

# "DANCING to A DIFFERENT BEAT."

Juggling personal  
pursuits, work and  
other demands is  
tricky, but these  
teachers show that  
it can be done. //



## contact

THE TEACHERS' DIGEST

ISSUE 15 • JULY 2014

### The lessons my students taught me

A teacher's journey in caring  
for her charges

### FYI: Be better

Work smarter, live healthier

### Right on track

What the PISA 2012 results  
mean for us



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Ms Arularasi  
Evergreen Secondary  
School

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Winning entries from April.  
Next theme: Making merry with  
your colleagues.

# This issue...

What does work-life harmony mean to you  
and, do you know how to achieve it?

Our cover story features three teachers  
who fessed up to finding work-life harmony  
just when they were most overwhelmed  
by work, or simply not looking. They show  
that harmony is possible.

Working smarter and improving your  
mental and emotional well-being can be a  
breeze with tips found in our FYI section.  
It's packed with advice and inspiring  
examples to help you simply "Be better".

Teachers here are a committed bunch and their efforts in  
getting students to learn effectively have paid off, gauging  
from the results of the Programme for International Student  
Assessment (PISA) 2012. Dr Poon Chew Leng, Deputy Director  
of Research and Evaluation at HQ's Planning Division, explains  
what the PISA results mean for teachers, especially in the area  
of problem-solving.

To continue their good work and refine their craft, teachers need  
to get involved in professional development (PD) courses and  
opportunities offered by the four academies and three learning  
centres. Not convinced? Give us a chance to change your mind

– listen to what representatives from the academies and centres  
have to say about why PD is necessary in our In Focus feature.

And in Heart to Heart, see if you can identify with the lessons that  
have kept one teacher true to her craft for 37 years. She received  
the Caring Teacher Award in April. Her tenacity in reaching out to  
students in difficult situations may encourage you to persevere  
when things get challenging.

Happy reading!

*The Contact Team*



FROM LEFT: PAUL, ZI RUI, TSUEY LING, SHARON & PAMELA

## Readers' comments



I enjoyed April's *Contact* and found the  
infographic on the newly-revised Enhanced  
Performance Management System (EPMS)  
a good guide. The information is very  
concise and useful. It guides teachers to  
key changes made, and summarises the  
information to be included in the revised  
EPMS form. I have printed the spread and  
it's in my personal EPMS file.

Mdm Premela Prabakaran  
St Margaret's Secondary School

Thank you, *Contact*, for a wonderful magazine  
that inspires teachers by keeping us in the know  
and up-to-date. I particularly enjoyed "What  
does a good teacher do?" article in the January  
issue. I am reproducing its well-designed  
graphics into cards and posters for use at my  
culture-building session to remind us that our  
role as educators is to nurture students. I look  
forward to the magazine each time.

Mr Derek Lee  
Beacon Primary School

What do you think of *Contact*? Share your thoughts at [contact\\_online@moe.edu.sg](mailto:contact_online@moe.edu.sg)  
Get the soft copy of the magazine at [bit.ly/contactmoe](http://bit.ly/contactmoe)

# DANCING TO A DIFFERENT BEAT

Juggling personal pursuits, work and other demands is tricky, but these teachers show that it can be done. We just need a different mindset and attitude.

Text by Kate Lilienthal Photography by Lumina

It's 3.30 am on a Saturday and there's not a soul on the road, except for Mr Jay Lim, Senior Teacher at Greendale Secondary School. Mr Lim, who is also the deputy discipline master, is cycling along Changi Coastal Road. He finishes nearly six hours later.

Mr Lim competes in marathons, triathlons and more recently, one of the world's most gruelling endurance events, the Ironman Triathlon. In his weekly long-distance ride he logs an average of 130 to 150 km.

On weekdays, Mr Lim has a nine-hour day in school, before spending time with his family and then heading out for a run or swim.

This lifestyle of demanding schedule and compendium of activities is what Mr Lim calls work-life harmony.

This wasn't always the case. Five years ago, Mr Lim felt persistently weary and cynical both at home and at work, two classic signs of burnout. He couldn't shake a nagging sense of personal dissatisfaction that he was just going through a mundane routine. Vacation time didn't help, nor did more rest.

Nothing worked, until his daughter, then aged 10, challenged him to join her in a triathlon.

And there, in the singular focus required to finish the race,

Mr Lim unwittingly found the respite he needed from the cares of the classroom.

## Start thinking differently

Teaching as a profession demands long hours and an intense level of interaction with students. When dealing with work stresses and other commitments, it may be hard to imagine that work-life harmony is possible, and even harder to find the time and energy to pursue what you really want in life.

Perhaps it is time to rethink the idea of work-life harmony.

When asked how he defines it, Mr Lim believes that such distinction between work and life is unnecessary in the first place. For him, it is about balancing everything.

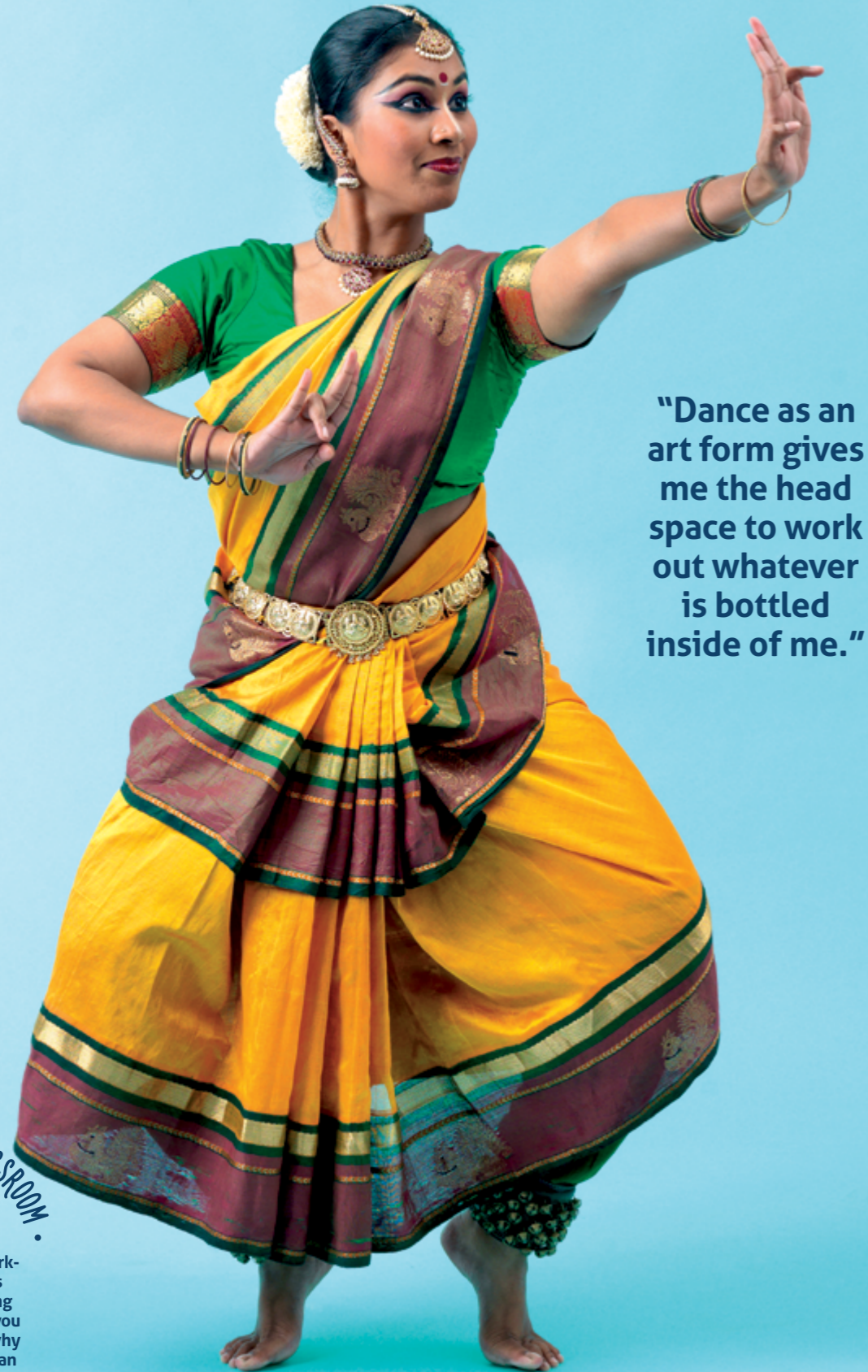
Mrs Sarah Lee, former Head of Department for Aesthetics at Holy Innocents' Primary School, shares similar sentiments. She is juggling a plethora of activities and commitments. Besides doing a full-time Bachelor of Arts in Music programme at the National Institute of Education, she joins the Ministry of Bellz, a handbell ensemble in Singapore. Last year, it set national records for the Longest Handbell Performance (24 hours straight at Changi Airport) and the Largest Handbell Ensemble.

**IN THE CLASSROOM**  
Mr Jay Lim seeks to inspire his students by sharing with them his Ironman Triathlon experiences.

**OUT OF THE CLASSROOM**  
Senior Teacher Mr Jay Lim believes that a distinction between work and life is unnecessary. It is about balancing everything.

**"If you're feeling listless, go out and exercise. Everyone can spare a half-hour. You can recharge every day."**





**"Dance as an art form gives me the head space to work out whatever is bottled inside of me."**

**OUT OF THE CLASSROOM.**  
Mathematics teacher Ms Arularasi believes that work-life harmony is found in knowing and doing what you enjoy, which is why she pursues Indian classical dance.

The multi-talented musician is also a trained classical singer, and plays the piano, *pipa* and other instruments.

As if her studies and music aren't enough, Mrs Lee tends to her two children while her husband – an engineer with the Republic of Singapore Air Force – works abroad at least once a year, sometimes twice, for one to three months at a time.

How does she balance all these commitments, you may ask?

"You can never achieve perfect balance, but you can achieve satisfaction," she says. And she strives to derive gratification not just from her participation in the ensemble or her studies, but in all areas of her life.

"The key to achieving fulfilment is accepting that it doesn't stem from any one part of your life; it comes from the whole."

#### Work passionately

For fellow teacher Ms Arularasi d/o Asokmani, dancing is where she finds not just her satisfaction, but her sanctuary.

Ms Arularasi turned to Indian classical dance to reflect on what she was experiencing in her first year as a Beginning Teacher. At that point in time, she was overwhelmed by the demands of teaching.

"An avenue of expression, dance as an art form gives me the head space to work out whatever is bottled inside of me," says the Mathematics teacher at Evergreen Secondary School. She is also on the school's Positive Discipline and Pupil Leadership Committees.

Her professional commitment has not stopped her from putting in hard work and discipline to hone her dancing skills.

**IN THE CLASSROOM.**  
Ms Arularasi feels that dance helps her to better understand and connect with her students.



Ms Arularasi, who has been dancing since she was five, dances on Friday evenings and Saturdays. When there's an upcoming performance, she puts in extra hours of practising on weeknights. That's why in the few weeks leading up to a performance, she is often exhausted. "I tell myself, 'Yes, I'm tired, but it's not fair to my students if I compromise on my teaching', so I just push on."

Ms Arularasi is not alone in her resilience to pursue her passion despite the demands it can bring.

While Mr Lim needs less sleep than most, averaging four-to-six hours a night, he concedes that "it's never easy to get up in the middle of the night."

The finisher of two Ironman Triathlons had a rough time when he started his fitness routine. "I almost 'died' (or crashed out) in my first 10 km run... [Then] I discovered that humans can do so much more than we think."

#### Inspire students

Mr Lim is deliberate in using his experience and insights to inspire a similar resilience in his students when



#### Preventing burnout

These teachers share how they do it.

"If you're feeling listless, go out and exercise. Everyone can spare a half-hour. You can recharge every day." – Mr Jay Lim

"Never believe that you should work for a long stretch of time in order to earn a well-deserved break. You will be 'punctured' in no time. In the busiest of my moments, I take a break! I get away from busy [work] and for two to three hours, I sit at a café or ice cream parlour and people-watch." – Mrs Sarah Lee

"When I'm tired, I'll just rest. To de-stress, I'll go for a jog, read a book or watch a sitcom." – Ms Arularasi

they see him train for competitions. He shares his Ironman journey with the school during assembly. "I try to teach by example: if you want something, you have to work for it."

Their passions do not just enable them to influence their students with positive values. Sometimes these activities

provide the teachers tools to reach out to their young charges.

Ms Arularasi says dance allows her to better connect with her students. In Indian classical dance, performers enact situations and play characters from Indian literature. The themes are universal and often dovetail with individual issues her students may be facing at school.

Armed with such insights, Ms Arularasi effectively dances right into her students' shoes, allowing her to better understand and assist them.

The meaning she derives from the concert of work, dance and relationships in her own life also motivates her to help students find the meaning in theirs. "I work with them to identify their own genuine interests and then show them how school can be a part of, not separate from, those interests."

### Involve families

Sometimes in the midst of pursuing work and personal goals, we may unintentionally neglect our loved ones in the process.

To avoid that scenario, these busy teachers have come up with a strategy: they consciously involve their spouses and children in everything they do.

"My children help me," says Mrs Lee. Before she went on her course, she and her children used to go to her school on weekends and together, they cleaned her instruments. "We shopped for classroom supplies, too. They have watched me perform and are proud of their mummy. My children also play music. We discuss music together. It's what we do."

She also notes that other family members play a role. Mrs Lee's mother-in-law and

other relatives were essential in helping her manage her schedule after the birth of each of her children.

In Mr Lim's case, his wife runs with him once a week and his daughter, 15, joins them sometimes. His wife doesn't mind the time he spends training and competing. "She's proud of me. She tells her friends, 'My husband is an Ironman!'"

He does concede, however, that he's careful to set aside time to talk to his wife and two children every day and stay involved in their individual work and interests.

### Reflect and refresh

While it seems like these teachers are managing work-life harmony well, they are aware that many of their fellow educators may struggle to find time and energy to live out their personal interests, especially in the midst of a tough work schedule.

When feeling drained and depleted, it's natural to think that a holiday is the answer. And it's true, a good getaway can refresh — for a while.

But if the real problem is a lack of fulfilment, then Mrs Lee believes that a trip to Paris isn't the answer. "You can't find fulfilment in the anticipation of a holiday. If you do that, your holiday won't meet your expectations. All it will do is leave you longing for the next one, and then the one after that."

So instead of merely looking forward to and planning the next holiday, invest effort in self-reflection too.

It's important that people take time to find out their genuine interests, says Ms Arularasi. Don't be afraid to experiment. Try different things.

In the journey to discover more about what you love, you may just find yourself closer to the work-life harmony you have been seeking. ➤

## It takes a village

*These teachers say that they develop their passion with the support of their colleagues and principals.*

Flexible policies that allow teachers time to pursue their dreams. Colleagues who show an interest in what each other does outside school. A listening ear when the going gets rough.

These are some ways schools help teachers obtain work-life harmony.

Mr Lim requests for time out from his principal to train for important competitions. He gets them granted most of the time. And there's no expectation to hang around in the office if he finishes his work early, says Mr Lim. "When the work is complete, I leave."

"We tell students in school to find something they're passionate about," says his principal, Mr Mark Minjoot. "And we tell teachers the same. Walk the talk."

Ms Arularasi is also thankful for how her school encourages her to excel in dancing.

When she represented Singapore in a dance competition in Thailand in her first year of teaching, her principal granted her leave. Some of her colleagues attend her performances, follow her on Facebook, and are interested to discuss her dancing.

Care from others is especially important during down times.

Mrs Lee's principal, with whom she shares a good relationship, was the first person she called when she was diagnosed a few years ago with carcinoma in-situ, a pre-cancerous condition of the cervix. At that point in time, her husband was posted in Afghanistan and unreachable.

Indeed, no man's an island. An individual, no matter how driven he is, will need a supportive community at the workplace to accomplish what he sets out to do.

**To readers: What other ways can your school help to encourage work-life harmony? Share with us! Email your ideas to [contact\\_online@moe.edu.sg](mailto:contact_online@moe.edu.sg)**

**"You can never achieve perfect balance, but you can achieve satisfaction."**



**OUT OF THE CLASSROOM**

Mrs Sarah Lee strives for gratification by combining work with music, and involving her children. She is now doing her Bachelor of Arts in Music at NIE.

# What do you love most about your workplace?

## ★ WINNING ENTRY ★

I like the school culture although I felt a sense of trepidation about how I fit in as a newcomer to the school this year. I decided that it was wise to expect the best and be prepared for the worst. Fortunately my fears were unfounded. My workplace comprises fun-loving, hardworking and talented people who are focused on helping our students fulfil their potential.

Our school culture focuses on teamwork to solve problems. Teachers of the same level sit together, which makes it easier to communicate, build bonds and share burdens. Guiding us around the maze of school cultural norms and work expectations is the Head of my level, Mrs Falicita Tan. She is a wonderfully humane and an empathetic leader.

**Mdm Chia Tzu Lin**  
Teacher  
Xingnan Primary School

In my school, our English department members sit in close proximity to each other. Not only does this increase our efficiency – we can broadcast announcements loudly and freely without disturbing other departments – it also allows us to share the joys, laughter and frustrations with each other across and along our *lorongs* (Malay for corridors). Senior teachers can easily help less experienced teachers who sit three steps away, and fresh ideas can be sharpened by “bouncing” them off each other. My colleagues place Hershey’s Kisses, candy bars, and even meatball platters on our tables. Receiving a “surprise package” adds fun to the workplace!

**Ms Chermaine Goh**  
Teacher  
Tanglin Secondary School

My cubicle, of course. It’s where I create art samples for my students, and hang my artworks and put up magnets given by my former colleagues and students. A desktop calendar made up of photos of my family members sits in one corner. Their faces often bring joy and pleasantly remind me of why I work. At my cubicle, I also hear snatches of conversations from the water cooler station and reception area. The overheard exchanges are sometimes humorous and ‘melodramatic’, and they occasionally make me smile.

**Ms Jenny Wong**  
Art Teacher  
Rivervale Primary School

My workplace is like a second home, as I can trust my colleagues for their support. At times when I feel down, colleagues offer me a listening ear and words of encouragement. Once I was very exhausted after a long day in school and my colleague, Penny, offered to drive me home. I was really touched by her concern for me. Although everyone is busy at work, we have not forgotten to show care and concern for one another. I am so glad that many of my colleagues have become my personal friends. The closeness makes me want to stay another 18 years and more in this school.

**Mrs Shirley Teo**  
Senior Teacher  
Kong Hwa School

The best entry wins a prize worth \$30! Other published entries get prizes worth \$10. All entries should be sent to [contact\\_online@moe.edu.sg](mailto:contact_online@moe.edu.sg) by **30 September 2014**. Entries should be no more than 150 words. Your entry might be edited for length. Please include your name, designation, school and contact number.

## NEXT ISSUE...

### Smart moves to manage different types of students

Share with us what you did to make the quiet one talk, the chatterbox stop and the smart aleck think more before he speaks.



## BE BETTER

Contact shares tips to help you work smart and improve your well-being.

**“A true balance between work and life comes with knowing that your life activities are integrated, not separated.”**

– Michael Thomas Sunnarborg  
Author, educator and wellness coach

An app to...



## Manage the classroom



**ClassDojo, free**  
[www.classdojo.com](http://www.classdojo.com)  
Also on iOS and Android

*ClassDojo* is a free classroom management tool that uses oh-so-cute monsters as avatars. Teachers can give credits to students for exhibiting positive behaviours, for example, raising hands to ask a question, or deduct credits for negative ones.

The system also captures and generates data on the students’ behaviour that teachers can share with parents and administrators.

## Avoid burnout

Teachers are educators, counsellors, administrators... With so many hats to wear, it is little surprise that many may feel burned out. Here are some tips to prevent it.



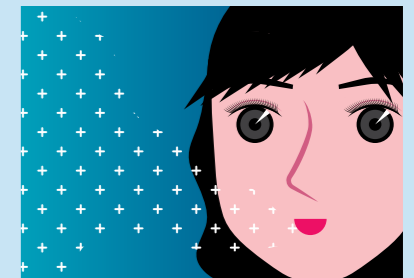
### Learn to say “No”

Sometimes, you just have too much on your plate that you cannot take on another project. You have to learn to say “No”. In *The Art of Speaking 2*, Taiwanese celebrity author and TV host Kevin Tsai shares a trick – blame yourself. Be honest about your already full plate, apologise for not being able to handle more tasks, and offer to help out another time.



### Have fun with your students

Share a joke, tell a story or even solve a brainteaser together. Not only do these quick activities engage your students and break the ice, they also help you relax. Align the activities to your lesson plan objectives so you won’t have to worry about having so much fun that you can’t complete the syllabus.



### Be the positive voice

While the staff lounge gossip may be juicy, it is often unproductive and negative. Rather than joining in the whining about how certain changes in school are dampening your spirit, encourage your colleagues to make constructive suggestions for improvement.



### Volunteer to help

When you can afford the time and energy, volunteer your help. Researchers say that people who volunteer tend to have higher self-esteem, psychological health and happiness. Start by helping fellow teachers. Edutopia.org’s contributor Ben Johnson suggests teachers share inspiring experiences in a blog, or mentor their peers.



### Make time for yourself

Meditate. Read a book. Go for a run. Or just stare into blank space. Do what makes you happy. Chris Hunt, a former teacher who is now a life coach, wrote in UK newspaper *The Guardian* that if one keeps putting in the extra hour for work, resentment will set in, and that will not do anyone any good.

Read more: [•bit.ly/happyhelp](http://bit.ly/happyhelp) [•bit.ly/guardianstress](http://bit.ly/guardianstress) [•bit.ly/eduburnout](http://bit.ly/eduburnout) [•bit.ly/burnoutsg](http://bit.ly/burnoutsg)

## Time-savers

Schools here have come up with innovative ways to assist teachers in better managing some time-consuming tasks.

### Online Oral Examination by Outram Secondary School

**Time saved** 

#### The task

Conducting one-to-one oral assessment after school hours

#### Solution

Previously teachers and students had to stay back after school for oral assessments. The entire exercise can take a few hours as each student has to be individually tested. Now, using the online portal, each student follows pre-recorded instructions to record his reading of passages, as well as his response and opinion based on a picture and a conversation topic. An entire class of 40 students can be tested within 25 minutes, freeing up the afternoons for both students and teachers.

### E-Com-efficient Communication on Mobile by Rivervale Primary School

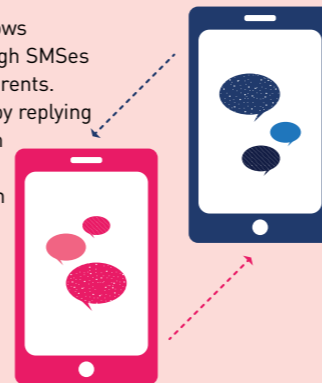
**Time saved** 

#### The task

Issuing parental consent forms, collecting and collating responses, and re-issuing misplaced forms

#### Solution

The mobile system allows teachers to send through SMSes standard e-forms to parents. Parents acknowledge by replying the SMSes. The system collates the responses automatically, and even sends reminders to the parents as the event draws near.



### MCQworks by Yio Chu Kang Secondary School

**Time saved** 

#### The task

Marking multiple choice questions (MCQ) scripts and analysing students' answers

#### Solution

Teachers can utilise existing resources such as past years' papers or worksheets and have students submit their answers using the MCQworks app on their own mobile devices. The answers are captured in real time, automatically marked and scripted to provide an analysis of their answers. Questions with conceptual errors are automatically flagged out, allowing the teacher to provide immediate feedback to address gaps in students' learning.

### The Smart Cabinet by Anderson Secondary School

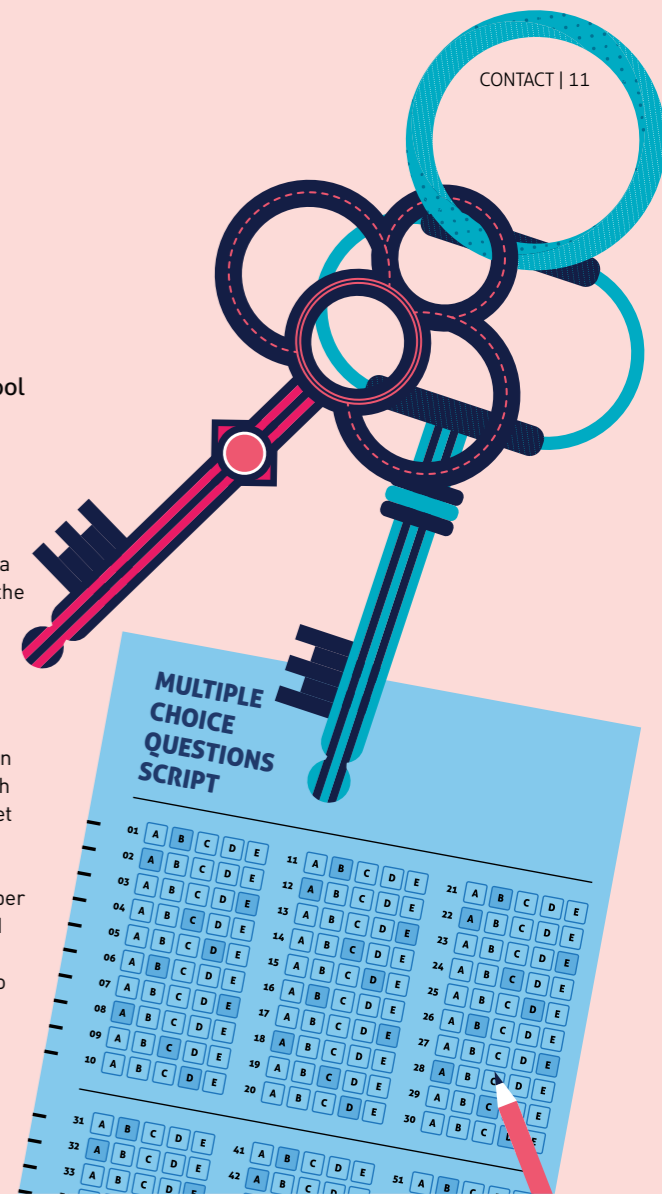
**Time saved** 

#### The task

Figuring out who took the key to a special room and recording it in the key register

#### Solution

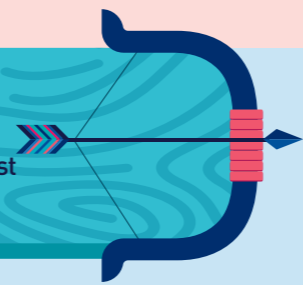
Keys are tagged to an RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) chip. The biometric authentication technology allows individuals with approved access to open a cabinet and remove one or more keys. The online system registers the individual's identity and the number of keys taken. It can also be used for cameras, iPads, laptops and files. No more paper work and no need to manually hunt for keys anymore.



For enquiries: Mr Lester Wee, Organisation Development Officer, lester\_wee@moe.gov.sg 6879 6267

## Good word hunting

You are in a mad rush to get a paper/proposal/essay/testimonial/remarks completed, and the last thing you want is to miss a grammatical error. Help is at hand with digital-based solutions.



### Grammarly

#### How it works

The web-based tool allows you to upload Word documents and eliminates any grammatical errors in them. It even checks for plagiarism, an essential function lest it slips your mind that you hadn't rephrased what you've copied, intentionally or otherwise. Don't trust the computer? By paying additional credits, you can also opt for professionals to proofread your work.

#### Ideal for...

Teachers submitting their own proposals or essays and are especially conscientious in proofreading their work.  
[www.grammarly.com](http://www.grammarly.com)

### PaperRater

#### How it works

Cut and paste articles onto the website, and within seconds, the tool gives a report on their grammar and style used. It even provides an analysis of vocabulary and the number of uncommon or transitional words used. An Auto-Grading feature allows the articles to be rated in terms of grammar and vocabulary, giving the writer a sense of how he fared as a writer.

#### Ideal for...

Teachers writing reports and papers, and over-achievers who get a kick from an A grade (even if it is from a computer).  
[www.paperrater.com](http://www.paperrater.com)

### Writefull

#### How it works

This app allows you to compare chunks of words with works stored in Google Books, to see how common your text is. The more hits you get, the more likely you've used the words correctly. For example, the phrase "fix up the problem" gets 42 hits, whereas "fix the problem" a whopping 33,317. This suggests that the preposition "up" is redundant in the former.

#### Ideal for...

Those who tend to experience grammatical slip-ups but have become immune to them.  
[writefullapp.com](http://writefullapp.com)

## Dream chasers

Work can be demanding but do make room for personal pursuits. Check out these educators who did just that with inspiring results.



### For peace's sake

American teacher John Hunter created the World Peace Game while teaching nine-year-olds about Africa. Students form "nation teams" to solve tough global issues from which they learn to solve complex problems, collaboratively. In 2011, Hunter shared his experience with the game in a TED talk. His work has inspired teachers around the world to create their own versions of the game.

[bit.ly/hunterus](http://bit.ly/hunterus)



### For the disadvantaged

Eperyl King started a programme to help disadvantaged students in Pennsylvania. The Second Grade teacher was shocked to learn about the challenges faced by the minority, low-income and disabled students in matching up to their peers. She brought together volunteers, communities, civic groups and businesses to provide free tutoring and grade-improvement incentives for those students.

[bit.ly/eprylking](http://bit.ly/eprylking)



### For the mountains

John Baird Tyson, a Geography teacher and school principal from Scotland, was also an avid mountaineer. Tyson carried out surveys on the mountains in West Nepal throughout his teaching, which spanned across the UK, Nepal and Bhutan over 30 years. He received awards from both the Nepalese and British governments in recognition of his work.

[bit.ly/tysonscotland](http://bit.ly/tysonscotland)



### For songs and soccer

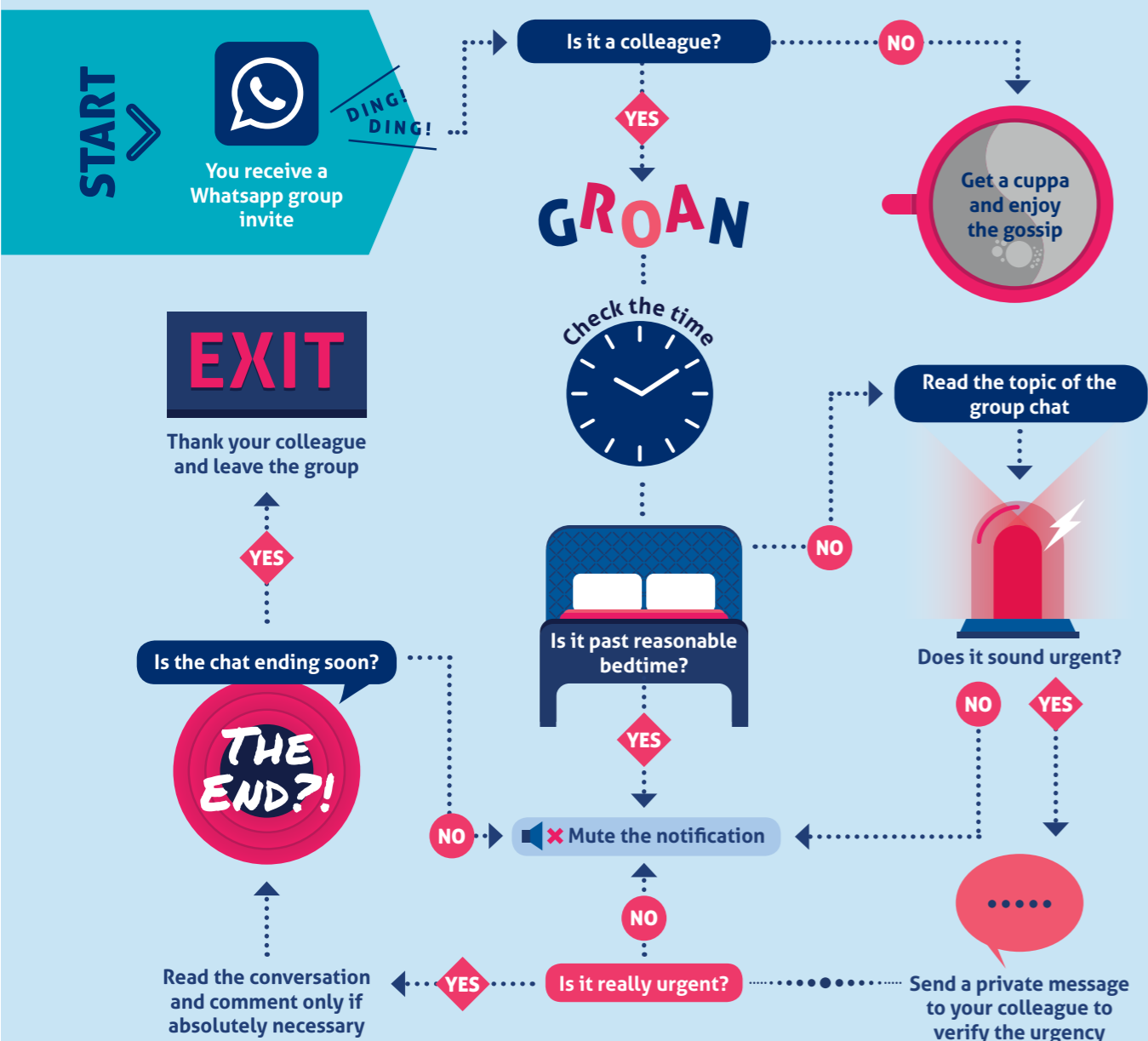
In Chebuyusi High School in Kenya, he is Mr George Owoko, history teacher and soccer coach. On Youtube, he is George Lio, the artiste, singing catchy love tunes. Though he met with skeptics, Owoko persevered and recorded his first album Mama ni Mama in 2013. Today, he juggles his music career with managing his football academy, and an orphanage.

[bit.ly/owoko](http://bit.ly/owoko)



## I need to get out of my Whatsapp group!

You are home, winding down from a day's work, when your smartphone buzzes. Your colleague invites you to discuss the upcoming learning journey/cluster project/exam logistics through a Whatsapp group. Experts are saying that mobile chat groups about work are hurting work-life balance. Here's how you could get your life back.



# The lessons my students taught me

Dear colleagues,

In my 37 years of teaching, I have taken on different roles and worn many hats. I've taught, led, mentored and disciplined – my scope shifts with the needs of the school. One thing hasn't changed though, and it is my students' basic need for love, care and trust. Over the years, I've learnt that fulfilling these needs is what makes teaching a calling, a truly noble profession and I have to thank my students for teaching me that one important lesson.

My students are my teachers. They have moulded me into the teacher I am today, sustaining my passion to teach. They have taught me many important lessons, some of which I would like to share with you.

If you want to know how best to teach, try to reach out to your students and get to know them well. I learnt this through one of my most challenging students. I was his form teacher and taught him English and Maths. Daily dealings with him were a perpetual test of patience as he was very rude and disrespectful. I wanted to scold him initially, as I was insensitive and blind to how his misdemeanours could actually be his call for help.

When I told this student that I wanted to talk to his mother, he retorted: "You can talk to her at her grave." I was stunned to hear of his mother's passing expressed in such an outburst, but I also saw his pain. Later, I learnt that he had witnessed his mother jump off a building. He had even sat beside his mother's body as she drew her last breath. I couldn't fully fathom

what he must have gone through, but I changed how I approached him. Instead of chiding him when he misbehaved, I got him to express his feelings. He responded to my gentle prodding, and I found myself beginning to understand him. He started listening to me, and gradually his schoolwork improved.

Understanding and guiding a child can be a long and painstaking process, and when it gets tough, I always remind myself that every child I meet is entrusted to me and I should make a conscious effort to do my best for them.

Sometimes, I realise it's both the child and parent that need help.

I once had a student who resented his mother as she had left the family when he was young. His father did not know how to control him and the child would often stay out till late after school. Eventually I told the father to come to school, and made him sit with his son to come up with a monitoring system. I also spent more time talking to the child, and managed to make him realise how much his father cared for him.

**Mdm Maznah Bte Yusak**  
Head of Department/Mathematics  
& Discipline Mistress  
Chongzheng Primary School  
Caring Teacher Award 2014 Recipient

Bringing them back together was worthwhile. Four years later, the child was one of the top GCE 'N' Level students despite having his father succumb to cancer in the midst of his examinations. The child even reconciled with his estranged mother and they now live together.

Unfortunately, not every parent is willing to work with me. I have learnt to take such 'defeats' in my stride, and turn my focus to meeting the children's needs instead, while seeking to enjoy my interactions with them.

Knowing that I have touched and made a difference to the lives of many families means a lot to me. Instead of promotions and recognition, my real reward comes from the wonderful relationships I have forged with my students and their parents.

I hope that you will also gain satisfaction from seeing how you have made an impact on your students' lives. For me, I am a better teacher and person because of my students. ✨



# Let's celebrate our performance

Singapore students have excelled in the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). *Contact* gives an overview of PISA and how well we did.

## WHAT PISA IS

A TRIENNIAL international benchmarking study for 15-YEAR-OLDS AROUND THE WORLD.

## WHEN IT BEGAN

SINCE 2000  
Singapore first took part in PISA in 2009.

## WHO ORGANISES IT

The ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT (OECD).

## WHAT IT MEASURES

Students' ability to apply what they know and learn in MATHEMATICS, READING, SCIENCE and PROBLEM-SOLVING; and to ANALYSE, REASON and COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY as they manage problems in different real-life situations. Tests were administered in paper- and computer-based formats.

## WHY PISA RESULTS ARE IMPORTANT

Governments can track how their students are faring in KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS compared to other countries, so that they can learn from each other to implement better education policies.

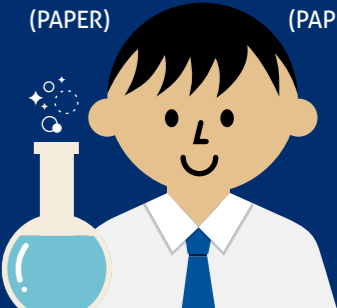
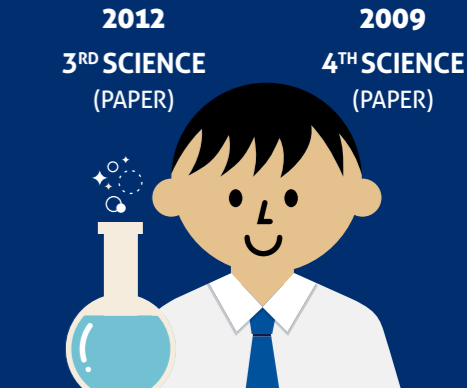
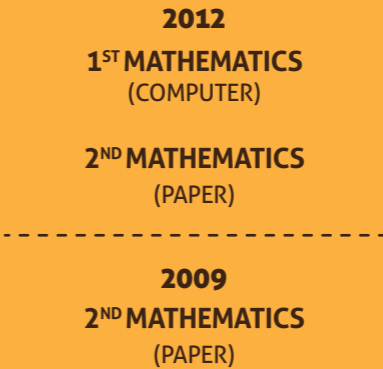
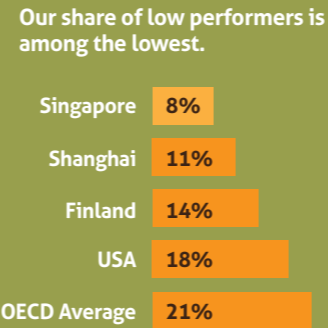
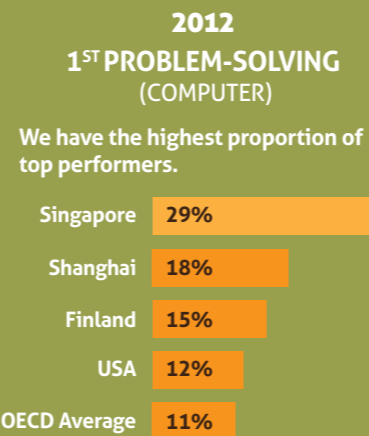
## PARTICIPANTS IN PISA 2012

More than 510,000 STUDENTS in 65 COUNTRIES & ECONOMIES which make up more than 80% of the world's economy, were involved.

85,000 in 44 COUNTRIES & ECONOMIES took part in the optional PROBLEM-SOLVING TEST.

In Singapore 5,546 STUDENTS from all 166 PUBLIC SCHOOLS & 6 PRIVATE SCHOOLS were selected through random sampling. This is Singapore's second PISA survey.

## SINGAPORE'S PERFORMANCE IN PISA



"...today's 15-year-olds in Singapore are quick learners, highly inquisitive, able to solve unstructured problems in unfamiliar contexts, and highly skilled in generating new insights by observing, exploring and interacting with complex situations."

— Mr Andreas Schleicher, Special Advisor to the Secretary-General on Education Policy and Deputy Director for Education and Skills of OECD (Source: MOE press release, April 2014)

What does it mean for teachers that our students excel in Problem-Solving? Find out more on the next page.

# Right on track

Educators here are doing a good job in developing problem-solving skills in students, says Dr Poon Chew Leng, Deputy Director of Research and Evaluation, Management Information and Research Branch from the Planning Division at the Ministry of Education (MOE). She tells *Contact* why. By Chen Jingting

"Teachers are only good at getting students to regurgitate what they learn."

"Our children aren't taught to be creative thinkers."

These are oft-heard criticisms levelled at the education system here. So it may have come as a surprise to many that Singapore students (along with their South Korea counterparts) emerged top in creative problem-solving at the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The results were released in April this year.

About 85,000 children from 44 countries and economies – including Japan, United States and Finland – participated in the problem-solving assessment conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Singapore's performance in PISA shows that students here are able to solve unfamiliar problems without ready-made strategies or solutions, said Dr Poon. The Deputy Director of Planning added that the result can be credited to schools' efforts in sharpening students' problem-solving abilities.

## Learning to generate solutions

"While teachers don't teach problem-solving as a subject on its own, they have been teaching [the principles of] it in the classroom," she explained.

In Science, students are trained in the skill of inquiry, which helps them to be analytical. They also learn logical thinking in Mathematics and the importance of

considering alternative views in the Humanities.

These skills came in handy when answering questions in the 40-minute computer-based PISA test. They had to study the problems (designed to mimic those in real-life contexts); collect relevant but disparate pieces of information; and connect the different bits together in a meaningful way to come up with novel solutions.

For instance, students were asked how the volume of an MP3 Player could be reduced if the "decrease volume" button was removed. This required the students to explore the other functions of the player, experiment with different methods to lower the volume, and develop an effective solution on their own.

## Learning to manage relationships

PISA has its limitations though. For one, it does not measure the ability of the students to interact with others when faced with problems, which is an important skill because people usually work in teams to find solutions in the real world.

In response, Dr Poon said that schools here are equipping students with relationship management and collaboration skills, based on MOE's 21st Century Competencies framework. One way is through Co-Curricular Activities,

"...our weaker students did better this time than in the last exercise three years before, even as our stronger students continued to show mastery... this is an affirmation that the work of our school leaders and educators is translating into deep and effective learning."

– Education Minister Heng Swee Keat at the 16th Appointment and Appreciation Ceremony for Principals in December 2013



where students learn to build friendships and resolve conflicts as they participate in activities together.

Hence, the PISA outcome ought to assure educators that their efforts in imparting problem-solving principles – whether in or out of the classroom – have paid off, she said.

But she was also quick to point out that "PISA is not everything to us [in MOE]. A lot of important things we are doing are not measured by PISA. It's just one of the many things that gives teachers feedback and confidence that they are doing right."

# Seven reasons to boost your skills and network

You know that professional development (PD) is important, but may be hesitating to take it up because of various factors. Educators from three new language centres and four established academies share why you should. By Yvette Kan

## 1. You get to improve your lesson delivery

The English Language Institute of Singapore (ELIS) helps all teachers – not just those who teach English – improve their lesson delivery, says Dr Caroline Ho. She is an English Language Specialist at ELIS leading in school-based research on literacy in content subjects.

To understand the challenges of non-English teachers, Dr Ho puts herself in their shoes. For instance, she was at a Science conference to "learn what the subject teachers are learning" and dialogue with them.

In her research, Dr Ho realised that teachers tend to focus mainly on content,

and less on how they talk and interact with students. They may not realise how poor communication negatively affects their students and need help in identifying and working on areas for improvement.

Case in point: Dr Ho once worked with a Geography teacher to design learning tasks and use language in a way that guides students to better comprehend the main points. It was effective, and other schools soon heard about it. One even got its entire Geography department to adopt the language-specific approaches.

Dr Ho's work includes developing subject literacy guides for teachers and offering support to promote productive and meaningful interactions with students. As

a result, the class is better able to absorb the content.

These efforts support the Whole School Approach to Effective Communication in English programme that ELIS is spearheading in schools.

More about ELIS: [elis.moe.edu.sg](http://elis.moe.edu.sg)

## 2. You can share your ideas on the regional stage

At the new Malay Language Centre of Singapore (MLCS), teachers get strong support and collaborative opportunities to work on research papers. At least 12 teachers are selected a year to present their papers at regional conferences held in countries like Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia.



THEY MAY NOT REALISE HOW poor communication negatively affects their students and NEED HELP IN IDENTIFYING AND WORKING ON AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT.

► Dr Caroline Ho  
English Language Specialist  
English Language Institute of Singapore



"PD (PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT) IS LIKE FOOD FOR OUR MIND AND SOUL. We need to re-learn, recharge and share our knowledge and skills TO BECOME EFFECTIVE EDUCATORS."

► **Dr Fadilah Isnin**  
Principal Master Teacher (ML)  
Malay Language Centre of Singapore  
Curriculum Planning and Development Division

"We want our teachers to be ambassadors to educators in the region, and to explain how the Malay Language (ML) is taught in Singapore," says Dr Fadilah Isnin, Principal Master Teacher.

At home, ML teachers are trying out a new curriculum designed based on recommendations from the Mother Tongue Languages Review in 2010. To guide teachers to execute the recommendations, many of which aim to improve students' reading and writing skills, Dr Fadilah researched on and developed relevant learning and

training resources. These materials were piloted among Primary 1, 4 and 5 pupils in some schools.

Using the pilot findings, MLCS, a unit under HQ's Curriculum Planning and Development Division, will refine the resources and offer courses for teachers. The centre also has a studio for teachers to record listening comprehension tools.

Dr Fadilah says to further develop their capacity, educators must be willing to challenge the limits of their existing knowledge. Even daily conversations

with colleagues or reading can spark new ideas or enrich current worldviews. Coming together to attend courses allow opportunities for such interactions with colleagues from various schools.

"PD is like food for our mind and soul. We need to re-learn, recharge and share our knowledge and skills to become effective educators."

More about MLCS: [bit.ly/mlcs2sg](http://bit.ly/mlcs2sg)

### 3. You meet friends who can support you

When handling work demands, it helps to

have a community of teachers who can empathise with and support each other.

In schools, the Art and Music departments are usually small teams with one or two teachers each. So the **Singapore Teachers' Academy for the aRts (STAR)** tries to build a community for all Art and Music teachers.

"Other than the knowledge and skills being the draw, teachers also come to STAR because of the people. This is a place that connects people and their passions," Mr Lim Kok Boon, the Programme Director for Art, says.

To achieve this aim, STAR has several initiatives – it holds the annual networking event *Celebracion*, hosts a Facebook page where practitioners share useful articles, and allows teachers access to studios to develop themselves as artists. STAR has also formed strategic partnerships with museums to draw on their rich resources for the PD of Art teachers.

While Mr Lim believes that teachers are capable of "finding strategies that work in their contexts" on their own, it is more efficient to tap and learn from the experiences of each other in PD.

To ensure that every teacher is able to attend its PD courses, STAR has recurring programmes and holds mass lectures.

When asked how teachers can keep the fervour in what they do, Mr Lim says their "passion for art and wanting to spread the love of art" is the key.

"Perhaps finding out what we are good at and what we can be passionate about will make it easier for us to help our students find theirs."

More about STAR: [www.star.moe.edu.sg](http://www.star.moe.edu.sg)

### 4. You don't know everything

Teachers going through the doors of the **Singapore Centre for Chinese Language**

(SCCL) will be guided by experienced mentors like Mdm Lim Kwee Hua, a Master Teacher and lecturer at SCCL, with 33 years of teaching under her belt.

Mdm Lim observes teachers in the classroom. As she watches the lesson plan she designed being taught by a teacher, she's able to see where their plans on paper did not work so well in reality. These then become learning points for Mdm Lim that she uses to design improved courses for SCCL.

Teachers who have completed courses are invited back to co-teach current sessions. They talk about their experiences of applying their new skills in the classroom. By sharing real-life examples and good practices, teachers are helping colleagues learn better, Mdm Lim says.

When Mdm Lim realised there wasn't information in Mandarin on lesson study, she and some teachers teamed up to write a book entitled *Lesson Study – Searching for Answers in the Classroom*. All primary schools in Singapore received a free copy of it when it was published in 2011.

Currently, Mdm Lim and other Chinese Language Master Teachers conduct training for primary and secondary school teachers.

The SCCL also organises biennial international conferences with other organisations for local Chinese scholars and educators to mingle and learn from their international peers.

More about SCCL: [www.sccl.sg](http://www.sccl.sg)

### 5. You can't afford to be an "at-risk" educator

While it's important to have a healthy self-esteem, acknowledging your weaknesses will enable you to work on them and grow as a teacher and person.

If teachers are unaware of the competencies they lack, they won't attend courses or find ways to improve their

BY SHARING real-life examples and good practices, TEACHERS ARE HELPING COLLEAGUES LEARN BETTER.



▼ **Mdm Lim Kwee Hua**  
Master Teacher  
Singapore Centre for Chinese Language

"PERHAPS FINDING OUT WHAT we are good at and what we can be passionate about will make it easier for us TO HELP OUR STUDENTS FIND THEIRS."

◀ **Mr Lim Kok Boon**  
Programme Director for Art  
Singapore Teachers' Academy for the aRts



**"IF THERE'S AN AREA I'M NOT GOOD IN,  
I will want to find ways to build  
my professional knowledge  
BEFORE I BECOME  
AN 'AT-RISK' EDUCATOR...AFTER ALL,  
our core business is to teach  
our children well, right?"**



**Mr Benjamin Tan** ◀  
Master Teacher  
Physical Education and Sports Teacher Academy

craft, shares Mr Benjamin Tan, a Master Teacher from the **Physical Education and Sports Teacher Academy (PESTA)**. But when teachers are willing to set aside time for PD, they become more aware of how much more they can learn and grow as professionals to help their students and colleagues.

The academy works with their PESTA Champions, who are Heads of Departments and Senior Teachers, to create awareness of and support teachers' need for continual PD in schools.

For self-directed learners, learning can also happen in the form of reading and watching sports related videos on the Internet, says Mr Tan.

However, this doesn't discount the importance of attending courses and workshops. He explains that at PESTA, teachers get to learn from experts and fellow practitioners, and become part of a learning community.

At the end of the day, teachers are not improving themselves for their own sake.

"If there's an area I'm not good in, I will want to find ways to build my professional knowledge before I become an 'at-risk' educator," he says. "After all, our core business is to teach our children well, right?"

**More about PESTA:** [www.pesta.moe.edu.sg](http://www.pesta.moe.edu.sg)

#### **6. You are more in tune with your students**

A challenge some Tamil Language (TL) teachers, especially those in secondary schools, face is low student enrolment.

To interest students in learning the language, educators have to "think different, teach different", says Mr S P Jeyarajadas Pandian, Principal Master Teacher for TL at the **Umar Pulavar Tamil Language Centre (UPTLC)**.

He believes that PD ought to go beyond traditional educational platforms and encourages teachers to seek work attachments in fields such as community organisations and the mass media.

Interested individuals can secure attachments on their own at media

**PD OUGHT TO GO  
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ORGANISATIONS AND  
THE MASS MEDIA.**

**Mr S P Jeyarajadas Pandian** ◀  
Principal Master Teacher (TL)  
Umar Pulavar Tamil Language Centre  
Curriculum Planning and Development Division  
Member of the Tamil Language Curriculum Instructional Materials  
Development, and Tamil Language and Promotion Committees



companies that have been cleared by the Education Ministry or school heads, or look to UPTLC for assistance, he says. Learning about production skills and scriptwriting may give them pointers for classroom activities.

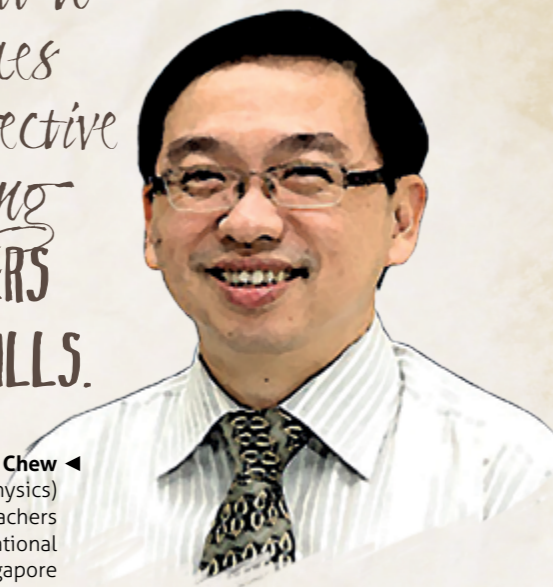
Teaching through music is another method promoted by Mr Pandian. With the support of Master Teachers he has come up with a package of songs and music scores, and a teacher's guide on using the package effectively. The Professional Development Wing at UPTLC also plans to conduct a workshop for teachers on Mr Pandian's method.

Now the focus of his PhD research is on enhancing TL learning through song lyrics by prolific lyricist and poet Kannadasan. With this research, he hopes to implement the songs in the teaching of TL in secondary schools.

"It's all about learning every minute to make our craft better and better."

**More about UPTLC:** [www.uptlc.moe.edu.sg](http://www.uptlc.moe.edu.sg)

**THE COLLABORATIVE  
POWER OF A GROUP  
that relates well to  
their colleagues  
will be more effective  
in influencing  
OTHER TEACHERS  
TO TRY NEW SKILLS.**



**Dr Charles Chew** ◀  
Principal Master Teacher (Physics)  
Academy of Singapore Teachers  
EXCO member of the Educational  
Research Association of Singapore

#### **7. You could spark change in your school**

Sometimes when a teacher learns something new or useful in a PD course, he is eager to share his experiences with colleagues who have not attended it in the hope that change happens not only in his classes, but also in theirs.

But it can be challenging to convince them – especially when it's just one person doing the persuasion – as a mindset shift is required.

Dr Charles Chew, Principal Master Teacher for Physics at the **Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST)**, suggests teachers attend courses as a group.

A group – which should ideally consist of teachers with different years of experience – will be more effective than an individual in persuading others that the courses are beneficial, says Dr Chew. The collaborative power of a group that relates well to their colleagues will

be more effective in influencing other teachers to try new skills.

When Dr Chew was a young teacher at Victoria Junior College in 1985, he attended weekly professional sharing sessions organised by his Subject Head. "The experienced teachers shared and this helped the younger teachers to improve in their craft. It was a very nice, natural professional development platform."

Tapping the power of learning in groups, Mrs Chua Yen Ching, Executive Director of AST, shares that the academy is looking at establishing emergent networks for a Subject Chapter (SC). Each SC is made up of a group of teachers who come together to deepen their learning in an area of professional interest. For instance, within the History SC, there can be emergent networks like "Differentiated Instruction" and "Inquiry-based Learning". AST will also be improving PD programmes for non-teaching staff, adds Mrs Chua. ♡

**More about AST:** [bit.ly/astgt7](http://bit.ly/astgt7)



# CAPTURE *moments* WITH CONTACT

WINNING ENTRIES FOR THE PAST ISSUE

## WACKY MEMORIES WITH STUDENTS

Thank you for sharing photos of fun memories with your students. Winners will each get a shopping voucher worth \$30.



**CONTRIBUTOR:**  
**Ms Sim Hong Kee**  
*Senior Teacher*  
*Singapore Chinese Girls' School*

Students and teachers of Class 4 Service (4SE) get into their school's "Spirit of the Class" celebration, unleashing their "FourSE".



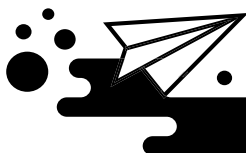
**CONTRIBUTOR:**  
**Ms Wee Yuting**  
*Teacher*  
*Yishun Town Secondary School*

Taking a fun selfie after our Secondary 2 Leadership Camp.



**CONTRIBUTOR:**  
**Mr Ulysses Wong**  
*Teacher*  
*Raffles Girls' Primary School*

Clowning around to look like Billy McBrown from the STELLAR Big Book. No more frowning!



NEXT ISSUE



# MAKING MERRY *with* COLLEAGUES

All work and no play makes one a dull teacher. Show us how you have fun with your comrades at work! Share your photo with us and stand to win a prize.

1. The competition is only open to staff of Ministry of Education (MOE) Singapore.
2. Each participant is allowed only one entry. The photo entry must be original and unpublished. The staff must be the original author and sole owner of his/her photo entry.
3. The photo should be in JPEG format, A4 in size and have a resolution of at least 300 dpi.
4. Submit the photo with your full name, institution, designation, e-mail and contact number, failing which the entry will be rendered void.
5. Provide a caption (max 25 words), explaining what the photo is about and how it reflects the theme.
6. Send both photo and caption to [contact\\_online@moe.edu.sg](mailto:contact_online@moe.edu.sg) by 30 September 2014.
7. The photo entry will be judged based on relevance to theme, creativity and originality. The judges' decision is final.
8. Three winners will each receive an attractive prize. *Contact* reserves the right to change or replace the prize with another of equal or greater value should the featured prize become unavailable.
9. Prizes are not exchangeable for cash.
10. All winners will be notified by email. Prizes not collected within two weeks will be forfeited.
11. The copyright of all entries shall remain with the photographer. However, *Contact* reserves the right to use and modify the selected entry as well as other suitable ones, with full acknowledgement to the copyright owners, for future use.