



issue 49 jul / aug 2014

# Teachers' Conference 2014

Big Idea

issn 2010-1031

## Teachers as Character Coaches

*Inspiring learning and shaping lives. This sounds like a tall order, but it actually describes what a teacher does in class every day. The Teachers' Conference 2014 focused on how teachers can become a positive influence in their students' lives.*

Every teacher plays different roles: a mentor, facilitator, administrator, subject expert and counsellor, among others. Now, we can add to that list "character coach" as well.

"As teachers, we need to understand that we are in a very privileged position, where we are accessible to many children," says Mrs Chua Yen Ching, Executive Director of the Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST).

"No other profession is in this privileged position of touching and shaping lives."

### Values across the Curriculum

The theme for this year's Teachers' Conference is *Values across the Curriculum: Inspiring Learning, Shaping Lives*.

The biannual conference was organized by AST and it focused on how teachers can nurture students who are active contributors with sound character and a strong sense of belonging to Singapore.

Another strand explored was how teachers could cultivate values and a passion for lifelong learning across subject disciplines.

### Role Models for Students

Mrs Chua said that teachers are often regarded by students as *significant adults*.



*Mrs Chua Yen Ching, Executive Director of the Academy of Singapore Teachers, believes that teachers are in a very privileged position of touching and shaping lives.*



An Institute of



## In this issue



Role Playing for  
Character Education



Learning from  
Dilemmas



What Will Make a  
Difference?

# RESEARCH within REACH

Supported by  Marshall Cavendish  
Education

## Useful Resources

The opening address by Mr Heng Swee Keat for the 7th Teachers' Conference 2014 can be accessed via the MOE website: <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2014/06/03/address-by-mr-heng-swee-keat-at-the-7th-teachers-conference.php>

Berkowitz, M. W. (2012). *You can't teach through a rat and other epiphanies for educators*. Boone, NC: Character Development Group.

"Especially for students who do not come from very supportive families, teachers may be their only role models," says Mrs Chua.

Students often observe how their teachers and significant others manage dilemmas in their lives, and this subsequently shapes the way they approach problems. If our actions and beliefs are not congruent, our students may get confused.

"You find that it is from such day-to-day experiences that many of our students 'catch' some of these values, and we want them to catch it from us!"

### Planning for Teachable Moments

But to be a character coach, one has to do more than just being a role model. It is about seizing the teachable moments—and planning for them too. This means actively guiding students to develop certain values and social competencies.

"For example, winning is very important for students when they play sports and games, but it cannot be winning at all costs," Mrs Chua comments.

"Even though the students pay a lot of attention to the product or end result, we can remind them that the journey is equally important. When you win, you can win fairly and with humility—don't be too proud! And when you lose, you can lose with dignity and learn from the experience."

## Educating Students on Character and Values

Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) will be the most difficult "subject" to teach, said Education Minister Heng Swee Keat during his opening address at the 7th Teachers' Conference. But he outlined for participants three ways teachers can teach CCE and inculcate values:

- **Role modelling:** The most powerful way that teachers,

parents and adults can transmit values is through their actions, said Mr Heng. "To guide students in strengthening their moral compasses, we must each first strengthen our own, and ensure that we walk the talk."

- **Explicit teaching of values:** Teachers need relevant materials to teach values explicitly. MOE has introduced the CCE syllabus and

also crafted new CCE curriculum materials to address this need.

- **Values-in-Action:** To illustrate this point, Mr Heng quoted the Chinese proverb attributed to Confucius: "I hear, and I forget; I see, and I remember; I do, and I understand." Schools should let students apply the values they have learned in the classroom to serve the needs of the community.

**Mrs Chua Yen Ching** is the Executive Director of the Academy of Singapore Teachers. She started her teaching career as a Science teacher at Dunman Secondary School. She held various leadership positions in schools, before assuming the role of Deputy Director, Sciences Branch, Curriculum Planning and Development Division at MOE in 1998. From 2006 to 2011, she was the founding Principal of NorthLight School. Prior to her current position, she was the Director, Curriculum Planning and Development Division from December 2011 to 2013.

### Preparing Students for the Future

At the conference, Mrs Chua noticed participants generally agreed that when it comes to character and values education, and 21st century competencies, not everything can be measured. "If it is important, even if we cannot measure it, we still need to teach it."

This is so, especially when the future that awaits our students is so unpredictable and complex.

"If one day, our students were to come to us and say, 'I don't know how to walk the journey from 18 to 80 years old', we would have done them a disservice and we would have failed as an educator."

### Collective Wisdom for Mutual Learning

The Teachers' Conference saw overseas participants for the first time this year. To facilitate more wide-ranging discussions on character building and values education, the organizing committee also invited speakers and panellists from different fields, including public service, medicine and social service. "This collective wisdom is very important and the learning is mutual," says Mrs Chua.

Indeed, what was discussed at the conference resonated with many teachers—questions from the floor came fast and furious during various sessions.

"I was quite impressed that there were so many questions asked!" Mrs Chua comments. She was also touched that such a large number of teachers sacrificed the first 2 days of their school vacation for professional learning. In fact, the event was oversubscribed and Mrs Chua thanked her colleagues at AST for their hard work because "running a conference for 2,500 participants is really not easy".

She hopes that teachers had taken away from the conference ideas and strategies that will help them to enhance their teaching. This will in turn lead to quality learning for every child. It is also a good time to take time to reflect on how they can inspire learning and shape lives.

Mrs Chua quoted from a book by keynote speaker Professor Marvin W. Berkowitz at the closing of the conference: "A teacher can fundamentally alter the course of the lives of their students. We're in such a powerful position that to our students, we can be the difference between a life of misery, and a productive, fulfilling life.

"We can be the single factor that protects them from pitfalls that otherwise await them. Teachers leave their marks on children every day."

## Research

### Role Playing for Character Education

*To many, drama is a form of performance arts. But to a group of MOE researchers, it can be a fun and engaging way to nurture values and develop character in young children.*

A group of adults were pretending to be students on an exchange programme. They knew very little English and tried hard to converse with their English-speaking partner. Furrowed eyebrows, hand gestures and empathetic faces were spotted all around the room.

This was a scene from Mr Adrian Wong's session at the Teachers' Conference 2014.

"Were there any props? Were there any costumes? Or lights?" the researcher from the Arts Education Branch, Student Development Curriculum Division, MOE, quizzed the audience. "No, it was very simple role play but you get drawn into it very quickly."

Similarly, such role playing in the classroom can be fun for young children and help with character development and learning of values.

#### Using Drama in PAL Lessons

In 2012, Adrian and his research team began designing a series of lesson plans and professional development to introduce drama as part of the Performing Arts domain in Programme for Active Learning (PAL). (Find out more about PAL in the box story next page.)

Last year, a pilot study was conducted in five schools and the research findings indicated positive responses from school leaders, teachers and parents, which were highly encouraging for the team. This year, they shared the PAL (Drama) lesson plans with schools and conducted workshops for more teachers.

Drama provides an authentic learning experience for pupils. This student-centric pedagogy brings out the essence of a PAL lesson: experiential learning.

Typically, teachers will set up thought-provoking scenarios for role play and encourage their pupils to empathize with the characters and be part of the decision-making process.

For drama to be a productive pedagogy in PAL, teachers need to take on a role to model role play for their pupils. Also, they can introduce the moral and ethical dilemmas for pupils to manifest their values and exercise decision making.



Can you imagine a classroom full of students having fun while learning? It can be loud but it is actually productive noise, isn't it?

- Adrian Wong,  
Arts Education Branch,  
Student Development Curriculum Division  
at the Ministry of Education

Through group work and participating in imaginary role play in a playful learning environment, pupils can become more self-aware and also connect better with the people around them.

## What is PAL?

The Programme for Active Learning (PAL) was introduced in 2010 as part of the Primary Education Review and Implementation (PERI). Conducted during curriculum time, PAL focuses on skills development and values education for Primary 1 and 2 pupils.

PAL also aims to develop social-emotional competencies in young

learners. Schools can design their own PAL activities. Lasting between 7 and 10 weeks, the programme provides pupils with experiential learning that is engaging, fun and creative.

The PAL (Drama) module is a series of lesson plans designed specifically for teachers not trained in drama.

In addition, the team designed and conducted professional development sessions to equip in-service teachers with the basic knowledge and skills to implement the lesson plans confidently in their classrooms.

## Becoming Socially Engaged

Adrian shared that due to changing times and technology, young learners may have less face-to-face interaction with people. Injecting drama in PAL gives them opportunities to exercise their interpersonal skills during role play.

“Perhaps due to increasing social isolation, young learners might not be able to attend to social cues that we have taken for granted, like making eye contact during a conversation,” Adrian says. “Very simple things become necessary for teachers to teach them.”

But it would be strange for a teacher to literally teach children to “look at each other in the eye while talking”, especially when there is no context for them to relate to. Is there a better way to nurture such social skills in children naturally? Through imaginary role playing, of course!

“Can you imagine a classroom full of students having fun while learning?” Adrian asks. “It can be loud but it is actually productive noise, isn’t it?”

## Life Lessons through Role Play

At the conference, Adrian demonstrated how role play can be carried out in a classroom. With a blue cap on his head and a spray can in his hand, he was instantly transformed into Baz the vandal. He was, of course, demonstrating the drama strategy of teacher-in-role.

Baz loves art and he expresses it by going around the neighbourhood playground and spray painting his name on the walls.

*What are you doing? Why are you doing it in the playground? You shouldn’t do that here. It’s public property. People wouldn’t like that. That is not right, Baz. I think you should stop.*

These were comments made by the conference participants—similar to what young children might say in the classroom.

“When young children ask these questions,” Adrian says, “they probably are starting to be aware that the person committing the act isn’t aware that it is wrong, and so they try to persuade that person to stop doing it.”

To nurture a sense of empathy in young children, Baz has to answer the questions strategically. Adrian calls this “planned teachable moments”.

*Public property means it belongs to me too. I have nowhere else to go. There is no one at home. Where should I go? Where should I do this then?*

“The function of teacher-in-role is to set up the scene such that children can empathize with the character and his difficulties in order to trigger their thought processes to think through such issues further,” he explains. It is, indeed, part of pupils’ learning to understand that making the right decisions in real life is difficult too.

It is this natural ability to pretend play in children that brings out the potential of drama for the learning of values in the classroom. It is also this very ability that brings out the best in young learners.

**Adrian Wong** is an Arts Education Officer (Drama) in the Arts Education Branch, Student Development Curriculum Division at the Ministry of Education. Before this, he was a Senior Teacher (Drama) who taught O-Level Drama and used drama as pedagogy for other learning purposes. Over the years, he has presented his other research findings in drama education at local, regional and international conferences. This article is based on his presentation “Teachable Moments for Values through Drama: Research-informed Design and Research Findings” at the Teachers’ Conference 2014.

## Learning from Dilemmas

*A teacher poses a dilemma in class and lets her students grapple with it, in a bid to help them enhance their social, emotional and thinking skills.*

In a world where speed and efficiency are everything, a teacher at Raffles Institution wants her students to learn to slow down when making decisions, especially if others may be affected.

To do that, Geography teacher Mrs Ong Wai Ling laid down a challenge for them, in the form of a dilemma.

### Dilemma-based Learning

“What is a dilemma? It’s a difficult decision that needs to be made,” explains Wai Ling. “You have conflicting points of view, and it’s not so easy to have a ‘good’ conclusion for everyone.

“What’s interesting about a dilemma is that there’re no correct answers. And that’s something that students don’t like,” she continues.

Wai Ling first got to know about dilemma-based learning through the book, *Dilemma-based Learning in the Humanities: Integrating Social, Emotional and Thinking Skills*.

Dilemma-based learning requires students to reflect on their own values, think logically and creatively, and empathize with others as they grapple with a dilemma posed by their teacher.

Wai Ling finds this learning approach especially apt for the Humanities subjects. “It is related to problem solving, conflict resolution and reconciliation of different needs,” she says. “That’s the essence of inquiry in the Humanities.”

### The Dilemma: To Build or Not to Build?

While teaching the topic of Tourism in Geography, Wai Ling decided to construct a dilemma for her students based on a real-life issue she feels strongly about: the wearing of heavy brass coils around the neck by women from the Paduang tribe.

To make the dilemma authentic, she asked students to assume the role of Director of Tourism at the Ministry of Tourism in Chiangmai, Thailand.

A group of foreign investors wants to set up a Paduang cultural village which costs US\$10 million to build. The local government will need to invest US\$6 million in this project. In addition, the Paduang women have to carry on the tradition of wearing brass coils to attract tourists (See box story next page).

Human rights activists frown upon this practice and see the project as a violation of human rights. However, it will possibly improve the economic circumstances of the Paduang people.

As the tourism director, would the students advise the Thai government to build the village? What would be the best decision for both the government and the Paduang community?

### “Hold your Horses!”

Wai Ling got her students into groups and told them to use “webs of meaning” to guide their discussions. The webs are series of key questions that get students thinking in a structured fashion about the stakeholders and how each group might be affected differently. This is very useful, especially for students who tend to be divergent in their thinking.

Some of Wai Ling’s students are eager to arrive at the “right” answer at the outset. “We tell them: Hold your horses first. Sometimes, you’ve got to listen to your friends and there’s no one right answer for the time being,” she says.



**Dilemma-based learning is related to problem solving, conflict resolution and reconciliation of different needs. That’s the essence of inquiry in the Humanities.**

*- Ong Wai Ling,  
Raffles Institution*

“Our students are very quick at making decisions, so when we delay them in their decision making, we help them to explore the issue more deeply.”

To make things interesting, Wai Ling did not provide all the information they needed immediately. Instead, she “threw up bits and pieces of information” along the way, so that students have to reconsider their decisions.

“One of the objectives is to teach them that you can’t gather all the information at one go. During the inquiry process, new information may come your way, so what do you do with it?”

## Background about the Padaung Tribe in Thailand

The fictitious dilemma that Mrs Ong Wai Ling posed to her students centres on the Padaung tribe who originally lived in Myanmar. Some of them fled from military conflict in their country to settle in Thailand.

With the help of the Thai government, a Paduang refugee village was set up in the Mae Hong Son province. Today, the tribe amounts to about 485 members in the Golden Triangle area.

Compared to the rest of the population in Thailand, they experience a higher degree of poverty. They also lack access to basic social services, such as education and healthcare. Most of them work in agriculture while some earn a living by making handicrafts.

The Paduang women are known for wearing heavy brass coils around their necks, as part of their traditional culture. Some of these coils can

weigh as much as 5 kg and may cause discomfort, muscle weakening and skin discolouration. In recent years, many Paduang women in Myanmar have abandoned this tradition. However, some in Thailand continue to do so, as part of their efforts to draw tourists to visit their village.

## Decisions, Decisions

After discussing the dilemma in their groups, each student reflected and wrote down the factors that made them decide on a certain course of action.

“I ask them about their personal feelings as well,” Wai Ling says. She wants them to learn to empathize with people who will be affected by their decisions.

Some of her students held very strong views and felt perturbed when their classmates thought differently from them. There were those who were very concerned about human rights, while others focused on the economic benefits that the project will bring to the Paduang people.

For teachers, it may be tempting to skip this step of personal reflection. But Wai Ling thinks it encourages students to reflect on their own thinking, something that many are not very skilled at.

After that, the students led a “content plenary” where groups shared their decisions with the class. Each group explained their decision-making process, and others were free to question them. The whole class then voted for the “best” decision.

Through the use of this approach, Wai Ling hopes that her students will learn to persevere and work with others to solve complex, real-world problems that await them in the future. “We want to encourage them to practise and develop skills they can use throughout their lives to make good decisions.”

Wai Ling’s advice to other teachers who want to try this out with their students is this: Be neutral. Although she is keenly interested in this issue surrounding the Paduang women, she did not let her personal opinions get in the way in class.

“We cannot impose our views on others—I think this is very important for Humanities teachers,” she says. “We expose them to the problems, equip them with the skills, and set them on a journey to go and explore on their own.”

**Mrs Ong Wai Ling** is a Geography teacher at Raffles Institution and she has been teaching for the past 22 years. This article is based on her presentation “Dilemma-based Learning: Integrating Social, Emotional and Thinking Skills” at the Teachers’ Conference 2014.

# What Will Make a Difference?

*Professor Kishore Mahbubani's childhood was not easy, but three things transformed his life: his love for reading, his teachers and his desire to question everything. This article is based on his keynote address at the Teachers' Conference 2014.*

I want to begin by emphasizing that I agree with Minister of Education Heng Swee Keat's remark that teaching Character and Citizenship Education is very difficult. It's a fact that most of the values we absorb in our lives and the values that we live by come from our parents and from our homes.

Schools can make a difference, but the primary source of teaching in moral education will have to be the home. The question is: What else can the schools do to complement what is being done in the home?

Since I'm not a professional educationist, what I'll try to do is to reflect on my childhood. Clearly by most standards, I've come a long way. I came from a life of hardship and ended up with a life of relative success. So, what happened?

### Read for Moral Education

Purely by accident, I discovered the Joo Chiat Public Library. I must have been 7 or 8 then. I would go there every week and borrow four to five books, and I was known as the bookworm.

Looking back now, if that hadn't happened, there was no way I could have been the writer I am today. It was all those years of reading. Most of the time, I write correctly because of all the reading that I did. I emphasize this because I fear that the habit of reading is becoming less common in Singapore and globally.

I believe that if you want to teach moral education, there's no better way than to get children to read novels. Literature is the best guide to obtaining a good moral sensibility. So, if children do not read novels, they have a major disadvantage in life. I don't know what we can do to promote it, but that's one thing I can encourage you all to do because that's how you build character and resilience in children.

We are luckier today because we didn't have *Harry Potter* then! Having only read one book in the series, I can already see how the story of Gryffindor versus Slytherin in the game of Quidditch—how one team plays by the rules and the other doesn't—exposes all the moral dilemmas we have to deal with. And it's much more accessible for today's generation than the books we had in my generation. So, please encourage more reading among your students.

### Teachers Make a Difference

The second way my life was transformed, from the age of 6 to 16, was due to my teachers. I went to Tanjong Katong Technical School. In Secondary 3, I had to sit for the Metal Work exam. I was asked to make a hinge. But I wasn't very smart: I made one piece this way and the other in exactly the same way. As a result, they couldn't fit together! So I failed Metal Work, which was the best thing that happened in my life.



**My experience has taught me that teachers make a huge difference in life.**

*- Professor Kishore Mahbubani,  
Dean, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy,  
National University of Singapore*

This trait enables me to speak in many different parts of the world today, challenge conventional wisdom, and write books...if you can question, you can succeed in life.

- Professor Mahubani on the importance of asking questions

I was transferred from Sec 3B to Sec 4G—the arts class. And that saved my life, because I was moved from a technical world to an arts world, which I was suited for. I studied History and Geography, and for the first time, the Sec 4G boy became the top boy in school in the O-Level Examinations.

I then went on to St. Andrew's School. Looking back now, I finally understand the saying: Education is not about filling a bucket; education is about lighting a fire. Someone lit a candle in my brain, and it transformed me.

I had all kinds of teachers. I had a Geography teacher who was a real terror. We were all scared of her! She was fierce and frightened us every day by shouting at us! But that worked. I got an A in Geography. And then I had the exact opposite for Literature. I had a teacher who would become one of Singapore's best poets: Robert Yeo. I had this remarkable range of teachers who lit this candle in me.

My experience has taught me that teachers make a huge difference in life. We were poor, we were on welfare, my father was unemployed, and he used to drink and gamble. In an environment which could actually break a young person, I succeeded. And what made the difference? The teachers. They provided a positive balance to what was happening in the rest of my life.

And that's why all of you (the teachers) have a very important role to play because in your classrooms, there are young Kishore Mahubanis who are struggling. And it's what you do with them that will determine whether or not they succeed in their life.

#### Learn to Question

And this brings me to the third thing which saved my life and which you can try to implement more in the classroom. It's questioning. For some reason, I find myself questioning a lot of things. I discovered it's part of my nature.

At the National University of Singapore (NUS), I initially did the sensible thing and took economics and sociology as majors and philosophy as a minor for my first 2 years.

But then I discovered that I wasn't learning much from my economics and sociology majors. By contrast, my philosophy lessons taught me to question everything and every assumption in the world. As a result, I did something stupid and repeated a year in NUS so that I could study philosophy as a major. To make ends meet, I taught night classes.

And what was the difference that philosophy made to me? It made me realize you can question every assumption in the world. It proved to be an enormous asset in my life. This trait enables me to speak in many different parts of the world today, challenge conventional wisdom, and write books.

The moral of this story is that if you can question, you can succeed in life. So as a result of my remarks, I hope you'll encourage more reading by your students, you'll realize that teachers can make a difference, and you'll encourage your students to question even more.

**Kishore Mahubani** is Dean and Professor in the Practice of Public Policy of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. He served in Singapore's diplomatic service for 33 years and was Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Ministry from 1993 to 1998. His latest book is *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World*.

Copyright © 2014  
SingTeach is an e-magazine of the National Institute of Education,  
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

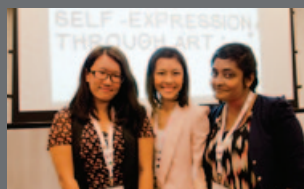
## Online Exclusives



Customizing Learning



Campaigning for Altruism



Self-expression through Art



Fostering Character and Values