. "If they accept me then I will be a teacher for the rest of my life because I think it really is a noble profession." The classroom calling was just his cup of tea. He had a knack for English and his passion for teaching grew.

About a decade into his career, his principal at Shuqun PS uttered some fateful words: "Govin, I'm going to nominate you to be HOD for Science." Protests about not being cut out for HODship, especially for Science, were lightly dismissed. "I wasn't really keen on the leadership track, but he encouraged me to step forward for 'a normal interview' he said, so I just went in with an open mind. Well, it was like they were recruiting for the Head of Shell Oil! A panel – so many people – it was very intimidating! One person on the panel thought I lacked credibility because I didn't have any background or a degree in Science. Rather than agreeing with him outright, I told him politely that I had students whose parents had Math degrees but they couldn't teach their own children Mathematics. 'It's not about whether you've got the subject qualification,' I offered. 'It's whether or not you can teach.' 'No, no, no!' he exclaimed, 'Knowledge is important!' I was afterwards

quite surprised, not that I wasn't appointed, rather, that my principal encouraged me to continue! He said, 'Just take on the role; and if you like it and are capable I'll put you for another interview.' Great.

"When I first started as an HOD, of course I had very high standards for myself. I used to be a perfectionist. Everything must be done up to 100%. But I made the mistake of expecting the same high standards of others around me. Not that it's wrong to have high standards; but I had to learn, the hard way actually, that standards really are a personal thing. So while I didn't wish to compromise on my standards, I was learning to take time to assess, to see what the readiness level of the person was."



“ Those National Service days opened me up to see a lot of things that I had never really encountered or thought about before. ”

Just around this time, the lovely Cindy Loh made her teaching debut at Govin's school and he was, in a word, smitten. It took some time for Miss Loh to overcome her initial paralysis in response to Govin's friendly overtures coupled with his 'garang' image. But gradually, in the months and years to follow, their growing closeness moved onto the marriage track and Cindy became undoubtedly *the* most important influence of all.

Govin's further education and career path over the ensuing decade led to his first appointment as Principal of Compassvale Primary School in Dec 2002. As a complement to his formal learning, he points not so much to people as his role models as to ideas. The writings of people like Gandhi, Mandela, and yes, Steven Covey, resonate with his own thinking, experience and values; and Govin draws on a plethora of quotes.

"Seek first to understand and then to be understood.' That one is very important. But sometimes I question whether I don't over-empathize. Too much empathy and you cannot move as a leader. At times, as a professional, you have to make tough decisions. So I have come to where I think I am able to balance both sides. Initially I had some difficulty with that; feeling the need to be a bit more 'principal-like' – in Malay they say 'garang' – meaning 'fierce'. I think we can get things done speaking respectfully to people even if something unpleasant must be said; there's no need to bang the table or shout. Let's just talk about it like gentlemen and get it done."

A few things, he says, are non-negotiable. One is for teachers to meet all their students' parents by the end of Term One. "I don't see how you can teach a young child otherwise. And even if you don't want to know who the parent is, it doesn't matter; the parent wants to know who the teacher is! 'I'm so and so, and I'm teaching your child this year, and this is how we can work together.' That way the parent is more likely to go directly to the teacher; and far less likely to come to me with complaints. After all, it is the teacher who is the key touch-point and the child will be the greatest beneficiary."

Following a smooth first year as principal, Govin was feeling rather buoyant. He decided the time was right to pursue a Masters degree and enrolled himself in the Education Management Programme at NTU.



“There's something else that I learned from NS. Because of my upbringing – my father's black and white view of things – I used to be quite judgmental: of people who smoked, or who drank liquor, that sort of thing. But working as a counselor I came to realize that I had to first accept people as they are. If you can help persuade someone to stop doing something unhealthy, that's great. But if not, I think that you have to accept it; at the very most you can try to help them change. But JUDGE them? Who am I to judge you? I'm nobody. So I learned not to be judgmental. **”**

Sure enough, unexpected demands from the office began ratcheting up, steadily, until he finally reached the point where something had to give. He opted to put his dissertation work on hold. "One thing about me, I know my limitations. I will not push it if I think my work or family might suffer." Then in June of 2006, he decided to switch over to the 'Critical Inquiry' option – a half dissertation, in effect. It meant taking another module but, overall, the reduced demand would be more manageable. Govin was eager to complete his degree.

No sooner had he started on that than some personal health issues cropped up that needed his attention. Then long standing renovations that were needed to their flat became more urgent. Suddenly it was mid-November, and the pressure was building.

"I had 2 assignments due plus my Critical Inquiry the week after that. We had started renovating the flat. The end of year was coming, a busy period at school. It was really challenging. I came to a point where it was just too much for me. Plus I had to be careful about my health. So I told my wife 'Cindy, I think I'm just going to get an 'F' for the module. And I'll redo it next year. But I'll finish the Critical Inquiry.' To this my wife

said, 'You don't need to bother about the flat renovations. I'll take care of it. You go and do your assignment.'



"My wife has had a great influence in my professional life in the sense that she is a great motivator. For all the time that I've known her, she has been supportive of all the things that I do." The proverbial woman behind the man? Govin has perhaps identified the one most significant force behind any healthy leader that's often taken for granted: the understanding, unselfish partner. In a profession where multiple stakeholders make countless demands, one can easily lose oneself in daily 'firefighting'. Achieving balance is an art that principals have to master if they are to survive and succeed. Govin seems to illustrate this principle to a tee. 



Coming Up For Air:

Research Shapes a Future School

Over the past decade there have been plenty of changes at Crescent Girls' School. On top of several beautiful enhancements to the school's facilities, including study gardens and a brand new community funded Performing Arts building, this past June, MOE designated CGS as a 'Future School' – placing it with four other pioneer schools in the leading edge use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and innovative pedagogies.

Developments like these naturally attract local media attention, enhancing the school's image while reflecting well on both the MOE and Singapore itself. Looking past the flashy sound bites, some pretty radical innovations can be seen taking place in how teachers are going about their craft. While details about these practices – some quite experimental – may be a lot lower on local media's radar, they have been garnering considerable global attention, particularly from those in the corporate world who are interested in educational partnerships: the Microsoft *Innovative Schools* Programme (MISP), for example.

What has caught Microsoft's eye is not merely the school's willingness to embrace new 'technologies', but CGS's evident eagerness to methodically assess the efficacy of fresh approaches to teaching and learning. During their initial involvement with MISP,

this school proved such an excellent partner – effective both at integrating technology and very strong in researching the impact – that in January, 2007, Bill Gates announced that Crescent Girls' School was being accorded *Microsoft Mentor School* status. CGS now serves as a model for MISP participants the world over. For teachers and staff at CGS, being the focus of so much interest makes for heady times indeed.

"The professional pride of the teachers in this school is very, very strong – they all want to be the best teacher for their students," says Lee Bee Yann, Principal of Crescent Girls' School and the key person leading this process. "But how do we become the best teacher? Not just by proclamation. It comes through the constant process of improvement; of learning from others and being willing to try new things in the classroom."

▼ One of several study gardens gracing CGS



While the five schools selected for the first phase of Future Schools@Singapore will 'focus on innovative teaching approaches that leverage fully on ICT', everyone understands that the Ministry's core values have not undergone some radical change. Performance in national examinations still determines what schooling options students will have. "We fully support the students' aspiration for certain colleges. But nevertheless, I think that the 'how' is the part where we can make things different."

Bee Yann's soft spoken, slightly shy demeanour seems almost at odds with what one might expect from the leader of a cutting edge 'Future School'. She's comfortable with computers, yes, but her strength stems not so much from a mastery of ICT skills per se as from her solid grounding in quite conventional academic standards. What matters are not so much the latest engineering marvels of ICT but the rigorous use of research methodology to understand the impact of such innovations on key student outcomes.

Andrews JC and sadness as she prepares to say her farewells here. Her deep fondness for Crescentians extends to staff (recalling all those girlie things, like manicures or shopping, that they occasionally enjoyed together) and students alike. And judging from the comments and notes coming her way, the fondness is mutual.

“The students wrote to me and one in particular was very touching; she said that she never had never spoken to me personally, but from what she had observed of me and the genuine love shown in understanding and getting close to the students, it had created a great impact on her life in the four years at Crescent. And she signed off 'Your beloved graduating student'! So even though I may not have gotten to know her personally, the influence we as educators have on the students can still be very strong – it was very touching to me. **”**



Like the centre of any good cyclone, this leader remains remarkably calm as successive waves of change pour in. Her steady direction and the frankly inspiring surroundings she has created are contributing to a surge of confidence about meeting the 'Future School' challenge, both within and beyond CGS. During her decade here, Bee Yann has found herself ahead of several key trends in education – exploring new tools and methods, improving the learning environment, and championing action research – basically by following her professional interests and using her signature clear thinking.

Now, as 2007 draws to a close, Bee Yann is experiencing a mixture of excitement about her next posting as principal of St.

PRINCIPAL AS TEACHER

School administration had never really been her aspiration, but during her extended stint at the Testing & Research Branch of HQ, the Ministry must have recognized something: upon arriving at CGS, she was promoted from HOD to VP to Principal, all within one and a half years. "My calling, first and foremost, is still as a teacher. But if leadership was to be the area where I might best contribute, I would certainly accept the opportunity and give it a try." She made a pact with herself, though, and despite the steadily increasing demands on her time, she has kept that promise. Every year, she has made it a point to maintain very direct contact with students – every Sec4 class. "I call it the highlight of my day:

going in not just to teach them math, but to talk and interact with them; basically enjoying myself, getting to know the young people and their views better; helping them to acquire different perspectives of life." Teachers have been telling her that some of the students really appreciated the fact that their principal, despite her very, very busy schedule, would set aside that protected time with them. "They're on a very comfortable level with me. They would SMS me 'Can I have an extra session??'"

Bee Yann is not about to second guess how things will unfold in her new posting but more radical innovations will doubtless be in the offing. 'Radical' – in the sense of 'foundational' or 'fundamental' rather than 'extreme' – may be just the right word to describe the process that's been taking root at Crescent. Teachers have been learning how to apply basic techniques of research to their own process of reflecting on their effectiveness as teachers.

Action Research:

Inquiry-based research conducted by teachers that follows a process of examining existing practices, implementing new practices, and evaluating the results, leading to an improvement cycle that benefits both students and teachers. Also known as: practitioner research, teacher research, site-based research, and action science.

WHO HAS TIME FOR RESEARCH?

Teachers everywhere are regularly reminded about the importance of reflective self-evaluation. When pressed, frankly many respond that merely 'going the distance' with the curriculum content is just about all they can manage. So, who has time – or energy – to reflect, let alone do research? Well, this is a point where Bee Yann likes to draw a distinction: between being teachers and being educators. "If we are continually absorbed in what we have to deliver without taking time 'out of the water' to breathe and look around, it will become a vicious cycle where we are so busy that we slowly lose track of what it means to be in that role – that is not just being a teacher of subject content – but of being an educator. So the time to breathe, to poke our head out of the water, is critical – to be evaluative and to reflect on our own practices. It is very important to know that the way we have delivered has indeed been effective in helping the students to learn better. Action research is an evaluative tool to help teachers ask, 'Have the time and effort spent in a particular activity, teaching or otherwise, really been effective?' If it's not effective, maybe we should find better ways of doing it and we should stop what we have always been comfortable with."

TRAIN AND LET THE SKILLS MULTIPLY

In order to do action research, teachers first have to find out what different kinds of practices and research findings are out there. What do the experts say? Or what have some communities or researchers found pertaining to this approach? Or is there a totally different approach that they may want to spend time on? In other words, they need to do an extensive review

of the literature. That will influence how they design their research. Then comes the easy part: collect data – before, and then after the 'treatment' – do the statistical analysis, and move on. Of course, Bee Yann feels that the learning will be lost if only the teachers involved in the research gain from the experience. "Getting them to write the lit review, experiments, findings and reflections, was not so easy," she recalls. "So in the early years, I had to help them do the writing – one-on-one. Later on, once they had a certain model of the various components that form a research paper, they became more comfortable. Now they're writing on their own."

As the initial group's success became visible and teachers saw the kind of support they could get, then other groups, every department in fact, started coming up with lines of inquiry. To facilitate the process, Bee Yann engaged consultants (Singaporean colleagues from the Educational Research program in Pittsburgh, in fact) to provide technical help and advice for their research efforts.

In the background is the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh, where Bee Yan pursued her Masters in Education.

“ ACTION RESEARCH IS SIMPLY A FORM OF SELF-REFLECTIVE ENQUIRY UNDERTAKEN BY PARTICIPANTS IN SOCIAL SITUATIONS IN ORDER TO IMPROVE THE RATIONALITY AND JUSTICE OF THEIR OWN PRACTICES, THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF THESE PRACTICES, AND THE SITUATIONS IN WHICH THE PRACTICES ARE CARRIED OUT. ”

Carr & Kemmis, 1986



While pursuing her Masters in Education on a scholarship at the University of Pittsburgh in 1986, Bee Yann became increasingly convinced that 'action research' was a hugely powerful and vastly underutilized tool for teachers. Knowing full well how daunting a task 'doing research' would seem to already overstretched teachers, she decided she would position it to her staff at CGS as something they could use to help chart their own professional development – their own process of becoming the best teacher that they can be. "The buy-in was easier because the staff saw that we were trying to equip and empower them with tools to improve themselves." She found there was sufficient interest to warrant guiding that process herself, at least with the initial group.



Meanwhile, in another initiative, all the teachers were learning to analyze and understand both their own teaching styles and the students' learning styles with the goal of finding a method of better matching teaching activity with learning objective. By the time Teach Less Learn More (TLLM) came along, CGS teachers were well along in their thinking about better ways of delivering the curriculum. A proposal for two new projects were quickly drawn up, submitted and accepted.

"One benefit of being selected as a TLLM school – we were one of eight pioneer schools chosen during the first phase – was that one of our teachers would be rigorously

trained by MOE in research skills. We had to offload that teacher's classroom schedule – she would be at MOE for training two days a week for half the year – but then she brought back her expertise to the rest of the school. So we have become more self-sufficient as time goes by. This year we sent another teacher for the training so now we

have two so-called 'research activists'. We are using less and less of the consultant's service and more of the capacity of the teachers to manage this on their own."

What is really impressive is the way that Bee Yann takes action research seriously. She guides the process and equips her staff with the necessary training. She resources the process adequately and creates an environment in which meaningful research can happen. She empowers those teachers with the interest to train up and assume the leadership themselves. Her teachers consider her a visionary leader, steering the school through uncharted waters. The variety of new challenges hitting Crescentians has been so intense and so rapid that teachers barely recognize how much their own capacity to achieve excellence has flourished. Their principal's down-to-earth approach to nurturing their professional growth, in handholding and then empowering the staff to be self-directed in their learning, has seen positive outcomes: Seven Heads of Department have been promoted as Vice-Principals during her tenure in Crescent.



“WE SHALL ONLY TEACH BETTER IF WE LEARN INTELLIGENTLY FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF SHORTFALL, BOTH IN OUR GRASP OF THE KNOWLEDGE WE OFFER AND OF HOW TO OFFER IT. THAT IS THE CASE FOR RESEARCH AS A BASIS FOR TEACHING.”

Lawrence Stenhouse, 1979,
University of East Anglia, UK

At a Harvard summer course, Bee Yann was impressed by a fresh take on Maslov's hierarchy of needs recast as safety and security at the bottom, then sense of belonging, then achievement, then aspirations at the apex. Evidently, intervention at the lower levels – helping students feel safe & secure within learning environments & creating that sense of belonging – is instrumental to students achieving excellence. "We designed research on 'significant people' in our students' lives who foster that sense of belonging. Do they have a significant adult to approach if life's problems arise? Quite surprisingly, data showed "father" as very important when problems occur while "mother" is the one closest. Upshot? A series of parenting workshops to share how important *both* are in students' lives. Some fathers are less 'hands on', thinking their role is less important compared to mother. The research showed otherwise.

A VERY PLEASANT IDYLLIC CHILDHOOD

"I've always enjoyed studying and learning new things. Learning comes naturally to me, and the passion for learning remains strong in me. So, in terms of academic results, whether as an undergrad (1st class honors, top student for Maths and Physics in NUS) or later at Pittsburgh studying Research Methodology (perfect GPA), I found I didn't have to struggle very hard to achieve what I wanted." From the time she was a youngster, Bee Yann was always signing up for different courses — learning to cook from a well-known chef, speed-reading, shorthand, even tailoring so she could make her own clothes. She was naturally diligent and conscientious; a reflection (Maslov might say) of the safe, secure and loving home environment of the pre-war shophouse in Chinatown where Bee Yann, her brother and four sisters were raised. "There was no pressure — no one really monitored how much I should study. I would do what I wanted to do, basically just taking responsibility for myself and deciding how I would plan and spend my time."

Bee Yann was always surrounded by many caring adults. Her paternal grandparents stayed with them as well as her aunt. "Throughout the day, different members — grand aunties, grand uncles, and cousins — were all dropping by; so there was always conversation and a lot of food around. We all had to help make certain things so that there would be enough for people who just dropped in at all times of the day. I would be helping to pound the chilli or cutting vegetables or rolling dough to make soon kuehs. It was a lot of fun and every night was like a party."

Her grandfather was an only son from a well-off Taiwanese family. He was a pampered teen who decided to run away to S'pore all by himself simply to escape an arranged marriage. Being unskilled, he took the only kind of job that was available in the Chinatown area: as a laborer along the S'pore River. Her father and aunt both went to a Primary School in the Chinese medium stream but he wasn't particularly engaged in learning and it was soon decided he should shadow his father to learn a skill.

Her aunt, on the other hand, flourished in school and Bee Yann remembers clearly the day she graduated. "My aunt asked me to run and buy a newspaper where all



the names of the candidates who passed the 'A' Levels were published. So she was very happy to see her name there. In those days, to achieve that and to be selected to become a teacher was something very honorable and prestigious."

Bee Yann's father recognized the value of education and strove to provide his children with the best opportunities he could. "He put us through school... with a lot of advice from my aunt about school and career choices. One very interesting thing was my early exposure to a lot of books because my aunt loved reading. In the huge attic which was occupied by my aunt, there were so many available. It was one of my pleasurable activities to go up to the attic and see what I could find from her collection. That's how I developed the

passion to read, I guess, and to learn things beyond what's taught in school."

Due to severe motion sickness, Bee Yann couldn't tolerate the bus or trishaw ride out to Delta West School with her sisters. So she walked to nearby Telok Ayer PS. Here she came to realize that there are different types of experience in the world. "That kind of toughened me up and moved me out of that comfort zone to be able to understand and read situations, reflect on them, and be grateful for the kind of home environment and support that I had in my life, where people talk to one another with respect and love. It was really an eye opener." One particular scene remains etched in her mind: a student challenging a teacher as the teacher was throwing his books out of the window. "Then he tried to cane the student, running around the classroom with the cane — and we were all petrified. As the 'monitress', my teacher expected me to do something and he yelled at me to 'Run to the office and get the principal here!'"

With her aunt as the role model, she helped them to make certain decisions such as which secondary school to attend. For Bee Yann, it was Raffles Girls' School (RGS). "Of course she told me that it was not easy to get into that school. In fact, when I marked that as one of my choices, my form teacher actually discouraged me saying that nobody from Telok Ayer PS had ever been accepted to RGS. When I told my aunt, she said I should just go for it! I might have a good chance of getting in. So from that point on, I became very serious in my



“ IT IS TEACHERS WHO, IN THE END, WILL CHANGE THE WORLD OF THE SCHOOL BY UNDERSTANDING IT. ”

Inscription on Lawrence Stenhouse's memorial plaque at University of East Anglia.



studies to make sure that I could make it." That year, three students from Telok Ayer PS got into RGS.

"Auntie encouraged my interest in math. Even though I was in Primary school, I was very curious about how to solve those Secondary math problems I saw her marking. She taught me about logarithms, indices, and I volunteered to help her. I said, "Let me check the answers for you, before you mark. That way you will work faster!" And she was quite happy, you know, to let me do that."

Lee Bee Yann started young as a motivated and autonomous learner under the wing of her aunt. As her circle of influence grows, she seems to be that exemplary lifelong learner that others find themselves emulating — a truly empowering experience.

When Bee Yann is into her next posting, the research process at CGS will be self-running and she 'won't be missed'. She had initially cast action research as 'teacher development' to make it sound more appealing, less weighty than 'academic research'. But in actuality, the professional practices of reflection and evaluation subsumed by



▲ Bee Yann with her aunt and baby sister

“ REAL CLASSROOMS HAVE TO BE OUR LABORATORIES, AND THEY ARE IN THE COMMAND OF TEACHERS, NOT OF RESEARCHERS. THIS IS THE CHARACTERISTIC OF PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS: THE RESEARCH ACT MUST CONFORM TO THE OBLIGATIONS OF THE PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT. THIS IS WHAT WE MEAN BY ACTION RESEARCH. ”

Lawrence Stenhouse, 1979, University of East Anglia, UK



▲ Bee Yann welcomes Microsoft Chief Technology Officer, Craig Mundie

action research may be the most important tool a teacher can possess along the journey to the school of the future.

"As a principal, my role goes beyond equipping myself with the necessary skills and competencies to lead the team. The members of the team — the staff, students and stakeholders — are interdependent. To have a high-performing team, everyone needs to be nurtured to their fullest potential and make a personal commitment to realize the shared directions of the school. This means that the teachers must take the responsibility for their own professional growth as well and work well together as a team. The students also have to be responsive to the new teaching approaches. Constantly on my mind are 'How do I get the best from the teachers? How do I work well with the teachers? How do I help the teachers to be the best that they aspire to be, and likewise for the students?' So my focus on learning has moved towards that of inspiration, motivation, as well as support and empowerment." 

▼ Bee Yann and her aunt revisit the family shophouse



Comments? Questions? → info@aps.org



“ Speaking as a facilitator, the level of engagement this group brought to the mentorship process was exceptionally high. People were not holding back at all. For me personally, as a parent with two youngsters in the school system, this was a rare glimpse into what makes our school principals tick; their extraordinary commitment to students; their passion and professionalism...

In June 2007, the APS launched its inaugural *Mentorship Programme* (MP) and by all reports the maiden voyage was successful beyond expectations. The good ship *Mentor* has been deemed seaworthy and provisioning for her next sojourn is already under way.

Judging by comments gathered both from participants and the MP organizers, the 'journey' so far has clearly been worthwhile. Relationships forged have proven to be of real benefit not just to mentees, but for the mentors as well. Most of these strong personal/professional connections show signs of enduring long past their formation within the programme.

At a kickoff 'coaching' workshop last July, John Ng, Principal Consultant from Meta, led the whole group of twenty principals through two days of training in techniques designed to engender fruitful mentoring

relationships. Over the ensuing months each 'dyad' continued to meet one-on-one, occasionally with additional guidance from Meta staff.



One pairing, Mdm Chua Lay Tin, Principal of Ang Mo Kio PS, and her mentor, Ms Lim Boon Cheng, Principal of Beacon PS, found that relaxed conversation over lunch was quite conducive to their purpose. PRINCIPIA caught up with Lay Tin and Boon Cheng sharing ice cream and latte in Holland Village during

their third get together to find out what sort of topics had been surfacing for them.

From the outset they had agreed their chats should focus on what Lay Tin was facing in her leadership. Boon Cheng would simply hear her out; and offer advice if it was sought. "She asked probing questions and let me see whether I could actually solve the problem on my own," observes Lay Tin.

In their first session, Strategic Planning (SP) was foremost on Lay Tin's mind: how to engage her staff in the whole SP process. "If I don't do SP well, then for the next six to seven years that I have at the school, my staff won't know where we are going. We won't be sharing the same objectives or fighting for the same cause. I was naïve at a certain stage: I thought maybe one-to-one dialogues, half an hour each, with 80 to 90 staff; it doesn't really take a lot of time."



The Mentor Diaries

I realized my kids are in very good hands. 

Terence Wee, Senior Consultant, Meta

Boon Cheng smiles. "Sometimes as a new principal you think you can control all the factors. But in reality we have a lot of other things that we *can't* really control. Lay Tin knows what she wants to do; I was just able to introduce other possibilities as far as how to do it. But she needed that time, you know, to have this conversation."

Lay Tin adds, "She didn't tell me 'You can't do it that way.' Instead, she said, 'You might also want to consider doing this, or trying that...,' for example, involving my Key personnel directly in implementing the SP process. I realized there are different ways to actually gather information – in small groups; or larger 'focus group' discussion, focused around specific topics – which I thought were very good. Then, back at the office, I looked at my whole planning schedule... it's impossible to have one-to-one dialogue! It brought me back to reality.

So in that sense it's been very good. She didn't prescribe but rather outlined options and let me think through what would be the best way to do it with my school and my staff." Boon Cheng quietly nods from behind her coffee.

"Sometimes, with obstacles along the way, like parent issues where you're not too sure, it's good to hear her perspective. 'Am I on the right track? Is this how I should handle this situation?' It really helps when there's somebody to share the burden, someone who has gone through similar things herself. It was very reassuring to hear Boon Cheng say that things actually become easier as you go along. It's not quite as daunting or intimidating as during the first year as principal."

"It's more the opportunity to have someone act as a safe sounding board," adds Boon

Cheng, "without feeling self-conscious. That's not really something you can do with your staff."

"We also talked about processes, such as dealing with my Officers, how to approach certain sensitive things, the potentially secretive part of our job. Because Boon Cheng has been there, done work reviews with key personnel, etc., I try to tap on her expertise.

Today we were talking about opportunities for developing key personnel – how to help bring them to a higher level; and keeping them motivated. I have a very young team of key personnel and many have their own issues: family, work and needing to achieve a balance. And yet the job requires them to do more, devote more time, more energy. We talked about ways to help energize staff..."

PARTICIPANTS REFLECT



"It felt personally valuable to be able to pass along some of my tacit knowledge. I say 'some' because I am very aware that mentoring is not coaching and most of the time, the mentee needs to discover for herself how best to go about doing things. When my mentee discovers, it is also an 'AHA' moment for me."



"I was pleasantly surprised. The age difference posed no gap. I am 58 and he is in his late 30s. He was keen to listen while I was excited by the freshness of his ideas and thinking."



"The techniques that we learned and then applied during our mentoring sessions were extremely useful. I discovered that skilful conversations are the key to maximizing the mentor/mentee relationship."

"I realized that my mentor also had her fair share of problems and that our interactions actually helped her as well."



"What I find most valuable is my mentee's trust: the risk he dares to take in sharing with me; his anxieties, weaknesses what he feels threatened by. The respect and regard that my mentee has for me is uplifting and that spurs me on and adds to my self respect."



"In sharing with my mentee I am in a way forced to reflect on some of my own approaches, and the outcomes. I am able to share with my mentee both 'good' approaches and some not-so-good ones. Also I need to set it in context as I run a Junior College while my mentee runs a neighbourhood Secondary school and some approaches may not work. I feel very blessed to run a school like mine."



"The experience deepened my relationship with a principal colleague. In helping my mentee to get a better perspective of things, I experienced the whole reflective process myself!"





LOOKING AHEAD

Reflecting on the enthusiasm with which the Mentorship Programme has been embraced, APS President Belinda Charles told PRINCIPIA, "We have been most heartened in the Mentorship Programme to see our principals' tacit knowledge put to so much good use. We have also found the coaching approach adopted for the training to be useful not just for mentoring itself, but in helping the fraternity to pose insightful questions about their own practice at the same time as learning to look at many issues from new perspectives.

As the Mentorship Programme continues, we are exploring the possibility of having principals develop this mentorship approach further and becoming involved in the coaching process alongside the trainers from Meta." 



A Fire in His Belly: Stickwithitness

When the phone rang, Lok Oon was half expecting an invitation to his first job interview; maybe from Philips; or Mitsubishi; or one of a dozen other multinational electronics firms that were establishing their footholds in Malaysia during the 1970s. After all, he was freshly graduated from the University of Malaya's highly-reputed Science Faculty — with a major in Pure & Applied Physics — a mere 3 days ago, in fact. But he was already feeling unemployed.

It was his friend, Liew, calling from Johor Bahru. Liew had just found a more lucrative job. How would Lok Oon feel about filling in for him at this convent school where he was relief teaching? Small school, easy work, not bad pay...

This wasn't exactly what Lok Oon had envisioned for himself. In fact, the idea of being a teacher had never even occurred to him. While listening to his friend with one ear, what sounded like his father's voice was whispering in the other an old biblical proverb, 'a living dog is better than a dead lion'. Hmm. At least he'd be gainfully occupied until something more suitable came along. He decided to head down to JB that afternoon and have his friend show him the ropes.

THE ACCIDENTAL TEACHER

The rudimentary facilities he found at the Convent School were a far cry from those shiny labs back at University of Malaya. Here, chalk and blackboard were state-of-the-art. Yet something about that very simplicity — the warmth of the staff; their common devotion to the students — quickly charmed him. And then there were all those eager young faces filling his classroom. Suddenly he had been given the chance to shape a learning environment for all that eagerness. He actually found the responsibility exhilarating. Lok Oon had stumbled into a role that he not only loved instantly, but which further ignited his own desire to learn: how to be effective as a teacher. Lok Oon was so quickly embraced into this harmonious community that he soon couldn't imagine doing anything different.

DECISION TIME

As the end of his first year of substitute teaching approached, it was time to make a decision: exactly how and where to go about getting properly certified to teach. He could certainly return to the university in Kuala Lumpur. On the other hand, there was an ad he'd seen in the papers calling for applicants to Institute of Education (IE) in Singapore, and that was just across the Causeway. It was the end of 1977 and there were changes taking place in his native Malaysia in the language of instruction. His English was better than his Bahasa. This further inclined him towards the Singapore option. Thanks to his good command of the English language Lok Oon's entry to IE was quickly approved, along with PR status shortly thereafter, and he was soon happily immersed in his new found calling at Queensway Secondary School. To top things off, during a camping outing to St. John Island, he met a young banking officer named Ang Ser Khee, with whom he immediately fell in love. Singapore kept looking more and more attractive.



▲ Queensway SS Principal Oilin de Castro

FIRST ROLE MODEL

When he reported for duty at Queensway Sec, the first person to greet him was the principal herself, Mrs. Oilin de Castro. "She had a commanding presence. She made me feel welcomed." Her crisp leadership style made a lasting impression on Lok Oon; and much of his on-the-job learning was the result of her influence and role modeling. Both in meetings and face to face, she was very clear about what she wanted and supremely confident. She had an incredibly good memory. "Whenever she assigned a duty to someone she would state a deadline. Almost always, just before the deadline, she would gently remind the person. No one that I know of ever missed her deadlines." Lok Oon was awed by how she was able to handle so many things at the same time, giving each just the right amount of attention, all the while keeping a strong sense of personal connection with staff and students.

Compared to the Convent School back in JB, he found Queensway Sec rich in learning resources. There were also increased demands, both from the curriculum and on his performance as a teacher. This meant staying back many days and well into the evenings delving into lesson planning, something which he did with relish. Before long, additional departmental tasks were being steered his way. While he treasured his classroom teaching time, he came to recognize that with these administrative responsibilities came a means to exert influence over a significantly greater circle. In due course, Principal De Castro nominated him to head the science department as a 'Senior Subject Teacher'. Curiosity about the leadership side of education led him to take courses and additional training and within a decade of his joining he was VP at Queensway Sec.

STANDARDS & EXPECTATIONS

Queensway Sec's profile reflects its surroundings: lots of lower-middle working class families with a sprinkling of students from a somewhat better off neighbourhood within the catchment area. Maintaining and building on the standards set by his predecessor and mentor was crucial. He took on these challenges with great enthusiasm. He had witnessed how strong academic performance could actually transform a student's self-esteem and even spill over into more widely felt school pride. Ever higher expectations became a hallmark of his leadership style. His commitment to the welfare of the students was unwavering. When in 1994 he was appointed as Queensway Sec's principal his deep sense of responsibility extended to all aspects of the school. "When I took over as principal, I was all fiery and really aggressive. I would not tolerate any defiance. I would not tolerate any bad behaviour. I would not tolerate ill discipline." Students who got into trouble would find the new principal taking a very direct interest in guiding them. If there was a discipline issue, he always handled such matters personally – and publicly if the offence was a serious one. "I had a very good relationship with the kids because they knew that I cared; that I loved them. But I still caned them if I had to cane them." If his methods were 'old-fashioned', they proved effective nevertheless. During his time at the helm, Queensway Sec's performance and reputation continued to improve. And people took notice. In 1998 he was invited to be interviewed for the top job at Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Secondary School.



▲ Teachers' (embarrassment) Day at Queensway SS, 1980

CHANGE OF SCENE

Along with being a Christian, Lok Oon's high academic and disciplinary standards met the KCP Board of Governors' criteria. Back in the mainstream government school system, any mixing of religious beliefs and education was considered strictly off-limits. So he was curious to see what would be different about running a school that incorporated religious instruction and values into its curriculum and daily practice. "It was something I really liked; prayer during assembly, the way moral guidance was infused into all aspects. Solving problems and settling disagreements among staff was a breeze because of the commonly held values and priorities. At KCPSS, I simply carried on with my own brand of discipline that had been quite effective at Queensway SS. Actually, it was simpler, because the principal before had been even tougher than



▲ First batch of students, CHIJ Convent, Johor Bahru

me. This allowed me to really focus on the academic area."

His superintendent during this time, Mr. Goh Tong Pak, became another strong influence. "He was a very fair boss – honest, straight to the point and full of wisdom. The way he could look beyond someone's mistakes and focus on their capability and commitment, that really impressed me." These were qualities Lok Oon endeavoured to emulate. During his tenure as principal, KCPSS obtained Value Added awards for all five years.

A DIFFERENT CHALLENGE

When his next posting came along, it was to the heartland and a school with an 'image' problem. Even with nine years of principalship under his belt and some prior knowledge about Dunearn Secondary School, Lok Oon was not entirely prepared for what lay in store. A neighborhood school, Dunearn's intake was as expected: fairly low in terms of PSLE T-scores. Historically, the school's academic results had been underwhelming. Right from its beginning as Dunearn Chinese Middle School in the early 1960s the school had been saddled with a reputation as rough – *a lot pai kia* – and its merger in 1969 with Dunearn Vocational School next door reinforced that perception.

The move in 1993 to its current Bukit Batok location, where a much higher density and even lower socioeconomic landscape prevailed, served to just further cement the school's image. "So I could see my work cut out for me. My first thought even before I stepped foot into Dunearn Sec, was the need to raise the academic standards and help the school to do well enough to be ranked among the achieving, the value-added. I reckoned there would also be a need to work on the school culture and the school's standing in the eyes of the public."

ASSUMPTIONS RE-EXAMINED

Lok Oon had assumed that his working philosophy, the blending of discipline with high academic standards, would continue to serve him well. But he was taken unawares by a wave of 'mainstream school leavers' – well over twenty students dropped out within his first year at Dunearn Sec. This was a big shock, unprecedented in his experience. It forced Lok Oon to re-examine some of his assumptions.

CHANGING STRATEGIES

To address the 'dropout' problem, he would have to change strategy: Lok Oon decided to adopt a softer stance, to find other ways to demonstrate his care and love to the kids. He relaxed his grip on the cane, delegating more discretionary authority to his Discipline Master – with the proviso that he be informed of and approved any physical punishment beforehand. He instituted an 'open door' policy in an effort to reach out to students. But that quickly became an issue for some teachers. They were feeling bypassed and that their authority was being undermined. In one-on-one meetings with his staff, Lok Oon set about trying to clear up these misconceptions.

To underscore his expectations about academic standards, he initiated 'book checks' whereby he personally examined each and every child's assignment books, files and workbooks, in all their subjects; and not just once. That, too, became a source of tension with some staff feeling that they were being 'overly scrutinized'. However, while he indeed found quite a lot of areas to be less than desirable, his goal was to determine how he might best help. Again Lok Oon worked to clarify intentions, to reassure the nervous.

TRIAL BY FIRE

Despite his best efforts to build trust with his staff, it proved simply too great of an

adjustment for some. Complaints, requests for transfers and even resignation letters reached his boss, prompting her expression of supportive concern, site visits, along with the usual climate survey. Not surprisingly, the subsequent feedback he received wasn't exactly glowing either: 'unrealistic expectations'; 'too straightforward'; 'too strict'; 'too blunt'. Lok Oon was certainly prepared to adjust his style; but he was not about to be dissuaded from his purpose because of some disgruntled naysayers. He had determined to do his utmost to bring about a noticeable improvement in Dunearn Sec's academic performance. If his methods were unsettling for some, they too would just have to adjust. He told the superintendent that he had to call a spade a spade! "But I suppose I could be less direct..."

For all his detractors, there were gradually more who came to appreciate the sincerity of his intentions and to trust his leadership. Moreover, his doggedness was beginning to pay off. For the last two years Dunearn SS has received the Value Added award for academic achievement. "The analogy I often used is that our children are like raw iron-ore. They start off dirty and messy. We need to put them in a 'furnace' to melt them and burn off all the impurities, mould them, hammer them and finally hone them into a fine sword. As a Christian, I firmly believe in what the Lord says in the book of Hebrews 12:11 – 'No discipline seems pleasant at the time,



▲ Award winning gymnast, St. Joseph's SS in JB

▲ With pre-U English College classmates, JB



but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

NOT ONE WILL BE LOST

Of course the academic side is only one facet of education. Where learners seem predisposed – whether by socioeconomic, environmental or other factors – to falling short of their true potential, a school leader's focus needs to extend beyond mere curriculum. From the outset, Lok Oon observed gains achieved within school being undone by a range of influences from the surroundings. This reality helped define another strategic priority: Dunearn Sec's 'public relations'; improving its standing in the eyes of the local community. More and more, he finds himself spending large chunks of time out in the neighbourhood, visiting students' homes, reaching out to parents, building stronger relationships with community, identifying and dealing with counter-productive influences. This means liaising with police, religious and community leaders, local business owners; and yes, scouring the neighborhoods trying to locate missing students. Through the assistance of his discipline teachers, the school actually found one youngster living and sleeping under a bridge in a park. Enticing such disaffected youth back into the school community is very challenging. During a short sabbatical in 2006, Lok Oon attended a course at University of Liverpool focusing on this very issue and he brought back some useful learning. With tactics such as the recent addition of a full-time *Learning Mentor*, a member of the non-teaching staff who acts as a mentor/friend to disaffected youths,

Lok Oon sees positive signs starting to emerge. The 'dropout' trend is reversing.

TURNING THE SHIP AROUND

"It has not been easy though. I have a good team going and that helps a lot. The key player is Sandra Gwee, our Vice Principal. The number of early school leavers has been reduced – by nearly half. But it is still far too high for me to even think about considering our measures a success. Actually, there have been a couple of students who had left and then decided to return. Both have just completed their GCE "O" Levels and I am very proud of them. Another one will be coming back early next year."

As more and more of the Bukit Batok community witness the level of care and commitment emanating from their neighbourhood school, greater dividends may yet appear, such as local pride. "A school like Dunearn Sec needs a leader that will love the students for themselves. You won't be able to survive without that passion; because there are just too many challenges; too much demand on your own personal space; not enough time, or energy. If you don't love the children, or don't have this passion for educating them and giving them a better chance in life, I really can't see how you can carry on. There are times when I say, 'Oh, no....' I don't mean that it's hopeless – it's just all the things that you have to deal with, like the gangsterism, the influences outside, and parents who don't bother or don't care, and yet make demands. You get parents that come in – lying through their teeth. Absolutely no scruples! To put it bluntly, they put me off in a bad way."

CLARITY & SIMPLICITY

Blunt indeed. Rough though his edges might be at times, there is a clarity of purpose, a directness and honesty, a simplicity, even wisdom about this man; qualities that, when taken together amount to the right approach for *this* leader, in *this* job – tools you perhaps wouldn't want to blunt.

"It didn't go down very well during the first year. But I think we've all matured since then. Everyone's getting used to my style; and I am adjusting my approach too. It's better now – at least the academic results bear this out. The Sec 4 Express for last year's cohort – those were the best results Dunearn has ever had. In my opinion it's not good enough yet. We can do even better."

DIGNITY & PRIDE

"A child need not score high distinctions and 'A's to be considered a success in my book. A child that does better than his best even if only slightly is a success to me already. If a school can achieve value-added results, that means all the children and the teachers have managed to do better than their best. As a principal, it is my duty to provide the conditions and support to let them achieve. In the process, the dignity and pride of all individuals must be preserved and honoured. Children must be respected as individuals and not just students who must perform to give the school, or the teachers, or the Principal for that matter, a good name. That is to say, good academic results are not the 'be all and end all!' *JP*

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Mr. K Govindan

Principal, Compassvale Primary School

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Mdm Lee Bee Yann

Principal, Crescent Girls' School

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Wong Lok Oon

Principal, Dunearn Secondary School

**A Fire in His Belly:
Stickwithitness**



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