Lead
Care
Inspire
Teaching is more than a job; it is a calling. As teachers, we believe in the worth and potential of every student. It is our professional desire to nurture every student holistically to become a responsible citizen with a zest for life. Committed to this mission, we place the student at the centre of all that we do and create opportunities, in a safe learning environment, so that our students can be the best that they can be. Teachers play an integral part of the cognitive, physical, aesthetic and character development of every student.

In this 13th issue of “Teach to Inspire, Inspire to Teach”, I am proud to read about the stories of our thirteen finalists of the President’s Award for Teachers. The stories capture the experiences and reflections of these exceptional teachers who inspire and empower students to maximise their potential and develop competencies to thrive in the 21st Century. They often go the extra mile in nurturing and caring for their students.

As reflective practitioners, they are bold in trying out different pedagogies in the classroom, so as to nurture curiosity and creative thinking, and engage their students in learning. These teachers are also strong advocates of continual learning as they hone their craft by keeping abreast of developments in education, and willingly sharing their learning with other teachers in their schools and beyond.

I would like to congratulate the winners and finalists of the President’s Award for Teachers 2016 for epitomising the professionalism of our teaching fraternity, displaying the characteristics of a life-long learner and passing on the love of learning to our students and fellow teachers. I believe their stories will encourage professional reflection and guide the fraternity to continue leading, caring and inspiring future generations of young Singaporeans.

Lead. Care. Inspire.

Mr Wong Siew Hoong
Director-General of Education
Ministry of Education, Singapore
President's Award for Teachers

The President’s Award for Teachers was introduced in 1998 to recognise excellent teachers for their role in moulding the future of our nation. The Award is conferred by the President of the Republic of Singapore on Teachers’ Day.

These teachers inspire their students and peers, through their words and deeds. Since its inception, 78 outstanding teachers, including this year’s winners, have been recognised. They are caring and nurturing, dedicated to the holistic development of their students. Committed to developing their students to the fullest potential, they are passionate in adopting innovative approaches in their lessons. These teachers are also life-long learners and mentors to their peers.

These teachers are role models that exemplify the Ethos of the Teaching Profession.
President’s Award for Teachers
Winners 2016

Back row from left to right:
Mdm Phoon Lyvenne
Spectra Secondary School
Mdm Juliana Bte Johari
Qihua Primary School
Mr Anil s/o Vasudevan
Marsiling Secondary School

Front row from left to right:
Ms O Guat Bee
Temasek Primary School
Mdm Tang Sheng Lien Michele
Catholic High School (Secondary)
Mr Tharmendra Jeyaraman
Siglap Secondary School

President’s Award for Teachers
Finalists 2016

Front row from left to right:
Mdm Phoon Lyvenne
Spectra Secondary School
Mdm Juliana Bte Johari
Qihua Primary School
Mr Anil s/o Vasudevan
Marsiling Secondary School

Back row from left to right:
Mr Chua Thian Keong
Woodlands Primary School
Mr Tharmendra Jeyaraman
Siglap Secondary School
Mdm Tang Sheng Lien Michele
Catholic High School (Secondary)
Ms O Guat Bee
Temasek Primary School
Mdm Samshiah Bte Mohamed Diah
Fairfield Methodist School (Secondary)
Mr Anil s/o Vasudevan
Marsiling Secondary School
Mr Yeo Yew Yong
Nan Chiau High School
President’s Award for Teachers
Stories of Finalists 2016

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do Hardip Singh
Anderson Primary School
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Mdm Tang
Sheng Lien Michele
Catholic High School (Secondary)
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Mr Peter Thia
Catholic Junior College
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Mdm Samsiah Bte Mohamed Diah
Fairfield Methodist School (Secondary)
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Mdm Juliana Bte Johari
Qihua Primary School
Pg. 44

Mr Tharmendra Jeyaraman
Siglap Secondary School
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Mdm Phoon Lyvenne
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Holy Innocents’ Primary School
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Woodlands Primary School
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Ethos of the Teaching Profession

The Ethos is expressed in Our Singapore Educators’ Philosophy of Education, the Teachers’ Vision, the Teachers’ Pledge, the Teachers’ Creed and the Desired Outcomes of Education. Each of the above is an important facet of an integrated Ethos of the Teaching Profession.

The compass has been chosen to depict the facets of the Ethos of the Teaching Profession. Pointing to the true north, it symbolises the constancy of values in the lives of educators. New entrants to the profession are presented with a compass at the Teachers’ Compass Ceremony.

Our Singapore Educators’ Philosophy of Education captures the core beliefs and tenets of the teaching profession and serves as the foundation of teachers’ professional practice.

The Desired Outcomes of Education establishes a common purpose for the teaching fraternity, guiding educational and school policies, programmes and practices.

The Teachers’ Vision articulates the aspirations and roles of the teaching profession, helping teachers to focus on what to do in pursuit of professional excellence.

The Teachers’ Pledge constitutes an act of public undertaking that each teacher takes to uphold the highest standards in professional practice.

The Teachers’ Creed codifies the practices of retired and present educators and makes explicit their tacit beliefs. It provides a guide for teachers to fulfil our responsibilities and obligations, and to honour the promise of attaining professional excellence.

Teachers’ Vision

Singapore Teachers
Lead • Care • Inspire

By word and deed, through the care we give, we touch the lives of our students.
We make a difference - leading and inspiring our students to believe in themselves and to be the best they can be.

As individuals and as a community of professionals, we seek continually to deepen our expertise.
Respectful of fellow educators, we collaborate to build a strong fraternity, taking pride in our work and profession.

We forge trusting partnerships with families and the community for the growth and well-being of each student.

We Lead, Care, Inspire,
For the Future of the Nation Passes through Our Hands.
Teachers' Pledge

We, the teachers of Singapore, pledge that:

**We will be true to our mission**
**to bring out the best in our students.**

**We will be exemplary in the discharge of our duties and responsibilities.**

**We will guide our students to be good and useful citizens of Singapore.**

**We will continue to learn and pass on the love of learning to our students.**

**We will win the trust, support and co-operation of parents and the community so as to enable us to achieve our mission.**

Desired Outcomes of Education

The Desired Outcomes of Education are attributes that educators aspire for every Singaporean to have by the completion of his formal education. These outcomes establish a common purpose for educators, drive our policies and programmes, and allow us to determine how well our education system is doing.

The person who is schooled in the Singapore Education system embodies the Desired Outcomes of Education. He has a good sense of self-awareness, a sound moral compass, and the necessary skills and knowledge to take on challenges of the future. He is responsible to his family, community and nation. He appreciates the beauty of the world around him, possesses a healthy mind and body, and has a zest for life. In sum, he is:

- a confident person who has a strong sense of right and wrong, is adaptable and resilient, knows himself, is discerning in judgment, thinks independently and critically, and communicates effectively;
- a self-directed learner who takes responsibility for his own learning, who questions, reflects and perseveres in the pursuit of learning;
- an active contributor who is able to work effectively in teams, exercises initiative, takes calculated risks, is innovative and strives for excellence; and
- a concerned citizen who is rooted to Singapore, has a strong civic consciousness, is informed, and takes an active role in bettering the lives of others around him.
When students make mistakes, I encourage them to use their mistakes as a platform for learning. In this way, they learn to be more persevering and resilient individuals.

Mdm Sarabjeet Kaur
D/o Hardip Singh
Lead Teacher (Science)
Anderson Primary School

THE MOTIVATIONAL QUOTIENT
What keeps children going?
For Sarabjeet Kaur’s students, variety is the spice of their lives.

In Sarabjeet’s class, chopsticks, pincers, straws and spoons are laid out on a table. She gets her students to use these tools to pick up various pieces of food. Some succeed, others don’t, but all of them laugh and learn.

It’s a Science lesson on the kinds of beaks that birds have, and how they eat with them. But at its heart is an understanding that children, too, are different – each with their own motivation and learning needs.

To keep her students engaged, Sarabjeet varies her class activities, such as the one on beaks. As a Lead Teacher, she gives her students work based on their ability, with filler activities to keep the faster ones occupied. She actively encourages her stronger students to help the weaker ones: “I always tell them that when you teach somebody, you are actually learning it yourself again,” she says.

Being sensitive to her students’ learning appetites, Sarabjeet introduced basic Science concepts to her Primary 2 students, even though they weren’t due to learn them for another year. She noticed...
that storybooks used in their English classes could serve as a great springboard to teach them about the body parts of animals, and how to identify animal groups. To get her lower primary English colleagues on board, she came up with resources on how to weave these concepts into their lessons, and the kids love it.

I BELIEVE IN YOU
Truly motivating children, however, goes beyond the harnessing of sound pedagogy. It involves taking a personal interest in their well-being, and believing in their ability.

Sarabjeet cites the example of a bright Primary 6 student with a poor attitude. He was disruptive in class and disinterested in all subjects. She took time to sit and speak with him over several afternoons, asking about his friends, the things that made him happy about school, and his personal success stories with Maths. The boy was caught off-guard – he thought he’d been hauled over to ask why he hadn’t turned in his homework. Slowly, he began opening up, and his behaviour improved.

This method, known as Appreciative Inquiry, is of such interest to Sarabjeet that she did a joint research project on it with teachers from other schools. “It’s about drawing on a student’s positive experiences to make him feel good about himself. This boosts his confidence, morale and motivation.” She’s shared the method with her colleagues, and those who have tried it have given her positive feedback so far.

Sometimes though, there’s no substitute for traditional intervention. One of her students had a phobia of Maths and would freeze up before an exam. Sarabjeet spoke with the girl’s parents and realised they were putting a lot of pressure on her. She encouraged them to give her some space to relax, and things got better. The girl was so grateful that, moments before her PSLE Maths paper, she asked the invigilator to call for Sarabjeet, who quickly ran over with a cup of Milo. The student hugged her.

IT GOES BOTH WAYS
Motivation is, of course, a two-way street. Much as Sarabjeet gives to her students, she also draws inspiration from them.

A girl in her form class once met with a serious road accident less than half a year before her PSLE. She returned to school a month later with a limp, slurred speech and illegible handwriting. Sarabjeet was concerned that the girl would not be in good form to take the examination, but she and her family were determined to see it through. The teachers doubled down on their efforts, providing special coaching sessions even as the student went through physiotherapy.

Over time, her faculties slowly recovered. Eventually, she did well in her PSLE and went on to the Express stream in secondary school. “It was an inspiration to the whole class, the whole school,” says Sarabjeet. “We went all out. We helped her, but she helped herself more.”

Reflecting on that episode, Sarabjeet felt moved by the student’s grit and determination. “She could have easily said ‘I can’t do it’. She could have asked for an exemption from the PSLE. But she wanted to prove to herself, her parents and her teachers that she could, and she did.”

Today, Sarabjeet shares this story with her students, as a way of passing on her motivation, and will do so with all her future students. “These things stay with you for life.”

“Mdm Kaur teaches us to persevere. Because her lessons are interesting, I want to work harder. It’s that kind of drive, that kind of motivation that we get from her lessons.”

Ng Yu Xin, Primary 6
Michele knew that boys learn best when there are games and technology involved. So, when she came across Aqua Republica, a digital simulation game on water sustainability, this enthusiastic Geography teacher saw it as another way in which she could make the subject come alive for her students.

When it comes to games, Michele prefers traditional board games, but that wasn’t going to hold her back. As she says, “Anything new is interesting to me.”

Her openness to challenges sustained her through the early years of her teaching career. Fresh after her GCE A-Level, Michele joined a school as a relief teacher where, as she says, it wasn’t unusual to see police cars roll up. Her students were just a few years younger than she and they gave her a hard time. “I tried putting my foot down, but that didn’t go well,” she says with a laugh. What worked much better was showing them that she cared. “I learnt something in that job – the power of human relationships, and that stuck with me. I liked learning how to relate to my students.”

That was 22 years ago.

GAME FOR ANYTHING NEW
Tang Sheng Lien Michele is more into Monopoly than computer games, but she is happy to let her students go digital to improve their understanding of Geography.

Her classes playing Aqua Republica have put her on a steep learning curve while her students have taken to it effortlessly. Laughing, she says, “There’s no way you can beat them – they’re all expert gamers!”

Developed in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme, Aqua Republica requires players to develop sustainable communities based on their understanding of issues such as pollution and green technology. The school became the first in Singapore to adopt the game.

Michele is firm in the way the game is used in the classroom. “You don’t just play games for the sake of playing games,” she says. She puts a great deal of thought into engineering the learning outcomes she wants. She plays the role of facilitator, constantly relating the game to the curriculum. “What’s important is that the students are having fun and are engaged as they make sense of their learning through questioning and collaborative discussions. I try to tease out their learning experiences and help them make the connections.”

A chief aspect of her lessons are the debrief sessions, which, under Michele’s direction, are rich with students’ insights. One of her students, Dominic, says, “We were in the library but we got so excited...
Teach to Inspire, Inspire to Teach

Students presenting their game idea at the World Water Forum in Korea – a gathering of policy makers who seek to advance the cause of water through innovation. The students did the school proud in the competition by winning second place.

Next, Michele decided to head further into unchartered territory by getting her team of Geography teachers to design a card game on energy. They approached a researcher from NIE’s Learning Sciences Lab and went to work. “It was a teacher-designed game, from the get-go. The researcher was a facilitator. The teachers were in full control of the learning outcomes and how we wanted to achieve it.”

The card game was a hit with the boys. It has even thrown up new knowledge for Michele, since she researches some of the ideas surfaced in class. She says, “My mastery of the subject has deepened from the designing to the playing of the game.” Her colleagues, too, can’t wait to design another game. “We are seeing more teachers, also from other schools, who are keen to be part of this learning process,” she says. “It’s always good to have people who are passionate – we feed off each other’s positive energy!”

Always on the go

Always keen to experience new things, Michele continues to take courses, build her teaching skills, engage in action research and travel.

“If I live a rich life myself, whether in terms of travels or in terms of experiences, I think it makes one like a resource for students – to share life experiences, to share personal stories. Our students need to see that life is more than just studies. There’s so much more for them to experience and learn from.”

Her advice to all in a nutshell: “Don’t be afraid to try.”

Mrs Lau’s lessons inspire me to love Geography as we do discussions, class debates and play some interesting games. I learn a lot from her.

Teo Glen, Secondary 2
Mr Peter Thia
Head of Department (Mother Tongue)
Catholic Junior College

If we want our students to be leaders, the teacher must first lead.

Catholic Junior College’s Mother Tongue Department is on a roll. Their Mother Tongue results are up. Their students’ recent video project on Balestier Road got picked up by the National Heritage Board (NHB), who is interested in future collaborations. And in 2015, for the first time in the history of the Department, the entire Mother Tongue Language (MTL) staff presented different projects at various national and international competitions.

The man at the centre of this resurgence is CJC veteran of 29 years, Peter, Head of the Mother Tongue Department, who also happens to be an alumnus. “This is my first school, and, I hope, the last!” says Peter.

The soft-spoken and avuncular Peter has been teaching and training teachers for almost three decades at CJC, but his moment of epiphany struck some three years ago when

TEACHERS FIRST
Do you focus on students or teachers? It took Peter Thia almost three decades to find the answer to that question, but once he did, there was no looking back.
he came across a quote at a training programme he was attending. The quote said, “When we focus on teachers, our students succeed.”

Peter instantly recognised the truth of this based on his past experience.

THE EARLY YEARS – RESULTS FOCUSED
When he had first joined CJC, his focus had been firmly on his students. “I saw my role as an educator was to impart knowledge so that students would achieve good grades and enter university. I was constantly contemplating how to get good results.” He pitched lessons at a higher level and with deeper and wider content but this approach did not work for the students. When he became Head of Department (HOD) – his first stint – he reviewed the curriculum and standardised materials, so that everything was in place for “good teaching”. But his efforts didn’t deliver the results he had expected. The students were not interested in what was being taught, their results fluctuated from year to year, and the teachers were not equipped to do what was needed for effective learning to take place.

It is said that CJC students can be a challenge to their Chinese teachers, but, as Peter says with a chuckle, “if I don’t stay (and teach), who else will?”

So stay he did, though he decided to step down as HOD after five years to focus on his first love – teaching. Along the way, he built his own strengths as a teacher, exploring new strategies and methods. He also took on school-based training and staff development, which he found to be very interesting and gratifying. “I enjoyed helping fellow teachers take ownership of their personal growth, and seeing them gain confidence and job satisfaction.” Five teachers he mentored during this time were promoted to senior positions.

MOMENT OF TRUTH
In 2008, he became School Staff Developer, which led to him attending the training session and his epiphonic moment. With his new mantra in place, Peter threw himself wholeheartedly into developing the capability of every MTL teacher, creating more roles and responsibilities that would improve the learning and teaching of MTL. He also took on, once again, the position of HOD. “I was really lucky to have a second chance, right?” he says.

In an effort to re-energise the Department, Peter got every teacher to present on an area of interest or research at Department sharing sessions. The teachers would share their ideas and try to convince colleagues to join their project, forming Professional Learning Teams. Peter says, “If we say that we want our students to be leaders, then the teachers must be leaders, too. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be able to cultivate leaders.”

The sharing sessions and project ideas were a great success. Not only did teaching practices improve, the entire department was selected to present their projects at various conferences in Singapore and abroad. “Never before had the Department achieved on this scale,” says Peter. He also tapped on funds for professional development to arrange for the trips. “We had not utilised the conference funds before, and now all our teams were selected,” he says with pride.

One of the project ideas that came out of the sharing sessions is the students’ Balestier video project, which caught the attention of NHB. For this experiential learning project, called “Unlocking Cultural Puzzles@Balestier”, students trawled Balestier Road in small groups and created short videos on certain sites. Some of the videos will be shown on NHB’s website.

In producing the videos, students not only had to use and hone their MTL skills, they discovered a lot about the cultural heritage of that estate. “It brought Mother Tongue into the real-world context,” says Peter. “The students saw the practicality and value of the language.”

The Department today is re-energised.

Peter adds, “In CJC, a core value is ‘In Truth and in Love’ – in other words, integrity and care. I tell my teachers, if you care for your students, you will identify your own gaps — whether it’s in competency, knowledge or skill, and you will look for appropriate training to close it. And as a professional with integrity, you will constantly upgrade your skills, so that it translates into effective teaching and learning, and benefit the students.”

The last two years have been very satisfying for Peter. “The teachers’ belief in what they’re doing is the success factor that anchors any programme or activity. And what can be more fulfilling than seeing a mindset change in each and every one of my teachers and students?”

“Mr Thia brings life to the Chinese language by using different ways, like videos and songs, to pique our curiosity. He leaves a very deep impression on us.”

Chloe Ng Siew Ting, JC 2
Sirens wail as bullets fly into walls and earth, kicking up sprays of dust. Above the din, Samsiah commandeers her boys: “Utara! Timur! Barat!” They drop and roll accordingly, paying attention to her Malay commands for North, East and West, avoiding the shrapnel and staying clear of the invading forces.

Minutes later, they pick themselves up from the classroom floor, laughing over the simulation activity. Samsiah’s normally stern visage relaxes for a moment, as she looks on with satisfaction. Directional words are part of the basic vocabulary for any language, but they may be challenging even for native speakers. That’s why Samsiah – who learned the Malay language a little later in life – is so determined to help her students and make the language come alive for them.

**BEYOND CLASSROOMS AND TEXTBOOKS**

Her main strategy is to let her students experience Malay in a real-world context. “Beyond the textbook, I come up with my own lesson materials,” she says. Hence the four-day homestays she arranges for her students in Malaysian kampongs, where they get to wake up at the same time as the locals, eat their food, and even help out in making noodles. And the local excursions to places like Arab Street and markets, where they have to converse with shop owners and stallholders.

Samsiah is so convinced of this approach that she’ll find any way to give her students the experiences they need to appreciate the language. Some years back, she planned an overseas learning journey, but it hit a snag because there weren’t enough Malay Language teachers in the school to run it. Undeterred, she approached her Geography colleagues, who were organising their own learning journey to Bali, and asked if her class could tag along. The trip went ahead, with both groups sharing logistics while having their own programmes.

Immersive activities like these not only help Samsiah’s students improve their linguistic skills, they also help to address any preconceptions they may have about Malay language, religion and culture. It’s an issue close to her heart. Being of Arabic and Chinese descent and brought up in a Peranakan environment, Samsiah went through her own journey of discovery into her identity and Mother Tongue.

**KEEPING IT REAL**

Whether it’s helping her students overcome their aversion for Malay Language, or reforming some of the toughest disciplinary cases in her school, Samsiah Bte Mohamed Diah gets the job done by staying grounded.
Once her students are ready, she’s even happy to turn the lessons over to them. Every year, Samsiah gets her Secondary 4 class to develop a Malay Language event from scratch. The most recent one was an Amazing Race-style event at Sentosa, where participants from all cohorts had to solve puzzles relating to Malay words and idioms. “I want them to have a sense of ownership towards the subject,” she says. “When kids have fun, they learn better.” Her students’ achievements back this up – ever since she started teaching, she has managed to help even the weakest of her students pass their final exams.

**TENDER LOVING CARE**
Samsiah hasn’t only succeeded with language students of differing abilities. She’s also done well with cases of difficult behaviour. Over the course of her career, she’s helped students who live in juvenile homes, others who suffer from Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and even a few who ran afoul of the law. Some of them were referred to Samsiah because she has a reputation for strictness, and more importantly because she knows how to reach them emotionally.

Apart from her Malay Language students, Samsiah has invested a lot of time to encourage and guide the PA Crew which she is in charge of. One of the students used to smoke, drink, steal, shout back at teachers, and sleep outdoors. Instead of focusing on his faults, Samsiah affirmed every little positive action, eventually speaking up on his behalf on one occasion. The boy, who confessed that he felt very unloved, was moved by Samsiah’s concern, and pulled up his socks. He received a CCA award and went on to graduate from ITE. The bond that Samsiah has built with the PA Crew is so strong that they keep in touch with her even after they leave school, and many return to coach their juniors.

This ability to connect with even the toughest of students is something Samsiah gladly imparts to her colleagues. As a mentor in the Skilful Teacher and Enhanced Mentoring (STEM) programme, she has given younger teachers advice on how to manage their classes and win their hearts.

“There’s no point in scolding difficult students,” says Samsiah. “To me, being strict is not about shouting at them. It is telling them the pros and cons of their behaviour, and setting boundaries.” She uses more relaxed settings to connect with her students – over food or a brisk walk – and takes the opportunity to weave in some life lessons. Samsiah chuckles as she recalls her students’ feedback: “They always tell me, ‘Cikgu, you are very real.’”

“Whenever Cikgu Samsiah talks to you, you just feel like you can share every single thing. She cares a lot about our wellbeing.”

*Wirdani Aqilah Bte Muhammad Amirul, Secondary 4*
Every recess, Yin Fatt holds court in a special room at Holy Innocent’s Primary School. It’s filled with colourful props and games – flash cards on the wall, a toy cash register in a corner, Snakes and Ladders and Bingo games strewn about. Outside, children form a line, all of them eager to consult her on Maths questions or simply play in the room.

Yin Fatt is the coordinator of Holy Innocents’ Learning Support for Mathematics (LSM) programme, an intervention effort to help Primary 1 and 2 students who’re weak in numeracy. LSM is run in all primary schools, but Yin Fatt has put her own spin on it.

**MULTIPLYING THE FUN**

It begins with the physical learning space. Yin Fatt understands that children need a conducive and engaging environment in order to learn. For students struggling to even count, a normal classroom may not suffice, hence the dedicated room at Holy Innocents’ – a relaxing, inviting refuge plastered with colourful visuals of mathematical concepts.

Then there are the games. Learning through play is a cornerstone of LSM, and Yin Fatt has embraced this wholeheartedly. She’s devised several activities for her students, such as multiplication songs, a game of Snap using number cards, and an ‘Inno Bingo’ game where students have to add up rows of numbers in order to win. There are also real-life applications, like bringing their families’ grocery receipts to class and calculating the totals. “They always like to play with this,” she says, pointing to the cash register. “They’ll pretend to be the cashier and buy things from each other. They love it!”

**IN ADDITION**

Yin Fatt’s support for numerically-challenged students doesn’t stop when they move on to Primary 3 and beyond. “I am very happy to help them all the way through to their final year if they need me,” she says. And some of them do, so she makes herself available at the LSM room for coaching and consultation during recess and after school. She sets this time aside as “the reinforcement of concepts is very important.”

Together with the Allied Educators, Yin Fatt does this even for non-LSM students. Her 7a.m. ‘Math Gym’ sessions are open to Primary 3 and 4 students who are performing poorly, and the sessions are a hit. Some students enjoy ‘Math Gym’ so much...
that they wait for Yin Fatt outside the
LSM room before she arrives. Several
have written of their fondness for
the programme in their end-of-term
reflection journals. Yin Fatt’s methods
are so effective that her colleagues
have borrowed some of these games
to motivate their own students.

Numerical skills aside, Yin Fatt is
mindful that weak students may have
lower self-esteem, so she nudges
their confidence upwards whenever
she can. “Some of the students find
the taste of success unfamiliar, so it’s
important that we make the effort to
courage them by not just focusing
on their grades, but their character.”

DIVIDING THE EFFORT
Yin Fatt’s Maths remediation efforts
require her to start work earlier and get
off later on many days. She also ropes
in parent volunteers, allied educators
and stronger upper primary students to
help out in her LSM programmes.

Parents can play an even larger role in
helping struggling students, Yin Fatt
reckons. Numbers are everywhere in
real life, and it’s easy to involve them
in conversations with children. For
instance, while driving, parents could
ask their children to read the license
plates of other cars, and take it a step
further by asking them to add the first
and last digits.

Too often, busy parents leave
education entirely to schools. In fact,
Yin Fatt has found, from her one-
on-one meetings with parents, that
some of them need advice on how to
even communicate with their children.

Others want to know how
to create a good learning environment
at home. Her most common piece
of advice is to begin by asking their
children about how their day was,
instead of asking about their results.
She also intentionally holds her
conferences with parents in the LSM
room, hoping that they can take
inspiration on incorporating educational
visuals in their children’s bedrooms.

These experiences have prompted
Yin Fatt to develop a toolkit for parents
to help them bond with their children.
She’s currently gathering feedback
from parents and teachers on what
they would like the toolkit to include.

“Therefore, I am keen to help
parents if I can. The school-home
partnership is so important in the
overall learning and development of
a child.”

“Mrs Hou comes up with activities, like games, for us to learn Maths. I used to
dislike Maths but now it is fun and interesting!”

Tan Rou Qian, Primary 6
“Does colour matter to a blind person?” This question encapsulates how Anil, Head of Department, Craft and Technology, jolts his students out of conventional mindsets.

The usual answer from students is, “No. It doesn’t matter because they’re blind.” Anil’s question to them: “What if this person is your sibling? Would you want them to go out in mismatched colours or would you want them to look nice?”

It’s an ‘aha!’ moment for the students – colour matters to everyone.

**LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELD**

Anil’s manner is soft but his questions are challenging, nudging students out of their comfort zone. Social justice and mobility are topics that are close to Anil’s heart and design is his way of levelling the playing field – whether it’s in helping his students design solutions for the disadvantaged or empowering his students to know that they can all make a difference no matter their background.

Inclusive design or designing for a range of users – able-bodied, the elderly or people with disabilities – is a passion for Anil. He says, “My primary goal as an educator is to get my students to think in this manner, so that in the future whatever role they’re in, whether an engineer, designer, teacher or a chef, they will think about helping others. If they can do that, I would think that I’m a fairly successful teacher.”

Anil’s students have already done their teacher proud by stepping up to the challenge of what he calls, “authentic problem solving”. He says, “It’s very important for schools to expose students to authentic situations, authentic problems… rather than spoon-feed them a certain curriculum.”

This real-world approach to problem-solving through design is seen in the products his students create. One of his students built a bottle opener for people with limited arm strength, by incorporating a foot-operated clamp into its design. The user simply places the bottle in the contraption – made from a bicycle brake and pieces of wood – steps on the clamp and the cap pops off. This was shortlisted for the D&T Awards in 2014.

Another student came up with the idea of attaching shopping baskets to wheelchairs so that the users would not have to carry heavy shopping baskets on their laps.
What is also particularly heartening is that students realise that they can each make a difference in the lives of others regardless of their background. This is a great confidence booster, which can help students transform their own lives.

Early in his teaching career, Anil realised that many students come from less than ideal home environments and he had a responsibility to help these students – first of all by ensuring that they stay in school.

“My father had to drop out of school to support the family. He was keenly aware of the importance of education and he impressed that upon my sisters and me. He was very clear – education will help us in the future. I was lucky to have a supportive family.”

As a teacher, “one of our critical responsibilities is to help students achieve small successes. All through their lives, they may have experienced just negativity and failure. It could be their PSLE, their class tests, their family environment. Success, even small ones, can boost their confidence, their interest and, hopefully, motivate them to do better.”

D&T, due to its problem-solving approach, is well suited to achieving this. “When students embark on a project and successfully make something with their hands, it sends a very powerful message. It says: ‘You’ve put in the effort, you’ve persevered and now look at the outcome.’”

Anil also noticed that students who persevere in project work, ultimately do well in their academic subjects as well. “They develop the attitudes and disposition to do well. They know that if they pursue something consistently and conscientiously, they can do well.”

An event that proved this, one of Anil’s career highlights, was a televised debate that his first school, Loyang Secondary, participated in. Anil had coached the Loyang team. “I wanted to instil in my students the confidence that they could take on the best schools and still do well. As it turned out, they beat one of Singapore’s top schools. This just proved what I believe in: That every student can learn, every student can achieve, and we must provide opportunities for every student, especially those who are disadvantaged in any sense. These are the people for whom we need to do a bit more.”

So, if you ever bump into Anil and he asks, “Is it possible to design a jigsaw puzzle for a blind child?” think before you answer. The voice may be soft, but the question will hit you hard.

Other project ideas include designing aids to assist the elderly in lifting heavy objects and recycling PVC pipes into usable objects, so they don’t end up in the landfill and add to pollution.

**IMPORTANCE OF SMALL SUCCESSES**

To Anil, as important as the end product is the thought process that goes into it.

What these students learn as they problem-solve, says Anil, is empathy as you have to put yourself in the shoes of the person you’re designing for. “It’s best that students learn these values for themselves through the design process. My job is not to tell them but help them discover it for themselves. I simply seed the thought in their minds.”

“Mr Anil always tells us not to give up and to always persevere. Whatever he can help us in, he will.”

Tay You Rong Zariza, Secondary 5
Playing a game of basketball together builds bonds that are difficult to achieve in other contexts. When you have that bond, the students trust you and come to you if they have problems.

**ON THE RIGHT TRACK**

Whether it’s catching a basketball pass from a student, or leading a thousand of them in choreographed Wushu movements, Yeo Yew Yong is passionate about using sports to bring everyone at Nan Chiau High School closer.

Sports is in Yew Yong’s blood. Over his three-decade career, he’s coached combined schools sports teams, managed Singapore’s youth basketball team, been in several community sports clubs, and groomed track and field athletes, one of whom went on to play football in the S-League. He has pretty much tried almost every sport.

Today he’s 57 years old, but isn’t slowing down. The sinewy father of three still meets his former junior college classmates for weekly basketball games, and won’t hesitate to shoot some hoops with his students a third his age after school.

It’s not only for the love of the game. He’s completely sold on the idea that engaging in sports is a great way to develop positive character traits and build rapport.

**BUILDING A SPECIAL BOND THROUGH SPORTS**

This belief of Yew Yong’s has its roots in the early 1970s, when he arrived in Singapore from Indonesia with his family. His PE teacher at the time
provided the attention and guidance necessary for him to flourish as a basketball player and find his footing in a new school and country. Yew Yong went on to junior college, captaining its basketball team to inter-school victories. He did this while also being active in volleyball, and track and field.

When he became a PE teacher, he found that sports was also a great way to get to know his students better. “Playing a game of basketball together builds bonds that are difficult to achieve in other contexts,” he says. “When you have that bond, the students trust you and come to you if they have problems. They are also more open to listening to your advice.”

And listen they did. Yew Yong’s rapport with his Secondary 5 students helped them do better than expected in their GCE O-Level in 2015. He knuckled down with them, using six months’ worth of PE lessons to train them in their favourite games, softball and basketball. He introduced competitions to motivate them. During pre-examination night study sessions, he made sure they were served dinner first, being the most senior students. Now most of them are in polytechnics, and a few in junior colleges. Many of them return to visit Yew Yong from time to time.

MASS PARTICIPATION
The impact of Yew Yong’s contributions goes beyond connecting with his own students – they’ve also shaped the school’s identity. Nan Chiau’s mass Wushu display is a mainstay at school events, being performed by all 1,300 staff and students each time. Yew Yong, who learned the martial art when studying in Taiwan, chose it as a way of honouring Nan Chiau’s Chinese heritage. He took care to simplify its moves and choreograph the display such that anyone could participate.

Sometimes, he lets students take the lead, allowing them to run events such as the mini-Olympics, a series of inter-class games held every term. They organise badminton, basketball, football, captain’s ball and table-tennis matches, and form teams with their teachers to participate.

In his drive to get more students excited about sports, Yew Yong has also looked outside the box – literally. In 2013 he initiated a friendly Combined School Sports Meet with Yishun Town Secondary School and Xinmin Secondary School. This allowed for friendly competition and more opportunities for students in non-sports CCAs to compete in sports beyond their schools. Indeed, the competition has been very keen, both on and off the field, with busloads of students from all three schools battling to out-cheer each other.

VALUES FIRST
Even as participation numbers continue to climb, Yew Yong has not lost sight of his rationale for promoting sports – instilling good values. He’s now piloting “Play with Integrity”, an honour-based system for using Nan Chiau’s sports equipment. Balls, racquets and frisbees are left in an unlocked cage on the school grounds. Students can play with them in their free time, as long as they observe “integrity” at three levels: returning the equipment when they’re done, going for classes when it’s time to, and taking care not to injure others when playing. “The students don’t always remember to put things back but they’re learning,” Yew Yong says with a smile.

Cultivating these values is just the start of a longer journey. “What we want to do is impart sports skills so that kids can use them – in their family life, even in the working world,” says Yew Yong. “This would serve them well as they become future leaders and eventually pass on the importance of sportsmanship and the love of sports to the next generation.”

“Mr Yeo’s infectious energy and friendly nature made PE lessons fun. I also gained the confidence to speak up more.”

Jasmine Chua, Secondary 4
Teach to Inspire, Inspire to Teach

Her Malay classes are action-packed as Juliana is determined to do what it takes to make her students understand that Malay is a living, breathing language whose power extends far beyond the classroom.

An idea that was a great hit with her students was her decision to invite radio presenters from Mediacorp to teach students communication skills as part of the school’s Mother Tongue Language (MTL) Fortnight activity. The students experienced what it was like to be a DJ and learnt to provide commentaries in Malay. “They saw that the language had a life outside of the classroom and it could be used as part of a profession,” Juliana says. “And with a celebrity present, they saw the language as more hip, more fun.”

EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY
Juliana is always looking for ways...
to engage her students, and she realised that technology may hold the key. She says, "I want my students to learn well and also enjoy the class, and it's obvious that technology and gadgets have a way with them. They're digital natives."

So, on any given day, her students could be on an e-Jejak (e-trail) around the campus quizzing canteen stallholders, in Malay of course, on why they don't use coconut milk in the food and communicating with their teachers through laptops and mobile phones. e-Jejak was developed by a team of teachers, led by Juliana, to infuse technology into Malay lessons.

On another occasion, they could be blogging about controversial issues, such as the negative effects of the Internet and mobile devices on children. More comfortable with using English than Malay in such situations, her students would initially struggle to type, says Juliana, but their desire to get their point across would win the day and they become increasingly vocal, finding out the Malay terms that they want to use.

Podcasting is also used to help students in the foundation class improve their oral skills. Juliana gets students to record commentaries of school events and conversations with each other, hence harnessing technology to encourage students to speak Malay, hone their pronunciation and boost self-confidence. She even uses WhatsApp to check her students' readiness for exams. "Sometimes I get them to record their reading for oral and send it to me."

Not surprisingly, confidence levels of students rose, and so did their oral marks.

THE DESIRE TO HELP
Confidence is key and when her students face difficult circumstances, Juliana encourages them by sharing her life experience. "I come from a poor family. Sometimes, our electricity would get cut off and I would have to do my homework in the corridor late into the night, so that my neighbours wouldn't notice... because I felt embarrassed."

She tries to change the mindset of students who feel they can't excel because she, too, has gone through the experience of being told that she was "poor, not smart and couldn't succeed". "I want them to see that they can change their lives. This hardship will help to build their character."

Juliana says that her biggest challenge is seeing her students in emotional pain. Two students lost their mother, another lost their father. "How do you protect them? There should be a way for me to help them more."

Juliana had always wanted a career that enabled her to help others. Though she seems so comfortable in the realm of education, her initial dream had been to join the Prison Service, be a paramedic or a police officer. But by the time she was called for her second interview with the Prison Service, she was already in love with being a teacher. "I felt that there was a role for me to play here. I didn't have to be in a uniformed group to help others."

Going by the number of ex-students who visit her, sometimes bringing tokens of appreciation like a heart-shaped epok epok (curry puff), it's obvious the difference she has made in their lives.

Looking back on her 15 years as a teacher, she says, "I still remember my first batch of students. I remember Aik How because he was very special. He had really thick glasses. Now he's a teacher. That was my first class; my first love..."
He’s a trained classical Indian dancer who takes hip hop and jazz lessons. He had the gamelan instruments in school tuned to the chromatic musical scale, similar to a piano, so that popular songs can be played on it. His Social Studies lessons are peppered with pop culture references – from Korean war movies to the song ‘Zombie’ by The Cranberries.

If it might work for his students, Tharmen is ready to try it. After 17 years at Siglap Secondary – “my one and only school,” he says – he continues to look for new ways to reach out to students to “hook them and get them excited”, whether it’s in the arts or Social Studies – his twin passions. “I want them to think, ‘Oh, that’s interesting!’”

His methods have worked and Tharmen has many success stories he can tell with pride. He is not a man who takes himself too seriously, but when nudged, he’s happy to recount, with a self-deprecating smile, the story of an “unruly student with a shaved head”, who turned around thanks to the transformative power of music.

That student is today a music instructor and the music that turned him around was from the school’s CCA, Siglap Nusantara Orchestra, with which Tharmen has been involved since his earliest days at Siglap Secondary. This is a story that resonates with Tharmen as he credits the arts – specifically his passion for dance – for turning around his life. “I used to be really shy and I lacked self-esteem. The arts and the stage brought me out of my shell. My self-esteem is a gift of the arts,” he says. And he is keen to share this gift with his students.

In fact, the idea of nurturing students’ self-esteem is one that is very close to his heart. Whether it’s in the arts or in his Social Studies class, he’s always looking for opportunities to make his students feel good about themselves by allowing them to taste some kind of success. “This is very important as it keeps the students going and it helps them develop an interest in school.”

UNLEASHING THE POWER OF THE ORCHESTRA

When Tharmen first became involved in the Nusantara Orchestra as a new teacher, it consisted only of the angklung, an instrument made of bamboo tubes, traditionally from Indonesia. In collaboration with the music director, Mr Mohamed Khamis bin Selamat, Tharmen expanded the Orchestra to include the kulintang (made up predominantly of bronze...
that involves dance, drama and music modules for everyone. Initially the boys were not keen on the idea of dance lessons, but, as Tharmen, says, “The purpose was more to teach values and life skills, like creativity and confidence, and to do it in an engaging manner.” Very soon, the students – boys included – were trying out line dance, jazz, hip hop, as well as creative movement. As part of the Heritage Arts Programme, all lower secondary students learn about and appreciate other cultures through gamelan, angklung, and multi-ethnic percussion lessons. He was also instrumental in launching the Combined Schools Angklung Concert and the Combined Schools Gamelan Concert, a shared platform for schools to showcase their talent.

Tharmen has experienced first-hand, through his own life and those of his students, the power of the arts to change lives. And since he believed this shouldn’t benefit only a few, he worked with the school to put in place the Potpourri programme – a modular performing arts programme which involves dance, drama and music modules for everyone. Initially the boys were not keen on the idea of dance lessons, but, as Tharmen, says, “The purpose was more to teach values and life skills, like creativity and confidence, and to do it in an engaging manner.” Very soon, the students – boys included – were trying out line dance, jazz, hip hop, as well as creative movement. As part of the Heritage Arts Programme, all lower secondary students learn about and appreciate other cultures through gamelan, angklung, and multi-ethnic percussion lessons. He was also instrumental in launching the Combined Schools Angklung Concert and the Combined Schools Gamelan Concert, a shared platform for schools to showcase their talent.

ARTS THERAPY
If you have a skill, why not use it to help others? With that in mind, Tharmen initiated a dance therapy programme at Kheng Chiu Happy Lodge and a music therapy programme at Apex Harmony Lodge. “It was a great experience for the students. They go in with all these plans, but they soon realise that they have to temper their expectations. They learnt adaptability, compassion, empathy and how to handle the elderly, including those affected by dementia.”

He adds, “The beauty of all this exposure to the arts is how it not only kindles an interest, but also allows some students to discover talents they never knew they had.”

TASTE OF SUCCESS
Head over to Tharmen’s Social Studies class and you will see a similar philosophy at play. In an effort to engage and draw in students on topics they feel they have little in common with – for instance, ageing population, civil war in Sri Lanka or the conflict in Northern Ireland – Tharmen uses resources that would resonate with the students. It could be a song by U2 or the Cranberries, a Tamil movie on civil war or an interview with the elderly to find out about their problems.

In another effort to help his students learn and succeed, Tharmen customised the curriculum for his students, simplifying content, using graphic organisers and bite-sized assessments. “Slowly, it worked and it improved the results over the years, which was very heartening.” The resource materials were put together in the Siglap Great Book Project.

Since the subject of tasting success came up often in the conversation, what does success mean to Tharmen? He says, “Academic excellence is not the only measure of success. To me, if you’re a good person with good values, you’re a successful person. If you’re a talented person and you pursue that talent with passion and hard work, you’re a successful person.”

What makes him feel great though is hearing a loud “Cher” at the supermarket and to see one of his ex-students – all grown up and a responsible father – waving to him. Tharmen says, “I ask: How do you even recognise me? I look quite different now. He says: Of course I remember you because you’re one of the few teachers who believed I could do it.” And that is what keeps Tharmen going.

“Mr Tharmen teaches us values, like inclusiveness and social awareness. He inspires me a lot.”

Mary Rojan Reyes Nocom, Secondary 3
Mdm Phoon Lyvenne
School Staff Developer
Spectra Secondary School

Teach to Inspire, Inspire to Teach

My passion is making a difference to my students’ lives. The more I learn, the more I want to do. The more I do, the more I see the fruits of success.

The rooftop garden at Spectra Secondary School – brimming with ripe fruit and crisp leafy vegetables – is flourishing, but Lyvenne, who masterminded this project, is prouder still of her flourishing student-gardeners.

“My intention is not just to get the kids to grow vegetables. My goal is to get more students involved in experiential hands-on learning activities,” says Lyvenne about her Garden-Based Service Learning (GBSL) programme, an idea she came across while reading educational research literature on GBSL and visiting schools in the US using this approach. “The plants along my HDB corridor are dying. Why? Because I don’t see the need to farm in my corridor. But here, I see a lot of reason and purpose.”

For Lyvenne, this purpose is to engage, motivate and cultivate values in her students. It goes way beyond gardening skills. She knows too well that some of her students learn better through hands-on activities. She used to be like them once, preferring Science and Home Economics in school as they allowed her to do things with her hands and experiment. “It worked for me and I want my students to benefit from this as well.” GBSL is now part of the school’s Character and Citizenship Education curriculum and all Secondary One students spend one term working in the garden.

The garden teaches many lessons: Students learn about composting and the environment (Science); they harvest rain water and talk about the need for water conservation in Singapore (Social Studies); they discuss their day’s experience and write down their reflections using the right terminology (literacy and communication skills); they learn resilience as they persevere through the vagaries of nature; and, teamwork as groups of students are put in charge of different plots of land.

And that’s not all. As Lyvenne says, “This is not so much a garden as a social endeavour.” The harvest is sold at the school’s Farmers’ Markets with the proceeds going to support students who are on financial assistance. So, here’s another big lesson the garden brings: empowering students to care for the community.

In fact, the garden has drawn a community of enthusiasts – parents, teachers, farmers, a group of engineers, bankers and teachers from other schools who love to farm but don’t have the space – who come in to help over weekends and whenever they’re free. “If I have a major harvest to prepare for,
I’ve got 30-40 people – it’s a happy problem,” says Lyvenne with a smile. “Saturdays are happy days and Farmers’ Market is even better,” she adds. Parents will come in as volunteers to help sell, pour drinks, make ice lollies to sell… and as customers. “It really brings up the vision of it taking a whole village to raise a child. I see it happening in the garden and it reminds me of my childhood days in my kampong.”

NO GIVING UP
Not all memories of her growing up days are happy ones though. Lyvenne came from a troubled family. She faced more than her fair share of challenges – poverty, stressful home environment, failing grades, aimlessness – overcoming all these to become a successful entrepreneur and then a much-loved and respected teacher after the age of 37. She shares her stories with her students to make them “sit up and reflect on their own behaviour”. Her turning point came in “Standard 6” when she discovered her interest in Science and hands-on learning. The rest was won through sheer hard work and resilience, a message she is keen to drive home to her students. She had to walk for 45 minutes through rubbish dumps to get to school but she was never late, she tells her students.

Lyvenne asks her students to never give up, and she doesn’t give up on them either. She kept track of a particular student, who had to drop out of school after being arrested, for over 10 years, helping him re-start his education, calling him and encouraging him repeatedly over the years. It was a happy day for Lyvenne when this ex-student, now successful, took her out for dinner and said, “You believed in me. Every time I start my sales training, I start with ‘Believe in Yourself’ because there’s this teacher who believed in me and that’s why I’m successful.”

On another occasion, when one of her students kept missing school, Lyvenne tracked down the hard-to-reach parents who were none too happy to see her, liaised with the Ministry of Social and Family Development to help the family, got the children into a shelter home, and, on occasion, even got the child out of bed… so that he wouldn’t drop out of school. She says, “I come from a very disadvantaged home. I’m seasoned to hardship… but when I see some of the situations these kids are in, I feel really sad.”

ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT
With her business background, Lyvenne brings a whole lot of enterprising ideas to the classroom. Once she gets an idea, she pursues it wholeheartedly, roping in the right people to make her project a success.

While at a previous school, she decided to start a Scrabble project to make the library club more exciting. She got other teachers involved and they not only taught students how to play Scrabble, the students started representing the school in Scrabble competitions. She also got a company’s sponsorship, worked with the Scrabble association, and after five years, they set the Guinness World Record for the most number of Scrabble games played simultaneously in one location.

Another time, she got her students to start a hamper business, which raised funds for the National Kidney Foundation. “I owe it to my students to enrich their lives beyond just studies,” she says.

Lyvenne has brought that same enthusiasm and doggedness to the garden, even tapping on farmers at Lim Chu Kang and Kranji for their expertise, who have not only offered advice, but visited her rooftop garden to offer solutions.

Her students love the garden. Some wait for her to open the door in the morning while others head out with her to farms to tackle the latest problem – be it wilting crops, pests or building shelters.

“I’m very happy to be doing this,” she says. “My passion is making a difference to their lives. The more I learn, the more I want to do. The more I do, the more I see the fruits of success. And the more satisfied I am. This is so beautiful.”

“Mrs Chong is very kind and caring. The first thing she asked me when I met her was, ‘How are you? Are you keen to come to Spectra?’”

Quek Zi Yi Emelyn, Secondary 3
In 2014, Chinese Language teachers at St. Anthony’s Canossian Primary were exasperated. Many students were not completing their xizi (习字, or writing practice) homework, despite constant reminders.

But the department persevered. Convinced of the value of learning the correct stroke order for Chinese characters, they handpicked over thirty students and conducted focus group sessions to find out how xizi could be made more interesting. The kids threw up ideas like using iPads, incorporating colouring, and giving rewards. Anything goes but definitely not writing in an exercise book with boring squares.

Today, no one at St. Anthony’s writes xizi in exercise books. They use a custom-made practice book that comes with stickers. Primary 1 and 2 students grade each other’s work by shading in stars on each page, which can be accumulated and used to claim prizes.

Jasmine recounts the xizi revamp with pride, even though she teaches Maths, not Chinese Language. It is part of a larger movement she’s been driving to systematically identify and meet the needs of the student population.

The Design Thinking Protocol – which she introduced to the school three years ago – involves forming teams to examine issues unique to each Primary level, as well as Physical Education, Arts and Music, and Mother Tongue. The teams then brainstorm, collect data, prototype solutions, present them to management for approval, and implement them. Jasmine has singlehandedly trained her colleagues in these methods, and encapsulated them in a booklet given to all teaching staff. The teams meet regularly during school hours. Jasmine is there to facilitate and track their progress.

Her efforts have paid off. Jasmine gushes about how students became more confident in speaking Mother Tongue languages after they got to dub cartoons with their own dialogue and voices. Primary 3 kids became more proficient in times tables through singing multiplication songs while queuing up after recess. A group of Primary 2 students improved their self-management and organisational skills after the school got their parents to affirm their efforts by giving out stickers.

**MDM SEING JEE CHING JASMIN**

Head of Department (Student Leadership and Partnership)
St. Anthony’s Canossian Primary School

**DEVELOPING A SCHOOL OF PROBLEM SOLVERS**

A problem-solving movement is spreading through St. Anthony’s Canossian Primary, and Seing Jee Ching Jasmine is leading the charge. Coloured carabiners, Cookie Monster rubbish bins and cartoons re-dubbed with students’ voices are just a few of the unexpected ways teachers and students are making things better at their school.

I want to give students the platform to be enterprising and innovative through Design Thinking. But first of all they must learn to exercise empathy.
Some of the solutions were surprisingly simple and yet effective. To help Primary 1 students remember to get things done at home, coloured carabiners were attached to their schoolbags whenever they had homework to do, or forms that required their parents’ signatures. Parents, who were informed of this initiative, would prompt their kids when they noticed these carabiners. The tasks would get done, and the carabiners would be removed in school the following day. Students became motivated to minimise the number of attachments on their schoolbags, and got more efficient in clearing their to-do lists.

On top of personally facilitating all the project teams, Jasmine gets her hands dirty too. To help pupils in Primary 1 read more expressively, she worked with colleagues to put together a package of four books, a CD of teachers reading the books aloud, and a manual for parents. “We uncovered some hidden voice talents along the way – you should hear them!” she says.

It’s been three years, and the enthusiasm for design thinking remains high. Jasmine feels gratified whenever she sees her fellow teachers present their projects. “Some of them do it through skits, or show-and-tell. Some even rap! We have a great time sharing and learning together.”

**BY STUDENTS, FOR STUDENTS**

With her colleagues fully on board, Jasmine is now turning her sights on students, starting with prefects. As Head of Department for Student Leadership and Partnership, she has introduced the Design Thinking Protocol to her charges. There’s been no shortage of the number of problems and solutions the girls have found, with her guidance.

One group of prefects noticed that most of the items in the lost and found corner belonged to Primary 1 and 2 students, so they came up with a simple campaign to teach them how to label their belongings. Another group found that straw wrappers were the main litter item in the canteen, and made posters reminding their schoolmates to dispose of the wrappers properly instead of leaving them to be blown everywhere by the wind. A third group will soon pilot a buddy system where new and experienced prefects do duty together, so the newer ones will feel less intimidated.

The most successful project thus far has been to encourage fellow students to discard rubbish in the bins by dressing them up as Cookie Monster from Sesame Street. A simple solution – the bins already happened to be blue, so they only had to add the eyes – but it worked.

Jasmine beams as she swipes through photographs of their projects on her phone. She’s glad that the girls have been resourceful enough to do so much without a budget, but even happier that the experience has taught them to look out for the needs of the school community.

“**She’s very admirable, a motherly figure. I feel comfortable asking her questions, even non-academic ones.**”

*Hana Ariqah, Primary 6*
Ms O Guat Bee
Year Head (Primary 5 and 6)
Temasek Primary School

Once the child feels loved, that’s when they learn. The child should think: My teacher cares about my learning, my needs, and wants to know more about me.

FOR THE LOVE OF MATHEMATICS
As a student, she used to be caned for her poor Maths marks. However, Maths teacher and Year Head O Guat Bee has found a more powerful weapon to make her students deliver results – love.

Every time Guat Bee gets less than 50 marks, the passing grade, she got a caning from her mother. The cane was busiest after Maths exams, her weakest subject.

Guat Bee’s journey from weak Maths student to passionate Maths teacher and Year Head is a testament to the transformative power of good teachers, a message that Guat Bee is keenly aware of.

When Guat Bee was in Secondary 3, her Maths teacher was Mr Jason Koh. This proved to be a turning point in her life. “His lessons were always interesting. No matter how many times I made mistakes, he was always patient. He spent hours after school coaching us. He made us laugh.” Guat Bee not only began to enjoy Maths, her marks soared. “From then on, Maths became quite easy for me. I was about to give up and Mr Koh was there for me at the right time. I’ve never forgotten that.” She went on to get an Education degree at the National Institute of Education, with Maths as one of her teaching subjects.
They call her “Mummy”

Guat Bee says, “Once the child feels loved, that’s when they learn. It’s important for students to know that the teacher is not there just to deliver knowledge. The child should think: My teacher cares about my learning, my needs, and wants to know more about me.”

Little wonder that when talking to her, her students have, on many occasions, unconsciously called her “Mummy”.

But what about Guat Bee’s mummy? “She still sits next to me and watches me mark Maths papers,” she chuckles.

and her amazing turnaround may have much to do with the way she interacts with students – both in and out of the classroom. She’s all about second chances.

To those who are struggling with the subject, she shows her own report card with her “borderline” Maths grades to encourage them and let them know that if she could do it, so can they.

She remembers how daunted she used to be by Maths concepts, so to help her students, she creates hands-on experiences that bring these concepts to life. She says, “I believe that it’s very important for students to see the application of Maths in real-life.” To teach ratios, for instance, Guat Bee and her class made chocolate-cornflake cookies. “I asked my students: If we have to make cookies for 10 people, how much of the ingredients will we need and in what proportion?” The class ended with the students eating their Maths project, of course.

And, just like her teacher Mr Koh, Guat Bee never turns down a request for help. “If a child approaches me for help after school, I’ll always make time. That’s something that I’m proud of.”

GETTING TO THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

She brings this spirit of acceptance and affirmation even in her approach to discipline. Guat Bee came up with a behaviour management programme called ACORNS that’s now practised school-wide. Instead of a discipline-based approach, it works on the premise that when a child reflects on his mistake, he will take ownership of his behaviour and choose to change it.

She recalls the instance of a boy who used to persistently tease a particular girl. He was shunned by his classmates. Guat Bee took him under her wing, talking to him every day and asking him questions that made him reflect on his behaviour. She encouraged him to do kind deeds and write about them. She also organised a sharing session with his classmates to restore his relationship with his peers. The boy and his classmates acknowledged each other’s feelings, so they could put his past behaviour behind them and move forward. “He has changed totally,” says Guat Bee. “The kids play with him during recess. I am very proud of him.”

This attention to each individual is also reflected in the school’s Teacher-Pupil-Interaction Time, when a teacher meets one-on-one with their students to get to know them better. Sometimes they have lunch together. Recently, this has been extended to include Foster & Bonding time, when the class plays games together, writes each other notes of affirmation or discusses different topics of interest.

“If we ask Ms O for extra help in Maths after school, she will readily do it for us. She is a very caring teacher.”

Christabel Ng Jing-Xin, Primary 6
At Woodlands Primary School’s Games Day, “passing to the girls” is a good thing. Boys launch ball after ball to their ponytailed classmates, cheering them on to score. And with good reason: girls snag double points for their teams.

“We want to dispel the notion that some games are for boys, and some games are for girls,” says Thian Keong, the chief architect of the annual event. He noticed that girls tended to hold back when placed in the same teams as boys, and came up with this solution.

Inclusiveness is his guiding principle: Games Day has an even spread of gender and races across all activities, prizes for the fourth place, and full participation of the upper
Under his guidance, several children turned Maths from their weakest subject into one of their strongest. One student, who had been struggling with the subject, eventually scored an A* in the PSLE, finishing among the top 10 in the school.

But grades are far from the be-all and end-all for Thian Keong. His students have a long road ahead of them and he wants to set them on the right track.

“I write in their report cards: Destined for greatness, but along the way, do touch lives,” he says.

ROLE MODEL FOR COLLEAGUES
This spirit of spreading benefits to as many as possible comes naturally to Thian Keong. When he received the Outstanding PE Teacher Award in 2011, his first thought was how he could leverage it to help his colleagues. “More opportunities opened up. I got to work with the Physical Education And Sports Teacher Academy (PESTA) to trial certain teaching methods,” he says. “I decided to involve my department in these projects, so that all of us could grow together.”

When the PE syllabus was revised in 2013, Thian Keong was one of the active advocates. He initiated discussions with his team on why the changes were made, how the school could implement them, and what the intended outcomes for students were. He then reinforced these with regular workshops to keep the conversations going. For him, it wasn’t enough for the PE Department to deliver the syllabus well, they had to be convinced of it too.

Even as he raises the competencies of those around him, Thian Keong also has a keen eye for individual potential, and will throw his full weight behind those he feels can really shine. Thian Keong, seeing how well a teacher in his department was able to engage her students, affirmed her qualities and encouraged her to be a Senior Teacher. While she was initially apprehensive, she eventually came round to the fact that “we will never be 100% ready”. Today, she is an associate trainer with PESTA.

REMEMBERING TO TOUCH LIVES
The same principles apply for Thian Keong when it comes to his Maths students. The father of three – one each in primary school, secondary school and junior college – knows a thing or two about working with young people.

Even as he engages his students with ICT-enhanced lessons and stretches them by getting them to set questions for each other, he is mindful not to dwell on their shortcomings. He understands they can be very sensitive at this age. “I believe that words can help build people up or pull them down. Some children already have a lot of negativity in their lives, so I shall not contribute to that,” he says.

Under his guidance, several children turned Maths from their weakest subject into one of their strongest. One student, who had been struggling with the subject, eventually scored an A* in the PSLE, finishing among the top 10 in the school.

But grades are far from the be-all and end-all for Thian Keong. His students have a long road ahead of them and he wants to set them on the right track.

“I write in their report cards: Destined for greatness, but along the way, do touch lives,” he says.
President’s Award for Teachers
Past Winners

1998
Mrs Lim Tai Foon
St. Hilda’s Primary School
Mrs Geetha Creffield
Anglo-Chinese Junior College

1999
Mrs Juliana Donna Ng Chye Huat
Nan Hua Primary School
Mr Wilfred Philips James
Dunman Secondary School

2000
Mrs Ng Peng Huat
Nan Hua Primary School
Mrs Caryn Ann Leong
Ping Yi Secondary School
Mdm Tan Liang See
The Chinese High School

2001
Mrs Chin Ngan Peng
Kong Hwa Primary School
Mrs Nora Teo
Punggol Secondary School
Mr Lim Chiow Huat
Broadrick Secondary School
Mrs Audrey Ting Yee Han
Nanyang Girls’ High School

2002
Mdm Stefane Tan Hgue Hwan
Meridian Primary School
Mdm Tong Wai Han
Ang Mo Kio Secondary School
Ms Koe Heong Yin
The Chinese High School

2003
Mdm Long Miaw Ying
Jurong West Primary School
Mrs Kheng Samuel nee Chua Mui Yee
Lakeside Primary School
Mrs Teng Siok Fun, Roger
North View Secondary School

2004
Ms Goh Siew Hong
Admiralty Primary School
Mrs Pramageetha Velmurugan
Huang Primary School
Mr Koh Cher Hern
St. Hilda’s Primary School
Mdm Rabiahul Bazriya
Compassvale Secondary School
Mdm Ranjit Singh
Pasir Ris Secondary School

2005
Miss Lim Siew Gek
Ahmad Ibrahim Primary School
Mdm Noorismawaty Bte Ismail
Jin Tai Secondary School
Mr Chew Tec Heng, Edwin
Sembawang Secondary School

2006
Mdm Bong Fui Lian Shirley
Montfort Junior School
Mrs Tan Swan Liang Doris
Temasek Primary School
Mr Nur Johari Salleh
Deyi Secondary School
Mrs Goh Hui Cheng
Paya Lebar Methodist Girls’ School (Secondary)
Mr Sulaiman Bin Mohd Yusof
Sembawang Secondary School

2007
Mdm Yip Jee Cheng Jessie
Mayflower Primary School
Mdm Parameswary d/o Sundar Rajoo
Montfort Junior School
Mr Yeo Leng Quee
Peirce Secondary School
Mdm Norlita Bte Marsuki
Sembawang Secondary School

2008
Mrs Ong-Chua Li Ling Eileen
Haig Girls’ School
Mrs Lee Kok Hong
Temasek Primary School
Mrs Lim-Ng Yee Ping Diana
Coral Secondary School

2009
Mr Terry Tan Chee Liang
Anglo-Chinese School (Primary)
Miss Sharon Ann Cardoza
Farrer Park Primary School
Mdm Wong Lai Fong
Anderson Secondary School
Miss Lucy Oliver Fernandez
Catholic High School (Secondary)

2010
Mdm Emelyn Soon Bee Hong
CHIJ (Kellock) Primary School
Mr Devindra Sapai s/o Indrasapai
Seng Kang Primary School
Miss Teh Wan
Townsville Primary School
Mrs Mohana Eswaran
Regent Secondary School

2011
Mdm Chua Mui Ling
Woodlands Ring Primary School
Miss Serene Han Tui Kin
Montfort Junior School
Mdm Dianaras Bte Ab Majid
Haig Girls’ School
Mr Chong Jack Sheng
Woodlands Ring Secondary School
Mr Ganesan s/o Raman
Fairfield Methodist School (Secondary)
President’s Award for Teachers
Past Winners

2012
Mdm Anwara Khatun d/o Moklis Khan
Haig Girls’ School (Primary)
Ms Koh Su-Cheng
Da Qiao Primary School
Mdm Tan Ying Fong Irene
Telok Kurau Primary School
Mr Gejendran s/o V Krishnan
Geylang Methodist School (Secondary)
Mr Yap Boon Chien
Tanjong Katong Girls’ School

2013
Mdm Shakila Jamal Mohamed
Da Qiao Primary School
Mdm Chee Mui Choo Valerie
Xinghua Primary School
Mr Lee Beng Wah
Bedok Green Secondary School
Mdm Lee Yee Tyng
Hougang Secondary School
Mdm Lim Chye Ling @ Nurul Huda
Kent Ridge Secondary School
Mdm Chan Puay San
Innova Junior College

2014
Mdm Lim Yen Peng Linda
Chongzheng Primary School
Miss Rezia Rahumathullah
Da Qiao Primary School
Miss Sim Lucy
Guangyang Primary School
Miss Wong Yoke Chan Wendy
Geylang Methodist School (Secondary)
Dr Muhammad Nazir Bin Amir
Greenview Secondary School

2015
Dr Tay Lee Yong
Beacon Primary School
Mdm Tauled Tunisha Bte Mohd Paser
CHIJ (Kellock) Primary School
Mdm Safidah Bte Samsudin
Da Qiao Primary School
Mdm Halimah Bte Jumaha
Bedok South Secondary School
Mdm Tan Dai Hwee
Anderson Junior College
Mr Muhammad Salahuddin Bin Ibrahim
Serangoon Junior College

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Students
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