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a New Level

PEOPLE

Returning to the
Heart of Assessment



**ASSESSMENT FOR
LEARNING,
LEARNING FOR
LIFE.**

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Published quarterly by the Office of Education Research at the National Institute of Education, Singapore, *SingTeach* is an e-magazine dedicated to improving teaching and enhancing learning. Each article is crafted with teachers in mind.

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Mention “assessment” and all too often, it is only associated with examinations and tests which are useful for ranking and placement purposes. With the recent changes in assessment announced by Ministry of Education such as the removal of mid-year examinations during transitional years, another—often overlooked but no less important—purpose of assessment is now brought to the forefront.

Assessment is also about supporting and enhancing students’ learning where learning is the focus of assessment. As Education Minister Ong Ye Kung aptly puts, “before it (exams) smothers us, we need to start to withdraw it somewhat, and focus on the true spirit of learning”. In a nutshell, Assessment for Learning (AfL) is all about informing students of their progress in order to empower them to take the necessary action to improve their performance. AfL puts the ownership of learning back into the hands of students.

In this issue of *SingTeach*, we explore how and why AfL is learning for life, beyond marks and grades. The Big Idea article, *Assessment beyond Tests and Examinations*, will further unravel the what, why and how of AfL, and how it affects both teaching and learning.

The rest of the issue feature voices from a researcher, school leader and two teachers on their experiences with AfL. The two feature articles in *Classroom Perspectives* will shed some light on assessment and feedback practices in the classroom. A researcher also shares his study in understanding teachers’ perceptions and practices of AfL in Singapore in the *Research in Action* section. In the *People* section, a school principal who is passionate about AfL shares how her school undergoes changes in their assessment practices. In one of the contribution articles online, one teacher shares her ideas on how assessment can be practised in ways that are useful and effective.

Finally, we hope that you will be inspired to implement AfL in your classrooms and in your schools. We also hope that this issue will enable us to think further and deeper into how we use assessment to serve our students’ learning.



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ONLINE EXCLUSIVES



CLASSROOM PERSPECTIVES

Empowering Learners through Assessment

CONTRIBUTIONS

Patching the Gap with Patchwork Assessment

Forming Global Connections

ASSESSMENT BEYOND

Tests and Examinations

The recent reduction of school examinations is a wonderful opportunity for teachers and students to enrich and enhance their learning. Now that we have fewer exams to contend with, what are the implications and opportunities for our students in terms of their learning and educational experiences? For guest editors and NIE assessment experts Dr Wong Hwei Ming and Associate Professor Kelvin Tan, this bold policy shift is a timely opportunity for both teachers and students to understand and use assessments for purposes far beyond just examinations and grades.

Building on efforts to steer away from an over-fixation with academic results, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung announced in September 2018 the ministry's plans to reduce weighted examinations and assessments in schools.

"As we overemphasized assessment, we inadvertently reduced the time available for schools to focus on teaching and learning," he said at the *Schools Work Plan Seminar*. With less weighted assessments to worry about, teachers are then able to shift towards a new paradigm of "teaching and learning" that does not place too much emphasis on examinations and grades.

A LOVE OF LEARNING FOR LIFE

For many of us, weighted assessments are tried-and-tested ways to assess students' understanding of a particular topic. But a fixation with grades could result in learning for the sake of assessments.

As such, this policy change aims to reduce the focus on the grading aspects of school assignments, and instead promote a love of and for learning in our students. But what exactly does love of learning, for life, mean? And how can we instil that in schools while also ensuring appropriate student assessment?

"A love of learning for life requires students to be active learners who take charge of their own learning in ways that can be sustained and beneficial in the long-run," explains Kelvin Tan, who is with the Curriculum, Teaching & Learning Academic Group at NIE. "The opposite of that is basically learning (something) for the sake of academic outcomes such as, in this case, grades."

Now that there are fewer exams and grades to focus on or work towards to, how can teachers utilize the extra curriculum time that is usually spent on preparing for examinations to promote holistic learning and what other forms of assessment can teachers carry out?

ASSESSMENT NOT ALL ABOUT GRADES

Assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning are two completely different approaches to teaching and learning, and each serves a distinct purpose, shares Wong Hwei Ming, who is also a Research Scientist at the Office of Education Research.

“It is important to understand how the two forms of assessments play off one another and enhance teaching and learning,” she explains. “The former, typically administered at the end of a unit or period, is a kind of a benchmark that measures how well our students can perform by comparing them within a class or a cohort.” That is what the education ministry hopes to steer away from with the implementation of this new policy—by reducing the academic stress and re-focusing on the joy and love of learning.

On the other hand, the latter focuses on creating opportunities to understand and improve students’ learning. This simply means that Assessment for Learning (AfL) is more than just test scores as it involves assessing students’ comprehension and understanding of a skill or lesson during the learning and teaching process.

“It is crucial that in our bid to help our learners excel in school and later, in life, we do not over-emphasize grades based on standardized tests,” Kelvin adds. “Grades don’t provide us with the immediate opportunity to address the needs of individual learners unlike other forms of assessment that serve to enrich students’ learning.”

As such, both Kelvin and Hwei Ming feel that it is now a good time for teachers to explore and implement AfL approaches in their classrooms in tandem with the policy change.

3 ASPECTS OF ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

In a nutshell, Assessment for Learning (AfL) is an approach to teaching and learning that creates immediate feedback which is then used to improve students’ performance. This is different from the traditional approach of assessment *of* learning in which students sit for weighted examinations with test scores that provide teachers with a benchmark of their understanding.

Guest editors and assessment experts Wong Hwei Ming and Kelvin Tan note the following three aspects in understanding AfL:

1. Assessment is more than just tests and examinations.
2. There is a difference between learning to serve assessment and assessment to serve learning.
3. Assessment focuses on *learners* (learning beyond tests and examinations), not just *students* (learning for examinations).

For successful implementation of AfL approaches, however, teachers must first have a shift of mind-set from one that holds grades above all else to one that sees grades as complementary to the curriculum. “It is important to note that this mind-set shift is the basis of AfL because without it, it is counter-productive to the new exam policy,” Kelvin says.

Truly, assessment can be a powerful tool for teaching and learning to create a classroom that meets the needs of our learners. When implemented appropriately, this approach can empower our learners to take charge of their own learning and promote a love of learning for life.

UNDERSTANDING ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

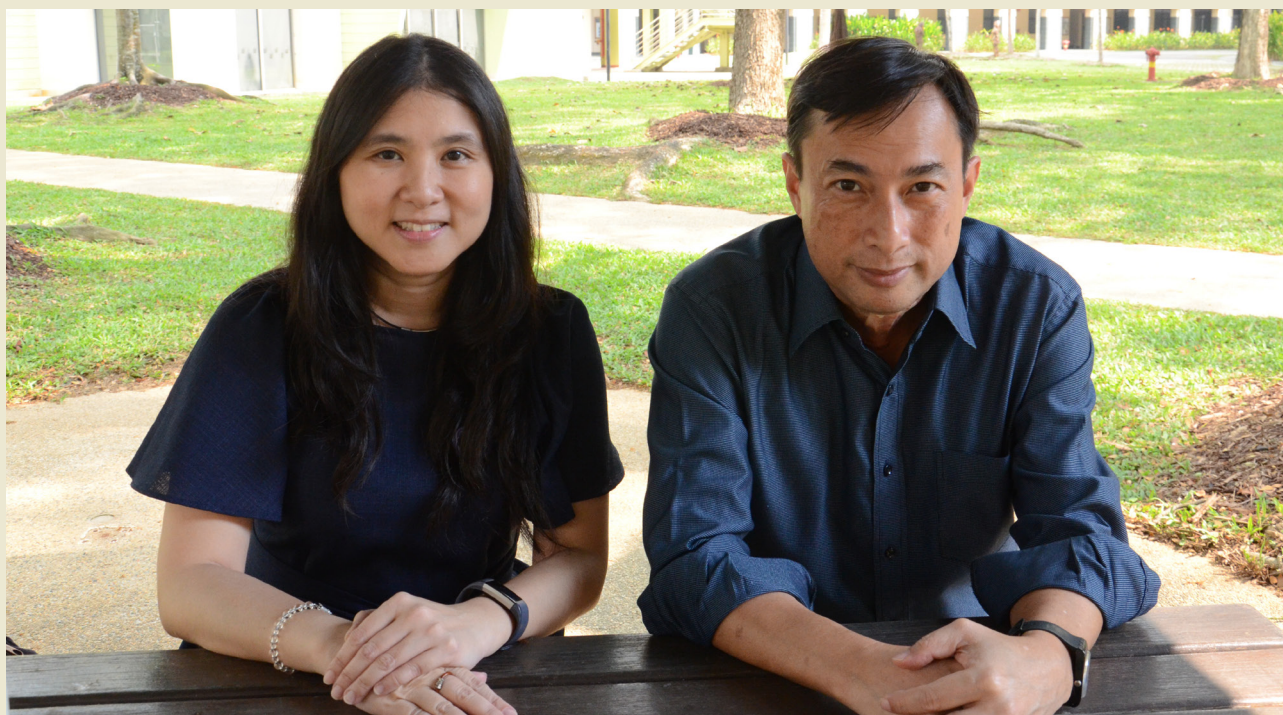
For Hwei Ming, being purposeful in the use of assessment is key. *What am I trying to help my students achieve? How can I then help facilitate that process?* By answering these questions, teachers can get a clearer picture of their students' needs, thus creating a more engaging and effective student-centred classroom.

"In some cases, assessment can also come in the form of questions," she says. "It could be asking students questions that can promote deeper thinking." Based on their responses to these questions, teachers can then get an idea of their students' understanding of a topic and address any misconceptions which will also benefit the entire class. Other forms of AfL approaches can include peer assessment and self-assessment, to name a few.

"Providing feedback to students about their learning is an important feature of AfL as it provides opportunities for students to reflect on how they can improve their learning," adds Hwei Ming.

But for the success of such alternative assessments to occur, both Hwei Ming and Kelvin believe that first, there needs to be a change of mind-sets in teachers. "We need to shift our mind-sets away from unduly emphasizing 'quantity' to grappling with what 'quality' entails. Without this shift, what we do in the classrooms might be counter-productive to this new exam policy," Kelvin stresses.

To this end, instead of preparing our youths to be just students who sit for examinations, it is crucial that educators prepare them to be active learners, for life. After all, it is today's youths who will eventually take Singapore forward. ■



About the Guest Editors

Wong Hwei Ming is Research Scientist with the Office of Education Research. Her research interests include assessment for learning, self-assessment and assessment literacy. **Kelvin Tan** is Associate Professor with the Curriculum, Teaching & Learning Academic Group. His research interests include assessment for learning and reflective practice. They are both with NIE, Singapore.

THE COORE OF ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

Mention the word “assessment” and many may think of it as a mere process of setting, facilitating and marking exams to benchmark students’ learning. However, one NIE researcher believes that assessment can also go beyond just that, and that when purposefully implemented, it can empower students and motivate them to be active learners.

During his schooling and teaching days, Dr Leong Wei Shin often wondered: How can assessment be used to enthuse, inspire and support learning rather than merely act as a barometer to test students’ understanding of a subject? Now Assistant Professor with NIE’s Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Academic Group, Wei Shin aims to come up with answers through his research study that focuses on classroom assessment in Singapore.

ASSESSMENT IN THE SINGAPORE CLASSROOMS

To do so, Wei Shin first needs to address the existing notion many teachers have about assessment; that it is an approach to benchmark learning. Known as Assessment of Learning, teachers use it interchangeably with summative assessment, which emphasizes the design and use of tests and exams.

“That kind of assessment may create a passive learning culture in which students study for the sake of exams,” Wei Shin shares. “But you don’t actually need to wait for exams to realize that you don’t know certain things.” How, then, can teachers identify and address learning gaps without the use of weighted assessments?

In recent years, Assessment for Learning (AfL) has been more actively introduced into local classrooms by the Ministry of Education. Much like formative assessment (FA) which has been well-known in education since the 1960s, this approach encourages students and teachers to be sensitive to “day-to-day” learning episodes, and to learn for life rather than (just) for examinations.

ONLINE EXTRAS!

How can teachers further support students' learning through the use of rubrics? Find out in the online version of this article.



ASSESSING TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF AfL

As part of his research study, Wei Shin worked with some schools in Singapore to find out what teachers understood about AfL, how they were practising it in their classrooms and whether there were additional ways to support them better.

In the first phase, the research team conducted a survey with 13 secondary schools to assess teachers' perceptions of assessment. "We asked teachers whether they valued certain AfL practices, how often they practised it and how proficient they thought they were, among other questions," he shares.

The results showed that while these teachers did see the merits of AfL, they were not practising it as frequently as they would like to. They also tend to view themselves as less proficient in implementing AfL practices.

In the second phase, Wei Shin and his team narrowed down the number of schools to observe deeper and understand better on how these teachers implement AfL methods within their respective classrooms. What the team discovered was that teachers' perceptions and applications of AfL can be sorted into three main categories: *tight*, *broad* and *atypical*.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF AfL



Found to be the most prevalent type, teachers in the *tight* category practise AfL in the classrooms with the clear objective to prepare students for examinations. This essentially means that the focus is less on the process of learning, but more on the outcomes (grades).

Teachers in the *broad* category feel that AfL plays a supporting role in assessing students' learning in that it encourages them to identify, and learn from their

mistakes and progress. They see the value of doing AfL for nurturing learning dispositions.

The last category, *atypical*, is the rarest, according to Wei Shin. Teachers in this group consciously take their minds off weighted assessments and implement all sorts of classroom activities that are outside of the syllabus to empower students to take charge of their learning, and motivate them to learn for life, instead of for exams.



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SUPPORTING TEACHERS IN THEIR AfL JOURNEY

With ample amount of knowledge and information about teachers' perceptions and practices of AfL gathered through his research study, Wei Shin and his team are presently working closely with two schools. He provides the teachers involved with research support and encouragement to better implement AfL strategies in their classrooms.

"We aim to support these teachers in their professional development by getting them to share with us their worksheets and lesson plans before discussing how we can refine them," Wei Shin explains.

The team is also currently video-recording lessons so they can, later as a group, reflect on what aspects of AfL work and do not work in the Singapore context. He hopes that eventually, these videos and analyses can be made available for all teachers to use as part of their professional development through appropriate online sharing portal.

It is only Wei Shin's hope to nurture teachers who are confident in practising AfL in their classrooms. "Ultimately, my goal is for students to have ownership of their learning through AfL, not only within the classroom but also beyond the classroom," he concludes. ■



Wei Shin (centre) and his research team believe that assessment should be used as a tool to empower learners.

About the Interviewee

Leong Wei Shin is Assistant Professor with the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Academic Group in NIE. His research and teaching interests are in the area of formative assessment, assessment literacy, cross-disciplinary thinking and teacher education.

HOW CAN TEACHERS CARRY OUT AfL?



The ultimate goal of Assessment for Learning (AfL) is to get students to take ownership of their learning by playing an active role in the learning process in school and beyond.

Explaining

INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES AND STANDARDS:

- Make known specific skills or content students have to learn, and the differing standards of learning outcomes.

Exploring

PROCESS OF LEARNING:

- Use variety of ways (e.g., questioning, observations, group discussions, exit cards, portfolios) to elicit evidence on where students are in their learning.
- Highlight learning gaps (not just mistakes) to students.

Engaging

IN QUALITY FEEDBACK:

- Offer specific actions for students to move their learning forward.

DO'S AND DON'TS



Explaining

- ✓ Discuss success criteria regularly with students.
- ✓ Possible tools: Checklists, rubrics designed using student-friendly language, student exemplars.
- ✓ Focus on helping students to achieve the learning outcomes instead of merely covering the syllabus.

Exploring

- ✓ Emphasize more on mastery of skills and content rather than marks/grades.
- ✓ Highlight specific gaps in student learning and provide concrete, actionable steps that students can take to progress to the next level.
- ✗ Marks/grades alone may not allow students to identify their learning gaps; students may even feel helpless or lack control over their learning.

Engaging

- ✓ Help students take responsibility to act on feedback.
- ✓ Personalized feedback for individual students (as opposed to general feedback to the class) may be more meaningful to some students.
- ✗ Simply highlighting what is wrong or focusing on giving students the correct answers may not help students know what to do next.



Acknowledgements

Information in this infographic is based on a research study (OER 12/15 CCO) funded by Ministry of Education under the Education Research Funding Programme administered by the Office of Education Research at the National Institute of Education, Singapore.

All secondary schools in Singapore will each receive a brochure with more detailed information on how to apply AfL in the classrooms based on this research study.



TAKING FEEDBACK TO A NEW LEVEL

Feedback plays a crucial role in effective learning in the classroom. It helps students understand what is expected of them and also provides them with clear guidance on how to improve their learning. The Head of Department of Character and Citizenship Education from Juying Secondary School shares with us how she uses feedback as part of her classroom assessment.

A few years ago when Miss Shynn Lim was doing her Masters of Arts in Leadership and Education Change at NIE, she started a conversation about assessment and learning with one of her lecturers, Associate Professor Kelvin Tan who is also the guest editor of this issue.

The conversation inspired Shynn to explore ways to create more impactful tasks for students, gather evidence of students' learning and improve feedback practices in the classroom.

"Most people generally associate assessment with grades but that isn't always the case," Shynn says. "In fact, there has been a shift of mind-set in teachers here where we use feedback as a form of assessment that doesn't focus on grades at times."

So what exactly, then, is assessment feedback?

FEEDBACK AS A FORM OF CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT

"To me, assessment feedback is an experience—it's a learning and two-way process that we bring the students through," Shynn explains.

Feedback, when appropriately structured, helps students maximize their learning by raising awareness of their strengths and/or areas of improvement. It also empowers them to identify the actions necessary to address mistakes that are made.

MAKING CONCEPTS VISIBLE

Putting herself in the shoes of a student, she cites an example: "If you were to ask me to do corrections for a composition with comments scattered throughout the essay, how and where do I get started?"

Instead of just underlining the words and phrases throughout the written composition that requires correction, Shynn instead decided to focus on just one or two areas where she hopes to see improvements.

"Most students are visual learners so if you can highlight one or two important areas that you want to bring their attention to, they will find it much more manageable to take ownership of their learning and address their mistakes," Shynn shares. To her, that itself is taking into consideration the socio-emotional needs of learners, which can also help build a more positive learning experience and teacher-student relationship, which are central to effective assessment feedback.

GUIDING THROUGH DIALOGUES AND QUESTIONS

Sharing another example, Shynn says, "A group of students was creating survey questions as part of a project and many turned out to be closed-ended. I thus stepped in and guided them to making the survey questions open-ended."

Using *Talk Moves*, a school-wide approach in Juying Secondary, Shynn asks her students guiding questions such as: *What are some questioning techniques that you know? How do you phrase your questions to allow for more quality responses?*

With every question that Shynn asks, she finds her students giving responses such as: *Maybe I should ask a "why" question.* Asking guiding questions enhances their confidence as learners and motivates them to do better each time.

APPLICABLE TO ALL SUBJECTS

Shynn recommends guiding students in their thought processes through dialogues, questions and feedback to enable them to understand core concepts in Math and Science better. For Art, teachers may go into the details of explaining the choice of primary or secondary colours, or the ways to create visual impact on a poster. With techniques and considerations explained clearly, students will see the relevance of a task better and be able to create meaning out of it.

"As much as I see that dialogic feedback is definitely effective and impactful for students, at times I find it difficult to implement," Shynn shares. "If you have to spend 15 minutes with each student and have two classes of 80 students, how do you then make time for that?"

To overcome time constraints, Shynn believes in taking advantage of pockets of time during lessons by walking around the class and providing students with instant feedback so they can improve their work immediately. That way, she can guide more students within the same amount of time. Giving bite-sized tasks and feedback also makes it more manageable for both teachers and students.

Despite the amount of planning and effort that goes into implementing assessment feedback practices in her lessons, Shynn believes that the successes her students experience through receiving feedback and then making improvements to their work make it all worth it for her.

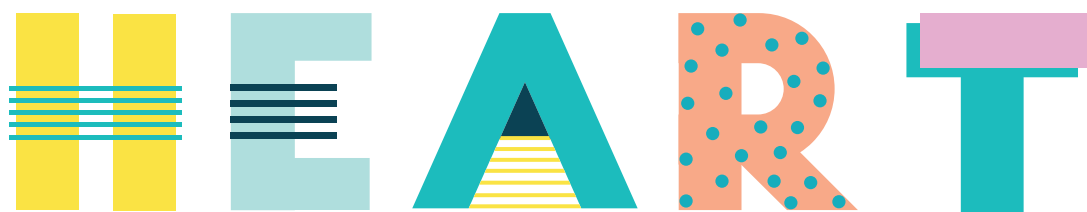
In the larger scheme of things, having a teacher like Shynn work hand-in-hand with students imbues Juying Secondary School's motto: *Together We will Succeed.*



About the Interviewee

Shynn Lim is Head of Department of Character and Citizenship Education from Juying Secondary School. She is also an alumnus of MALEC (Masters of Arts in Leadership and Education Change). Besides CCE, she has been actively working on strategies to engage learners with lower readiness more effectively as well as pedagogies to hone 21st CC skills. To date, she has conducted various sharing with groups of educators from Management and Leadership in Schools (MLS) and Masters in Curriculum and Teaching (MCT) courses.

RETURNING TO THE



OF ASSESSMENT

Pincipal of Chua Chu Kang Primary School Mrs Sheree Chong is passionate about Assessment for Learning (AfL). She shares with SingTeach how she provides direction in leading assessment change in her school.

"I believe it is a policy that is well-received by many educators," shares Sheree on the recent announcement made by the Ministry of Education on the reduction of high-stakes assessments in schools.

"But the challenge for us educators then becomes threefold," she says. "How we might affect mind-set change at all levels, how we might empower our curriculum leaders to design the assessment and to ensure curriculum outcomes are met and finally, how we can design clear implementation policies for the changes to take place."

Less Exams—How Does That Affect School Assessment?

Sheree stresses that the exam policy change, albeit a welcome one, makes it crucial for teachers to ensure that the assessment needs of each subject are broken down into small and appropriate chunks to meet both the assessment and curriculum outcomes.

This process demands that Sheree and her team re-look the entire syllabus and curriculum outcomes, including the schemes of work, to fit the new assessment schedules. "As a school, we look into the learning needs of every student profile and strive to tailor our assessment to suit the purposes of each profile," she explains.

Sheree stresses that while this involves a fair amount of work, it is also critical to the heart of assessment, which is to motivate and inculcate the joy of learning for her students.

"Assessment, when implemented purposefully and appropriately, is a powerful tool that can motivate a child to learn," Sheree adds.

Introducing Assessment for Learning (AfL) in School

To kick-start the school's journey in AfL, Sheree gathered and encouraged all her teachers to share their beliefs and challenges in assessment and feedback.

She very quickly recognized the importance of her role as a school leader to synthesize all the available information and theories for her teachers, and to simplify complex theories into an irreducible minimum as a framework for teachers to adopt.

As a school, it was decided that the most impactful way to help every child improve would be through effective feedback. Evidence of feedback were collected and presented to the staff as examples of how theory might look like in practice.

"My advice to the teachers is simple," Sheree shares. "Have routines in the classroom to ensure that students understand your feedback and then take action on your feedback. This is a crucial first step that can promote student motivation and improve learning outcomes."

Sheree is also in the process of helping teachers to empower students to make their own learning decisions and reduce student's dependency on teachers for guidance and corrective actions.

One way of knowing how much students understand a certain topic or concept is when "they are able to demonstrate the new knowledge independently, on demand *and* in a way that is good enough."

Challenges Faced in Shifting Mind-sets

A few immediate challenges faced by the teachers in implementing AfL was on a systemic level—the worry of not being able to complete the required worksheets and the need to complete the syllabus in time for a scheduled assessment.

As a result, these teachers also worry that they might not be able to adequately prepare students for their *Primary School Leaving Exam* which is, after all, still a pen-and-paper assessment. "My role is thus critical in addressing teachers' fear and anxiety, and subsequently promote a mind-set change," Sheree shares. This was done through regular engagement sessions with teachers, listening to their concerns and designing policies to help make the change happen.

She lets on that the mind-set change is still a work-in-progress, but is heartened to see a gradual cultural shift in which the school is moving towards a deeper focus on how assessment can motivate every child.

Leadership Support for Success

When asked about how leadership support can facilitate successful implementation of AfL, Sheree answers without a doubt, "We just have to be authentic."

"We have to say what we mean and mean what we say," she continues. "We ourselves have to understand the heart of AfL and be convinced about it. This will help us discover the much-needed leadership courage within us to move into some 'new terrains' and bring our people along with us."

Another point of support for teachers is to acknowledge the fears that they have before trying

to eradicate them. Sheree cautions that "we must never put results ahead of everything else, because that creates fear."

Sheree therefore appeals to educators to focus on the core mission of their work: loving every child, believing in each one and giving them hope. She also spreads the same message to parents of her students.

Sheree advises, "This whole thing about assessment is not just a tactical change. For teachers, it is also emotional because we are going against developed habits and practices we used to consider the norm. It is never easy to unlearn and re-learn."

Despite the difficulties and challenges, Sheree concludes that it has been an immensely rewarding experience for her as she looks forward to seeing her students enjoy their learning journey. ■



About the Interviewee

Sheree Chong is Principal of Chua Chu Kang Primary School. Prior to that, she was Vice-Principal at Regent Secondary School and Yishun Secondary School respectively. She has been an educator since 1996.

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