



Inspired by Roy Lichtenstein's work, the Secondary 3 (2012) Art students designed this wall mural.

We worked together in harmony and showed respect for one another's ideas and opinions. The mural painting project also brought out the resilience and perseverance in us as we endured long hours together.

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FOREWORD

At the end of 2012 Mediacorp Channel broadcasted a Mandarin serial titled “Don’t Stop Believing”. While it was well received by the majority of viewers, it also garnered many brickbats for its “over-the-top” and “unrealistic” portrayal of passionate teachers and disadvantaged students. Netizens commented that in real life, teachers do not do regular home visits to get at-risk students to come back to school, and that in this day and age it is surely an exaggeration that there are children in Singapore who do not have basic utilities at home such as electricity at night or water for washing up.

A few of these dissenters are my friends and acquaintances, whom I regard as well-informed and well-meaning individuals. To be fair, many are not educators. They do not get to see what I experience as the principal of Shuqun Secondary. Certainly many aspects of the show that have been embellished for the sake of dramatic impact, but at their core the stories featured are real ones. In fact, for schools like Shuqun that serve this invisible segment of the population, the stories do not go far enough. Truth is often more heart-breaking than fiction. On the positive side, I am also privileged to see daily the life-changing impact of passionate teachers, who go the extra mile determined to help these students break out from the cycle of poverty, the stigma of academic failure, the shackles of low expectations and the bad habits formed from out-of-school influences.

This book, the Hearts of Shuqun, gives these real stories a voice. It is the fifth edition of a tradition started by former principal Mrs Chua Yen Ching. Within its pages you will find stories of hope, like how students such as Bryan Choo and Alvin Yeo rose above difficult circumstances to find meaning and succeed with the care and attention of the staff and through their own resilience. They will hopefully inspire and encourage you.

There are also stories about life-giving generosity. There is our staff, many whom did not choose to come to Shuqun but subsequently stayed (or returned!) for the students and for the mission. There are also the numerous stakeholders who contribute money, time and expertise to help our students. Many of them been transformed themselves in the course of working with us; the stories in this book include the reflections of 2 scholars who were attached to Shuqun Secondary over 3 months. Other stakeholders help because they themselves have benefited in the past and remembered the impact of their teachers – Jeremy Ong is an ex-Shuqun student who is also an School Advisory Committee member who has donated generously for the N(T) stream character awards every year since he graduated in 2007. In the same vein, we want to teach the students to move from receiving to giving, so that they can, in small ways, become blessings to their family, friends and community.

Most of all, the book is a collection of stories about thankfulness. Through school programmes such as horse-riding and Football Plus, our students have the chance to enjoy opportunities and learn skills which they would otherwise never be able to experience. The student councillors write about their overseas CIP to Cambodia and how it taught them to appreciate the little things that they have even in their own difficult circumstances and the importance of giving to others more in need than them. One of the photos taken during an Art class by a Sec 2 student which hangs on the school wall features a scene of the neighbourhood seen through the metal grilles of a school window. Our mission is to help our students look past the bars of their present situations, and learn never to stop believing in themselves and the better future which lies beyond.

Mr Chia Hai Siang
Principal

The Power of Vision and Purpose

Christopher Wren, who designed St Paul's Cathedral in London once asked three of his bricklayers who were working side by side what they were doing.

The first bricklayer replied wearily, "I'm laying bricks."

The second answered stoically, "Building a wall."

The third, however, said cheerfully, "I am building a magnificent cathedral."

There is clearly no right or wrong answer here. In fact, all of them are right in their answers, and what differed were the perspectives they had on the task they were doing. While laying bricks and building walls are all essential tasks, it takes one with the big picture in mind to see the larger meaning behind what he is doing. In another similar story, an admirer of Michelangelo, the greatest sculptor of the Renaissance, asked Michelangelo how he had found inspiration to sculpt the famous statue of David. Michelangelo said, "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free. First I fixed my attention on the slab of raw marble, studied it, sketched a few pencil drawings on it and then chipped away all that wasn't David. In fact, every block of stone has a statue inside it, and it is the task of the sculptor to discover."

Are you a bricklayer, a wall builder or a cathedral builder? Does Michelangelo's description of 'discovering David' resonate with you? Do you see in every 'raw material' that comes through the gates of Shuqun someone waiting to be discovered and uncovered?

The students in Shuqun are a much privileged lot. While all of you, our teachers, see your responsibility as the classroom teachers of our students, you have never regarded yourselves as just the 'bricklayers' nor 'wall builders'. In a large way, you are all Michelangelos at heart. While we are well aware that policies, processes, programmes are important to develop our students, you have never sidetracked from your key role as our students' teachers. For our students, you have held to your calling as an educator in an unwavering manner and stood by the commitment to build a positive and encouraging culture in the school. Indeed, it is your painstaking effort to chip away 'all that is not them' that eventually helped to free our students from the raw material they first came to us embedded in. I believe that explains why all of you believe in placing a premium on building strong ties with our students or have gone the extra mile to conduct house visits when you notice something amiss in your students. The process of moulding our students has never been easy and our students may not, at the present moment, appreciate what you are trying to do. However, because we are held together by a common vision, and driven in unison, towards our mission of 'touching hearts, inspiring learning,' you have never given up hope. Our students, hence, despite their disadvantaged background, are given the opportunity to experience success and eventually become Men and Women of Character. The key enablers that bring success to the school are indeed the staff of SQSS.

The desire to create an inviting school to bring out the best in our students is pervasive among the staff, and everyone sees themselves as having a stake in it. One story I recall can attest to this. Last year, just before our Annual Staff Retreat, one of our OSOs walked into my office briefly to inform me that he would need to go for his medical appointment during the day of the Staff Retreat. I am sure he could sense my disappointment that he was unable to join us as just before he left my office, he assured me that he would try to "see how things go." The next day he returned and told me, "Don't worry. I have rescheduled my doctor's appointment. I will be there for the school." This is a poignant illustration showing the level of commitment our staff have. Clearly, as a member of this family, he did not see this Staff Retreat as a meaningless get-together, but one which will help the school achieve the bigger outcome of greater staff bonding. This incident is not an isolated example; I know of many more of you who have placed the school and the students before yourselves.

Disraeli once said, the secret of success is the constancy of purpose. The school has come so far, and is capable of moving even further to a much higher plane because we have your support. Because of your steadfastness in helping us to ensure the constancy of our purpose, Shuqun indeed fits the bill of a good school.

Mr Sivakumar Viswanathan
Vice-Principal

A New Chapter

Contributing a piece of writing to this book is an opportune time for me to pen down my thoughts as I look back at the past nine months since I joined Shuqun Secondary School. I came to the school on 15 June 2012 with much anticipation and nervousness in my heart. A serene frontage greeted me as I passed the tall green gates. Stepping into the general office, a chirpy "good morning" welcomed me that morning. A warm and inviting school indeed – this was the first impression I have of the school. As I settled down at my new workstation, I was feeling very excited because it was a new posting, a new appointment, a new chapter in my professional life and most importantly, another opportunity for me to make a positive difference to the lives of many more students. At the same time, anxiety occupied a large part of my mind knowing well that the role that I was about to take on was one of great responsibility and influence. I wanted to serve well and assist my school leadership team and teachers to bring about better student outcomes whilst preserving the caring and people-focused culture built by many who came before me.

Very quickly, school activities began to pick up with the new semester. As I went about my day-to-day business, I had the chance to interact with my Principal, Vice Principal and staff more frequently. It has been a joy working with my fellow school leaders, administrative staff and teachers because they often went that extra mile to ensure that things ran smoothly and their colleagues were cared for. I shared with my family members and friends that I was blessed with a team of good-natured people. There were many instances how the staff had helped in big and small ways, be it about troubleshooting the IT issues in the late afternoons for Shuqun Personalised and Asynchronous cuRriculum for Collaboration and Self-directed learning (SPARCS) lessons, rehearsing the facilitation process for staff workshops, or packing and transporting boxes of stationery to Marina Barrage for the staff retreat. Those acts of thoughtfulness and dedication never fail to amaze me and warm my heart and it is exactly this spirit of camaraderie that motivates me to press on and give my best. I know that this positive vibe that permeates the air of Shuqun Secondary must be carefully protected and not be taken for granted.

I also treasure the daily interactions with Shuqunites and watching them grow. There were several instances that reinforced my belief that we can trust our children to do good work and rise up to the challenge. I saw the Elements of Business Skills (EBS) and Food and Nutrition (F&N) students overcome their worries and deliver an excellent dining experience to our school's Hideout Café guests with a quiet confidence and a warm smile, the Science & Environment Club members tasked to host a Director's visit planned and executed a terrarium building activity independently that engaged the visitor in a refreshing way, and a Sec 4NT student with whom I shared about how her oral skills could be enhanced was able to give a well-paced and fluent announcement. She even came up to me after that to ask for further feedback! Certainly, all was not rosy. I also know of students who might be very trying or difficult despite the many helping hands to reach out to them and help them find that direction in their lives. However, I always remind myself that they did not set out to be so and that we have to persevere in nurturing them and one day, they would appreciate our efforts. Many students said as much in their interviews when they were asked what they liked about the school .

"What I like most about Shuqun is that the teachers here are friendly and they care about me. It's my second home."

Indeed, I am humbled by the ways that Shuqun leaders and staff have shown to grow the children and support one another – often inconspicuous yet silently impactful.

As I take on the challenges of being a new Vice Principal in my new school, I remind myself that we must remain mission-focused to help our children grow to be men and women of good character with a disciplined and creative mind so that they can be a blessing to those around them, and we will be able to accomplish this through "joining with our kin and comrades". As our school song says together, Shuqun will "strive for a glorious fraternity"!

Miss Britta Seet
Vice-Principal

Shaping Characters

Leap of Faith

My name is James. I am an international student from China and a Shuqunite. Three years ago, I decided to leave my homeland and come to Singapore. That decision proved to be the turning point of my life.

When I joined Shuqun Secondary School, the first thing I learned was that although change was sometimes good, it was never easy. Like many other international students who came to Singapore to fulfill their dreams, I suffered a lot while trying to learn and master English Language. In Singapore, for both Express and Normal stream secondary school students, in order to be promoted to the same stream they are currently staying in the following year, the basic criterion is to pass English Language. If we fail, no matter how well we perform in other subjects, we would not be promoted. Therefore, international students work painfully hard and try to force ourselves to converse in English in public. Till now, I am still struggling with the language! The journey seems endless but I know I am closer to my final goal with every step I take.

However, the challenges that came with our new lives did not just revolve around English Language. We also needed to blend in with the diverse local cultures and societies. It felt just like soccer players going into a basketball competition. Sometimes we found it difficult to share a common topic with our local classmates.

I can still remember the day when I first came to Shuqun. I was too timid to talk to any of my classmates; I could not even find a place to sit in the canteen. I felt lost as I did not know anyone because I came to the school in the middle of the year. I spent the whole day in silence wishing that I could find another lonely person to talk to.

However, the second thing I learned in Singapore is that (thankfully) things always get better. Despite the fact that it took me nearly a month to remember all my classmates' names, they quickly treated me as one of the members of the class. I was rather surprised that I was surrounded by 'potential friends'; all I needed to do was to take one more step. Shuqun is indeed an inviting school that brings out the best in everyone.

More importantly, I discovered that I could slowly begin to understand what the teachers were teaching, and that they were friendly and very willing to help me. In addition, I learned to be independent and attempted to make use of my free time to develop myself in other ways. There were always one or two hours for us to do self-study so that we could follow the lessons. We just had to be self-motivated, like the sponge that absorbed water no matter how much came its way.

During these three years as an international student, I had learnt a lot of new knowledge and grown tremendously. Coming to Shuqun had been a great leap of faith and a turning point for me. It had been very difficult being away from my family, especially during the festive seasons. Although life is not always perfect for me, I still treasure and enjoy every moment of it. I am grateful to my friends, teachers and staff in Shuqun. No matter who we are, no matter where we come from and no matter what our current position is, we can always aspire and dare to soar to greater heights in Shuqun Sec.

Chai Zhang Rui James
Secondary 4C

My Second Home

DARE

Shuqun Secondary School was a school name which I had neither heard of nor ever considered as my choice school. I recalled the day I accompanied, somewhat unwillingly, my parents to the Secondary One Open House. Shuqun was in the midst of undergoing Programme for Rebuilding and Improving Existing Schools (PRIME) and it was definitely not a pretty sight. Looking rather run-down amid all the construction, the only attraction was the indoor sports hall. That said, I must admit I was disappointed when I got posted to Shuqun. However, in a moment of folly, I made a dare to myself to expend all my energy to achieve my dreams in this school.

TO SOAR

Before long, I had settled down well in Shuqun and Volleyball became my choice of CCA. At first, due to the tough training, I nearly wanted to give up. Yet, my coaches, teachers and team mates rendered me their patience and encouragement; as a result, I pulled through. I felt blessed to be in such a caring environment. It had pushed me to strive hard in all the training and tournaments, not just for myself but also for my team and my school. These were many occasions that I knew, deep down, had I moved to another school, I would not have excelled in Volleyball. Shuqun had given me the wings to soar.

TO GREATER HEIGHTS

Sweat, tears and hard work brought us the achievement that we had only dreamt of but never thought we could achieve – the glory of being crowned the Champions of the West Zone in 2012. The hard earned National Championship title validated our efforts and made us realise that the strong bonds forged among my teammates had provided us the strength to pull through all obstacles we might face.

Time flies. In a blink of an eye, 4 years of school life had gone by. Now, unlike the young 'me' of 4 years before, Shuqun Secondary is no longer a stranger to me but, my second home. I'm proud to call myself a "Shuqunite".

Alvin Yeo
Secondary 5A

A School that Cares

I was a shy and quiet boy when I joined Shuqun Secondary in 2009. While I enjoyed studying in the school, it was only when I was in Secondary 2 when an incident happened that changed my perception of the students and teachers.

I had a fall at home and my hand was in a cast for several months. After a few months, the bones were still not healing well. Another visit to the doctor revealed that I had to remove the bone as there was a high chance that it was cancerous and it would affect the use of my hand. I had to go through an operation and a metal piece was implanted to straighten my hand.

For a few months after that, I was very happy as my hand seemed to be healing well. Unfortunately, the doctor subsequently told me that the bone was growing strangely again and I had to go through another operation.

During the entire period, my friends and teachers were very caring and supportive. They would keep me updated on news from the school and the homework that needed to be completed. They would encourage me when the doctors told me that I would never be able to play sports like in the past again.

It was the encouragement of my friends and teachers that helped me pull through this difficult time. I learnt that I cannot give up on life as there were people cheering me on. I shared my story during the Normal (Technical) Showcase in Secondary 3 because I wanted others to know that they can do it too when they face difficult times.

I would like to extend my thanks and gratitude to Mdm Rafilah, Ms Siti, Mdm Suhana, Mdm Sumiate, Miss Kaur, Mr Siva, Mr Tham and Mr Ng for always being there for me these 4 years. They had taught me that though I might not have a perfect hand, I am still capable of doing many things. I am really glad I had joined Shuqun Secondary as it is a school that cares.

Bryan Choo Wei Xin
Sec 41A (2012)

Bryan is currently studying at ITE.

Be Brave, Be Confident, Be Happy

Being a transferred student to a new school is never easy.

Being an international student transferred to a new school is even tougher.

When I first entered Shuqun Secondary, it was in the middle of the semester when everyone there had found their passion and drive in the school, be it becoming a student leader, a school team volleyball player, a budding artist or even as the performer who brings laughter and joy to his or her peers. I had such a hard time adjusting myself to the new environment because I was none of the above. I was shy and totally not confident of my spoken English, so solitude became my best friend; sometimes, I even acted indifferently to all the events and activities happening around me. There was no purpose in my life and all I did was to watch the days pass by, with little emotion. In retrospect, it was really quite silly!

Fortunately, this did not last long.

I could vividly remember when I tried to introduce a friend of mine from China to join Shuqun, the Vice-Principal then responded, "If you are the top student of the school, then I would admit her," she said. At that moment, my pride was truly defeated. I was furious at first at how she could be so harsh to me, but later, after I had calmed down, I started to re-examine and reflect on myself. When I made the decision to study in Singapore, I understood all the challenges that I would have to face. However, instead of forging ahead to overcome these difficulties, I chose to ignore them. Since the Vice-Principal had set that expectation of me, I realised that I had the potential to succeed and so why shouldn't I embrace it and fight for it?

From that moment onwards, with that determination clearly resonating in mind, everything changed. I studied so hard for each and every subject that I became one of the top students in my class. This improvement gave me much confidence hence I pushed myself even further to be more active in other school events. Life became so much more fulfilling when I lived it with passion. Community service and enrichment programmes, and competitions; every new experience made my life shine brighter. Finally, everything that I worked extremely hard toward paid off; I was the top student of my level.

Before the actual O-level examination, my form teacher, Ms Pang, only said this to me, "I just want you to be happy," and that's exactly what I had learnt from my almost 3 years in Shuqun : Be brave, be confident, be happy!

Huo Yuchen

Secondary 4D (2012)

Yu Chen is currently studying at Temasek Junior College.

Giving back to the School and Community

It has been 10 years since I left Shuqun Secondary School as a student. I am very grateful that the current Principal, Mr Chia Hai Siang, and his team of teachers have made fundamental changes to the school's programmes and introduced new facilities such as the Hideout Café. When I first visited the Hideout Café last year, I was told that the students receive training on culinary and service skills from the industry experts. It was really a great development for Shuqun Secondary compared to 10 years back as the students now are exposed to a real life environment and receive training in school. In addition, the school has a new host of facilities which compared to the old building, has definitely added more learning spaces for the students.

Ever since I graduated and started working, I have donated a small sum of money to the OKH Character Award, which is given to the students every year, from each of the levels in the Normal (Technical) stream. While results are important and can get you a job, I have found in my working life that character is more important - character is what will keep you in a job. In June 2012, I was invited by the Principal to be part of the School Advisory Committee (SAC). This has given me another opportunity to contribute back to the school. It has also allowed me to be engaged with the school community and network with the rest of the committee members. I am proud and honored to be both an ex-Shuqunite and SAC member.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the teachers who had taught me in Shuqun. It has made me feel that in school, other than friends, teachers are the ones who make a significant impact on the students' lives in school. For myself, I have been influenced by my teachers and Principals who had helped me through my difficult times during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) quarantine period in 2003. Therefore, giving back to the school is my way of giving back to the community that has once helped me. I would also like to thank my ex-principal Mrs Chua-Lim Yen Ching who had given me the opportunity to serve the school.

Lastly, I would like to wish all the students and the teachers an enjoyable learning journey in Shuqun. All the best!

Jeremy Vince Ong
Class of 2003

P.S.

Life is not just about working; it's about enjoying the work in a way that brings out your passion for it. After that, work will no longer be work, it will be a life-long passion. Quoted from Denise Tan YM

From Siem Reap with Love

As I waited in line for my turn to check my baggage in, many thoughts filled my mind, thoughts that both scared and awed me.

I had many fears even though that wasn't my first time to Cambodia. Like many other students embarking on this trip, I was worried about the language barrier, the physical environment, and the availability of halal food as well as the work we were going to carry out there. The thought of not being able to bask in the glory of our modern-day luxuries for five days terrified me.

However, it wasn't all fear that I had taken along with me. Going to Siem Reap meant the opportunity to stand in front of Angkor Wat, the ancient temple that many found difficult to believe that the local Khmers of the distant past had built. The mere idea that a History lover like me could see it in person sent butterflies fluttering in my stomach.

Twenty of us were on our way to Kirimanon Primary School in Siem Reap for an overseas service learning program. Our project was to build a water tank, many sets of tables and benches, and of course to teach the pupils there simple English. We would also host a campfire and charity dinner on the fourth night of our trip in return for the hospitality we were due to receive. Logically, twenty of us were divided into 3 teams, loosely termed the teaching team, the charity dinner team and the building team.

At first contact, we instantly noticed that the Cambodians were different from us. They were contented with their lives despite having to face many challenges such as financial difficulties and the apparent lack of education. It was no doubt a stark contrast to the relatively pampered lives we all lead in Singapore, with all the resources and education we need at hand.

This made me wonder about what kind of future these kids would have. Our tour guide said that every kid from around that neighbourhood went to Kirimanon Primary School. After a few years they start to drop out of school in order to help their parents with the farming. That would mean that all their effort at studying would be for nothing. Imagine spending all those years learning so many things and having to give it all up to live a life as a farmer. In addition, to know that there was nothing we could do to change the fact or help them, really hurt me. I felt very sad for these people, for it was their illiteracy that had made them vulnerable. Had these children been given a chance to continue to learn to read and write, things might turn out differently, for the better.

Nonetheless, I felt that these five short days had been extremely meaningful. It had opened my eyes to the world out there and made me realize that we had not cherished and treasured the simple joys we had in life as much as we ought to. We should be grateful for the current social stability and general prosperity that we Singaporeans enjoy. Although it was important to have empathy for the Cambodian children, we should be thankful that we were not in such dire situation. We actually have a chance to strive for success and yet many of us don't appreciate and treasure the chance that those children long desired for.

All in all, I think it is safe to say that this short, tiring yet meaningful and enjoyable trip had become a reality check for all of us. Millions of people in the world do not have access to proper healthcare, sanitation and education as we so readily do in Singapore. If the children there can live their lives happily despite the rough conditions and having to collect rain water using crushed plastic bottles from the muddy plains, then I believe we, the people living with everything they have ever dreamed of having, have even more reasons to make a positive difference to the world.

Victoria Chwa
Secondary 4D

Football as My Second CCA

This soccer enrichment programme has motivated me in many different ways both in my academic areas and outside of school. This programme has nourished my self-confidence and relations with my teammates. In addition, I can apply my leadership skills in class as well as during self-study time so I can learn more with my friends in subjects such as Mathematics, Science, English and other subjects. It also allows me to show care and concern for others and together we achieve greater goals. Knowing that choices have consequences, I must make right choices such as who I should spend my time with.

I have also learned to better manage my time, trying to cope with my CCA and the soccer training. This programme has taught me basic but important principles such as being punctual and giving my best in all that I do. I have never been late for school or my CCA trainings. I must have the integrity to do the right things and be fair to others.

As the Vice-Captain of the team representing the school, the most important value to me is respect. In a game, respect is not only given to the referee but also everyone around us, including our opponents. By respecting others, we earn respect in return. With this new found revelation, I have made many new friends, with people of different races and from other schools. I don't want to be known only as a good player, I also aspire to be a good Shuqunite.

My other CCA is Volleyball and to me volleyball and soccer are two different sports. In volleyball, communication is much easier as we are close to one another on the court. It is easier to support one another in a game of volleyball. However, in a game of soccer, all eleven players have to support and encourage one another on a much larger football field. To ensure this, I have taken the role of the 'commander' in the team and would usually lead the team from the back as a defender. I always make sure that my team plays well with 100% commitment. Only then the team will have teamwork. Regardless the situation, all sports to me require great responsibility and respect for everyone.

I have also joined the Taman Jurong Zone D Resident Constituency (RC) since I was in Sec 2 in 2011, so this will be my third year under the Youth Chapter Programme. Joining this RC has given me great opportunities to do volunteer work, gain a lot of experience in helping the elderly and preparing for events for Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Hari Raya and others.

Anis Dani
Secondary 43

These are excerpts from Football Plus coaches, Mr Lionel Chan and Mr Titus Wong, who have worked closely with Anis and their assessment of him:

“Anis has been a model player on and off the field. On the training ground, he is punctual and shows a positive attitude in training. He is always willing to help carry the training equipment. On the competition field, Anis is always competitive but never malicious in his challenges. It is not unusual to see and hear Anis urging and telling his team mates to keep their spirits up. When things do not go well or mistakes are made, Anis would continue to encourage his team mates on and not blame others. I am confident that Anis will only get much better as a player because he is willing to learn and train hard and shows respect to fellow team mates and opposition.” - Mr Lionel Chan

“Anis has excelled in his role as the Vice-Captain of the football team, diligently and willingly completing any tasks required of him, to the best of his abilities. Throughout the time I have known Anis, he has always displayed character which distinguishes him from the rest of the team. He is endowed with natural leadership qualities, never putting himself above others, and respectfully relating to his teammates, coaches, referees, and even the opposition. Anis has shown great competitive spirit whilst being peaceable and down to earth. It has been a joy to see him develop himself through training and hard work, and I am confident there are greater things in store if he continues on this path.” - Mr Titus Wong

Fulfilling a Lifelong Dream

In 2011, I heard about the Equestrian CCA for the first time. Instantly, I knew it was for me. I had always dreamt about riding horses and these amazing creatures had always enthralled me. Naturally, I signed up almost immediately.

Till now, I still remember how nervous I was during the first few lessons, constantly worrying over “What if something goes wrong? What if I don’t do it correctly? What if...” However, over the following few weeks of horse riding lessons, I felt much more comfortable being around the horses, until they released the lead.

My confidence level dropped to -10. Again, after a few more lessons, I realised, “Hey, it’s all about control! Cool! I can do this!” Over time, my skills improved and very soon my confidence level had risen to 10 upon 15. With new confidence, I found myself laughing at how I used to worry over minor challenges.

Since then, I have looked forward to every riding session and would always be in the best of mood. Despite that, what is life if there are no mistakes here and there? My aim is to correct those mistakes, which only practice would help make possible. As I overcame some of those obstacles, my confidence level rose and riding became a source of tremendous joy.

In 2012, I was promoted to level 2. *Oh help.* Walking nearer to the arena, I felt nervous once again. However, things turned out not quite as bad as I had feared. Needless to say, I was glad that I could finally ride after such a long term break. Trotting came after that.

How am I ever... Wait! I shall try trotting before making up my mind. Isn't that what I have learned all along? I know how to steer, brake and get the horse going. Why was I scared? It looks pretty safe anyway... okay... I will give it a try.

At first, I felt awkward and had a lot of “Ahh” and “Oh no” moments. I thought I would not be able to do it, not in a short period of time anyway but I kept trying to master trotting. Before I knew it, I was proudly trotting away.

During heavy rain sessions, lessons might not go well because the loud booming thunder frightens the horses. However, there was a horse named Rocket that was quite calm. For that special lesson, we had lungeing (one-to-one) and we practised on Rocket because the other horses were quite shaken. It was a terrible storm and one horse even bucked my friend off and ran around the arena till it got all tangled up in the reins before it stopped.

During jumping sessions, we had to trot and go over low bars, it was awesome! That was my first time cantering on a horse named Gefro and it was perfect. When we were cantering, I felt like I was flying with the strong wind blowing around me! It was fun. However, while I tried to canter during the second session, it turned out to be disastrous. I nearly fell off Gefro as I had forgotten to keep my legs tight and it went flying in all directions. Gefro was a very sensitive horse, he did not like his forehead and top neck being touched and I did exactly what he didn’t like. When the horse handler tried to put the reins on before I had to lead Gefro to the arena, he accidentally touched its top forehead and Gefro went berserk. I let go of the main leading rope and he ended up dragging me a little with him. I apologised to Gefro and after that, he became extremely alert at all times which got me really worried. Thinking back now, I guess I should have trusted Gefro and believe in myself since I know Gefro quite well. Fortunately, I did a perfect canter for that day’s session as I rode with confidence.

While riding on the horse Annabel, I had to remember to give her a good pat and praise. We practised our two-point turn and standing up with our butts in the air and going through a tunnel. It was weird and hard to balance at first but I knew I would soon get the hang of it. It felt like I was hovering just above the saddle. We tried to do that while cantering. It was indeed work in progress as I unceremoniously fell off the horse. I was shocked and it really hurt. I held on to Annabel’s rein after that and yelped but she ran off, behind another horse named Cody. Her reaction was really amusing because she thought she was going to be in trouble. Actually, it was my fault that I fell, not hers. She had a quick change of direction and that caught me off guard. I got back up and carried on.

In 2013, during the first session of the year, I rode on my lovely horse, Gefro. Despite my misgivings that I had not been riding for a few months, thankfully Gefro was used to me and vice versa. Although I knew I was not as good as before, the moment I started on Gefro, I knew I was ready. It felt so right.

However, the more we progress, the harder things become. Sometimes the horses get bigger even as we grow taller, which means more control is required. Once, Speargrass (horse) “bullied” me because he was probably grumpy. From this, we learn that horses have feelings. As we ride them regularly, we also learn how to figure out the horses’ feelings by observing their ears and movements. A pat might cheer them up sometimes. Slowly we pick up and learn different riding styles that we could apply while the horses walk, trot or canter.

Although I have this constant fear of cantering, I learned how to brush the fear aside. I would always give it a go whenever I have the chance or being asked to do so. I love being close to the horses. I wish I can bond with them more. I can't wait for the next session. Horse riding is AWESOME.

Clarissa Foong Wen Hui
Secondary 3C

From Flawed to Fabulous

When I first stepped inside the Art Studio in Shuqun Secondary School in 2010, I thought that Art was just a lesson where we draw and doodle. Since I could not differentiate colours well due to my medical condition, I did not really bother much about Art.

As the months passed, I learned about the building blocks of Art and learned to appreciate it even more. Although I learned new skills in my first year, I considered myself just a seedling waiting to absorb more knowledge. The second year came and it dawned on me that Art had suddenly become more challenging as our Art teacher, Mr Faizal, introduced new mediums, designs and approaches in making Art to us.

I had a hard time just trying to keep up the pace. Then, we were given an assignment. We had to bring a picture that represented us and draw it out based on our own interpretation. I was clueless as to what to do with the picture that I had selected: a silhouette of Sherlock Holmes. He represented me - a person who loved to poke around, in a quest to search for more information. I went to Mr Faizal for help and told him about my condition (colour vision deficiency) and my fear of making Art as it mainly involved colours to express oneself. He did not show any sign of surprise. Instead of telling me that my condition would hinder my progress in Art, he told me to embrace it and use it so that others can experience the world from my perspective – one who sees the world in different lights. Surprisingly, I received a high grade for that assignment but deep in my heart, I was just glad I was able to make it through.

In Secondary 3, I chose Art as my Elective subject because it was the single subject in which I could express my emotions in a positive way, be it anger or happiness. That year, one of our assignments was to conceptualise murals for our school. I did not think that my work would be good enough to be selected to be a part of the finalized murals but it did. Students whose murals were selected were also given an opportunity to learn a new medium – graffiti. This allowed me to attain new skills that further developed my interest in Art. One of our trainers, Mr Iman, liked the way I approach the medium and the way I used colours so he invited me to a 24-hour Art Boot Camp Audition @ Little Arts Academy as they were looking for new talents. We had to produce an artwork based on the theme 'Splash' in 24 hours. Just like the conceptualisation lessons in school in which we had to share our ideas through presentations, the boot camp too required us to place our artworks together to make one big piece. My work was selected by Mr Bryan Gothong Tan, a local visual artist and I was eventually accepted into the Little Arts Academy.

My joy and jubilation were beyond words and I immediately informed my parents. What made it more special was that I would be given the opportunity to be mentored by famous local artists for 3 years, all fully funded. I felt truly blessed.

Under the mentorship programme, my interest in art flourished and it had allowed me the opportunity to confidently explore new things. Together with the encouragement that I had from my teachers in school and the exposure at the academy, I had my first exhibition at the Artshouse in January 2013.

Matin Safwan Lee
Secondary 45

Strategic Presentation Skills Course @ Republic Polytechnic

The five days of Strategic Presentation Skills for the Advance Elective Module (AEM) that I attended at Republic Polytechnic was very meaningful. The experience was valuable and if I had a chance to experience it again, I would definitely go for it regardless of the cost.

This communication course was useful because we had the opportunity to communicate with other people, be it adults or peers every day. It is particularly beneficial to the Student Councillors as it helps us to interact better with visitors to the school such as parents, overseas students or teachers. This in turn helps us carry a more positive image of the Student Councillors hosting guests visiting Shuqun Secondary. Furthermore, it will definitely help us during class presentations, interviews, or even as emcees for school events. I will definitely consider applying for this course when I choose my pre-university education.

Not only did this course bring us many new insights regarding communication, it also allowed bonding among the Student Councillors who attended the course. Previously, we did not really have time during meetings to interact, especially between senior and junior Student Councillors. However, being 'stuck' together for five whole days has brought us closer as we took this rare opportunity to interact with one another. The Project Based Learning (PBL) was enjoyable too as it allowed us more freedom in learning and we could easily practise what we had learnt during the hands-on sessions. There were also many games and breaks to help us 'digest' what we had learnt. The games were practical and related to our topics of interest.

Besides the practical skills learnt, one of my most enjoyable memories of Republic Polytechnic was, of course, the food. With three different canteens and four eateries, I could not complete trying all of them out. As such, we had to ask our trainer for recommendations for the best food on campus. When we left, the one thing that everybody could agree on was that we would surely miss the food; especially the waffles which had the longest queue but the wait was well worth it. It made my mouth water just reminiscing about the waffles that were crispy on the outside, and warm and fluffy on the inside. We were spoilt for choice with the variety of toppings that were available such as peanut and maple syrup or chocolate with Oreo.

In conclusion, it was a very meaningful and enjoyable experience that had certainly broadened our horizons and would be beneficial to our future.

Zoe Kng Bao Lin
Secondary 4D

Shuqun School Jacket

It all started when I was in one of my Science classes. There I was, sitting there quietly, listening to my Sec 2 Form Teacher, Ms See, when suddenly I heard a commotion behind me. I turned around and my best friend, Nurul Ain, said that her skirt was untidy and it was hard to keep it straight. That sparked an idea – I could design a new school uniform to delight everyone. Initially I thought it was a crazy idea but I decided to give it a try anyway.

I worked with my friends, Melisa and Ain, and within an hour, a preliminary design was completed. I showed it to Ms See and asked if she could pass it to our Principal, Mr Chia. Instead of passing the design to Mr Chia, our Form Teacher brought us straight down to the General Office so we could present our idea and design personally to Mr Chia.

I was surprised and nervous at the same time, thinking that it was a bad idea, trying to change the uniform and all. Unsurprisingly, our proposal to Mr Chia was rejected because it would take a few years before the design can be approved and changes can be made. I was upset at first but I thought I should learn to take rejections in my stride; it was a learning process anyway.

A few weeks later, Mr Chia came to me, asking if I would like to design a school jacket instead. I felt honoured to have been given the opportunity to create something for everyone in the school after being rejected initially. Designing a jacket was not a bad idea at all.

We all love wearing jackets. Every time when it rained, I noticed how colourful Shuqun Secondary School became. I could see students wearing different types of jackets in all shades of colours conceivable. During field trips and overseas learning journeys, we would wear jackets of different colours and designs, confusing the teachers whenever they had to look for the students.

Later, it dawned on me too that this myriad of colours meant expensive jackets and would take a student like me a long time of saving and scrimping before I could afford to buy one. Apart from the price which could burn a sizeable hole in our pockets, these jackets could also get my Shuqunites into trouble with the school's Discipline Masters. We either had to remove our jackets or risk getting an earful from them.

Thus, I sat down with my friends and asked for their opinions about the colours and designs that they want to see in the jacket. Most of them gave me helpful ideas and I managed to come up with a few designs for the jacket. To get a further and deeper input from other Shuqunites, I also uploaded the initial designs on my Facebook account and asked them to vote for their favourite design.

A few weeks later, with a design in mind, I sought the assistance of Mr Faizal, who helped further refine the design before it was finally confirmed by Mr Chia and sent for production. It had to go through a few rounds of inspection for quality control and we had to wait for months before the jacket supplier could come up with one that we really like. The wait almost killed me.

When the jacket arrived, I was so happy. The jacket turned out better than we had expected. It was first sold during the school's CCA Fair at the start of the year. I saw our Vice-Principal Mr Siva buying it and putting it on that day. I was so glad that he liked it. The jacket was sold for \$30 and the proceeds went to the school's Needy Student Fund. I was the happiest person alive on that day, seeing people smiling and wearing the jacket that I had designed. Thank you Mr Chia, Mr Faizal and those who have helped me.

Nur Sarah Bte Ahmad
Secondary 3B

Voices of Shuqun Cabin Club

“Life was boring before the Cabin Club. My group of friends and I were regulars at IMM or Jurong Point shopping centres; often doing nothing but wasting time and just hanging out. I would also spend a lot of time playing basketball outside the school at the nearby basketball courts. After the Cabin Club was set up, we finally had a proper place to go to after school together. However, setting up the Cabin for the school was a tedious process and we even had to take up training courses to better serve the visitors of the Cabin. Eventually it was all worth it. We had a lot of fond memories such as going fishing and prawning together as a CCA group. There were also a lot of other events that we were very proud of. Cabin had made a big impact in my secondary school life and I believe it would do the same for many other Shuqunites!” - **Brandon Chong, Secondary 5A (2012)**

“The Cabin was a place for me to make better use of my time. Before the start of the Cabin, I would just hang around the school, go to my friend’s homes or visit the nearest shopping malls. I did not join any other CCA as none of the CCA interested me. After the Cabin Club started, we had a place to spend time and to do our Design and Technology (D & T) coursework. It was very good as I did not have to find a place to go to after school. It was always the Cabin where I can spend my time at. By spending a lot of time together in that ‘home’, I grew closer to the rest of my friends. Together, we hosted a lot of events and managed to get a lot of students in the school to frequent the Cabin. Even during the study break before our GCE O-Level examinations, we all studied together in the Cabin with the help of the teachers who used the place as a venue to conduct remedial and consultation sessions for us. Now that we had graduated from the school, we would not forget the Cabin Club and would always come back to help out frequently.” - **Haw Jin Yao, Secondary 5A (2012)**

“My Secondary School life in Shuqun Secondary School was filled with excitement after I joined the Cabin Club as a member. My life before that was never so fun. Before the opening of the Cabin, I had always spent my time outside, walking around the neighbourhood and hanging out at the void decks of the HDB blocks. Back then, I was also not a responsible person who always refused to carry out the tasks assigned by the teachers and pushing responsibilities to others around me. When things went wrong, I also had the tendency to put the blame on others. I had also never attended my CCA back then (Wushu). Initially, I was reluctant to join the Cabin but I was made to join the Club because I did not have an active CCA. Fortunately, my life took a complete turn after I joined the Cabin Club. After I started taking part in the Cabin activities, I realised that it was more than a CCA that required me to sit around and do nothing. There were duties and responsibilities assigned to the members and we had to do many things and interact with many visitors. Soon, I started to enjoy my time there. I popped by The Hideout every day after school even when I was not on duty! I started to learn to be more responsible, especially after earning the recognition from the teachers for the good work I had completed. When I left Shuqun Sec and sadly, the Cabin Club, I brought with me many happy memories and lessons learnt. I learnt to be a better person and see the abilities within me. I learnt about my leadership potential. I will bring these qualities and lessons learnt with me as I move on to the next stage of my school life.” - **Justin Gan Kok Weng, Secondary 42 (2012)**

“I was the leader of the dance group in Shuqun called the ‘MaskYEEZ’. We participated in the Cabin-Got-Talent Talentime in 2012 and we went on to win the competition in the school. We were very proud to represent Shuqun Secondary School in the Cabin-Superstar competition. Even though we did not win the competition, we were very glad that we had won the crowd. I am glad that the school gave us the chance to compete in the competition as we were able to learn important lessons and made a few new friends in the process.” – **Richard Khant Nyar Hein, Secondary 4A**

The Push Cart Project

When I first joined the push cart project, the only thing I had in mind was that I would be doing it with my friends. However, I realized later that it would be something more.

Along the way, we had to overcome some obstacles. Luckily, we had our friends and teachers to help and guide us. In addition, we had to learn the proper way to use the tools as it would affect our end product and compromise our safety. Other than that, the values of perseverance and determination formed part of our learning journey.

It was a long process and took us a few weeks to complete everything. Occasionally, we entertained the notion of giving up but after looking at our half-completed project, a feeling of self-satisfaction would overwhelm us and put a stop to our negative thoughts.

Though we grumbled and moaned, we still managed to finish everything on time. It was a meaningful project filled with joy and laughter. It was tiring but worth every bit of the effort. Above all, we created wonderful and unforgettable memories for ourselves.

Adeline Chiang
Secondary 3C

Nurturing Learners

Principal's Address at Teachers' Day Dinner 2012

Good evening everyone. It is good to see all of you today.

I will get to the teachers. You are the VIPs here today. But first of all I would like to thank everyone who made this possible.

Thank you to the SAC for donating generously for the dinner today. When I asked (SAC Chairman) Mr Desmond Chin a few months ago, he told me "of course, it is expected!" He said that it was the least they could do for all the teachers. Thank you for believing in us and what we are doing for the students.

I would also like to take the opportunity to welcome 2 new SAC members with us. The first is Mr Jeremy Ong, our ex-student who had been donating towards the character award for N(T) students since he left Shuqun. Many of you know him. Unfortunately he cannot be with us today.

The next is Mr Tan Kok Yam. He is currently Deputy Director (Personnel Policy) at the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF). We would like to welcome them into the Shuqun family.

I would also like to mention the kind donations for the lucky draw prizes made by the Shuqun alumni and the Shuqun Parents Association. Thank you to Mr Samy who has kindly joined us today to represent SPA.

I would like to thank the SWC, for planning this event. I know that I gave them a lot of headaches when I told them that I would like it to be an outside dinner this year. To the rest of the staff, thank you for taking the time away from your families to be here tonight. I know that it is a sacrifice; I have a wife and 3 young children waiting at home. Tomorrow is also a school day. But I think it is really important to celebrate Teachers' Day together as a school.

More importantly, when we close the school, we can come together to show our appreciation for our adjunct teachers and support staff. They are very important people who make our work possible, but we do not have a chance to thank them in our busy-ness. You all know our contract and flexi-adjuncts who have been with us for a long time – Mr Loh Ai, Shanmugan, Mdm Wong, Mrs Koh, Mr John Paul Low, Peter Yuen and Rebekah. There are 2 more flexi adjunct teachers who have been quietly helping us whom many of you might not have met before. First Teresa, our ex-teacher who has been coming back to help our IS students with English 2 days of the week. Secondly, Win Hon, who has been working with Kok Boon and Esther to come up with the lesson packages in Cyberwellness and CME.

Our OMs, office staff, SDOs, OSOs as well as Amirah, Lay Hwa, Selvan, Jovert, Sathi who are able to join us today. Thank you. We appreciate all the work that you help us do everyday: the advice and help that you give to us on administrative and financial matters, the last minute printing requests, the IT and portal support. Let us not take this for granted. Only in Shuqun do you get the Shuqun postal service - Cindy, Ah Chu or Mdm Chong delivering correspondence from the staff room to my office or the VPs' office and vice versa. The OSOs lay out the tables in the hall for Prelim 2 today, stack them up for the Teachers Day concert tomorrow, and lay them out again on Fri afternoon for the N level exams, all with great willingness and cheerfulness.

We have our security guards Mr Chin and Mr Ishack with us as well, who changed security companies to stay with the school. I will tell you one story about Mr Chin. At the start of this term I was standing at the school gate in the afternoon when a group of 3 Shuqun boys were leaving the school. They waved to Mr Chin and said "bye bye Uncle", but did not say anything to me even though the principal was standing next to him. This is quite amazing. It shows the kind of bonds that the security guards have built up with the students. Long after they have forgotten me, the students will remember the security guards.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the VIPs, you the teachers and the AEDs. I shared a story about what happened last year at the Open House, when (ex-principal) Mr Adolphus Tan told the new parents that I was taking over. I have the misfortune of being nowhere as handsome or as accomplished looking as him. The parents were of course worried. But I told them that while the leadership might change, the Shuqun teachers will not change. And it is the teachers who spend most of the time and have the biggest influence on their children.

I am very proud that this year whenever a parent brings a complaint to me, I can tell them with confidence that I never doubt the intent of my teachers, that you have the well-being of the children at heart. Yes, we can disagree on the methods; we can always improve our processes. But we have ex-lawyers and ex-engineers among us who became teachers. We have teachers with very rich spouses who can afford not to work. Some of you have given up the chance to teach in brand-name schools to teach at Shuqun.

An NIE lecturer shared at DOS meeting recently about an ethnographic study that they did with a number of teachers. They said that most teachers split their work into 4 types. Work that had little meaning and was not mandated, they called it

“distraction”. Work that had no meaning but was mandated, they saw it as part of the “job”. Work that had meaning and was mandated, they saw it as part of their teaching “career”. But work that had meaning but was not mandated, they saw it as part of how they saw teaching as a “calling”.

Teaching is different, and teachers are special. When you go the extra mile for your kids, you are seeing teaching not just simply as a job or a career, but as a calling. Some of you text me at 11.30pm to tell me that you have just finished a home visit; the latest time I received an sms is 1.30am, from a police station. That is teaching as calling. When I go down to visit a child at hospital, IMH, or a parents’ wake and see a whole group of Shuqun teachers that is calling. When you go down to a cemetery to hunt for where a child’s family has been putting up illegally, that is calling. Some of you give daily pocket money to help students who do not have food at home, or pay in advance for a volleyball coaching trip, that too is calling. Our teachers do not have to be rich, but they cannot afford to be poor.

When you give up your protected time to bring the students on an overseas CCA trip that is calling. When you give extra remedials at night and on Saturdays, and call students repeatedly who do not turn up, and wait until the very last minute before you submit the students’ coursework, that is calling. When you give a student “last chance” after “last chance”, and still welcomes a child back after she has screamed vulgarities at you, scratched you, hit you and broken your heart repeatedly, that is teaching as calling.

All the above are true stories, stories that happened in Shuqun, although I have not revealed any names. The non-educators here today must be thinking by now – why do we do it? We must be crazy. There is no guarantee that we will be thanked, or that your performance ranking will go up. Instead we can be sure that we will be poorer, more tired and sometimes, for good measure, scolded by unappreciative parents. But we do it because we believe in our students, that somehow in some ways we can give them hope and turn them around even when they themselves have given up. Someone once said that giving H-O-P-E means Help One Person Escape. Every Shuqunite is precious to us. We believe that even if we can just help one child escape from the cycle of failure, of neglect or of poverty, it is worth it.

In ending, I would just like to encourage us to continue to keep our eyes on our mission, and why we chose to become teachers in the first place. Once you lose sight of the mission, it is very easy for what we do because of “calling” to become “distractions”, and for petty quarrels and concerns to start coming in. It is only because we share a common mission of helping our kids, that we overcome our differences and work together towards a common goal. I am sure that it is only because we agree with the mission that you put up with me and all the work I have to give you. Our satisfaction comes when our students respond, learn, and succeed in the future.

Enjoy the food and the company. Thank you.

Mr Chia Hai Siang
Principal

Worth More Than a Gold Bar

My first experience with the school's Equestrian CCA was to take a group of 8 students from the Normal Technical stream to a horse riding lesson in 2009. All the students were excited but scared to death as they all had no idea what to expect. This group of students all experienced personal issues such as low self-esteem and no confidence.

It was a challenge at first in terms of encouraging them to hang on till the end of the session. Some were so scared that they were reluctant to go near the horses as they were so huge. Some were very worried that they might fall off the horse when riding it. During the first session, some students refused to cooperate with the trainer. However, after a few sessions, the students looked forward to the session and wanted to ride the horses as they got to know the horses better by their names, characters, moods, habits and preferences.

There would always be surprises in every session for the students which would get them talking about their experiences with their horses and coach after the session that day, on the way back to school and the next few days to come. The students would share with their friends, classmates and family. As the students become more confident, they are able to express themselves better. Their self-esteem was boosted. They have more courage when faced with challenges. They are also more patient and gentle in their mannerism. I felt sad at the same time as this group of students would only get to ride for a year since this is a special programme for them that last only for a year.

One particular student stood out amongst the rest as he was the only boy who on his first day did not have a pair of trousers because he had no money to buy one. Due to that, he could not ride on that day; he was so devastated and his face was filled with disappointment. We found out about this and quickly acquired a pair of trousers for him by his next session. He was very delighted he could ride on his favourite white horse "Snowy". He told us he was so happy he was "flying above the clouds". He could not believe and never dreamt that he would ever have the opportunity to ride on a horse. During the entire session, he was overjoyed; jumping and laughing just as the horse approached. Throughout the whole session, he beamed widely. Due to some illnesses, the same boy passed away in 2009.

In 2011 I was assigned again to horse riding with only 2 members. I gladly accepted the task. These 2 students had been riding for the past two years. Both students were very passionate about horses and loved this programme. No matter how tired they were or whether they were injured, they would still attend the session. Their attendance was consistently 100%. Their attitude was very positive and I could feel their passion for the horses. Spending time with them, bringing them to the sessions and back provided me the opportunity to get to know them better and listen to their experience during the training sessions. We saw the benefits that students could acquire through equestrian. After experiencing all these, I felt that it would be great if more students could benefit from this program.

In 2012, after working hard with various parties, we managed to recruit more students for horse riding and stable management. We had a hard time selecting students for these activities as there were strict restrictions, and of course the issue of students' safety and interest. Towards the end of 2012, Equestrian officially became a school CCA. There are only 16 schools throughout Singapore that had been specially selected to set up Equestrian Clubs as their CCA. Shuqun is one of the schools and we are privileged to have the opportunity to develop this special connection with the horses. Both students and teachers worked together to design our own Equestrian shirt, set up the committee and our year plan.

The students shared many special moments with the horses such as how they had to speak gently while patting the horses before taking a canter. The students had to ride with proper posture so that the horse would sense their confidence and not get confused by their mixed signals. The students also learned about patience, consideration for others and they became better listeners. It is very challenging to guide a horse to do our bidding, because some horses are strong-minded.

In stable management, the students learned to groom and take care of the needs of different horses. Skills such as combing out the tangles from the mane and tail, clearing the poops and urine and using the hoof picks to scrape off the mud from the hooves of the horses. The students who had never cleaned any toilet or performed any sort of house work learned all the tricks and willingly completed all the chores. The students are constantly reminded to be careful about the position they take in the stable and at times they needed to calm the horse adequately so that the horse would not kick them using its powerful hind legs. One blow from those legs could prove deadly. Of course the students had to watch out for the horse dung. Some parents did not support their children's decision to join equestrian as they preferred their children to join a more glamorous uniform group. As such, the students had to overcome this struggle.

The students have to overcome many challenges along the way. However, I am very proud of their achievements. Every session is a golden opportunity for me to witness the students' joy and that cannot be exchanged even with a gold bar.

Louisa Ho Sue Cheng
Allied Educator (2008 - present)

Biz Club

"I don't believe you have to be better than everybody else. I believe you have to be better than you ever thought you could be." That was the opening statement I expressed to my Biz club girls when I was first appointed as the teacher in-charge. Incidentally, that was the very same quote that my teacher way back in Secondary School used to tell me. Battling to please others and striving to compete with those around them were the main sources of unhappiness that I first saw in my Biz Club students (fondly known as my girls).

In the midst of trying to find a way to bond with and unite the girls, due to their varied backgrounds, I battled with my own search for identity as a teacher and making a difference and apparent change to the Club. Mahatma Gandhi once said, *"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."* There I was; throwing myself out in the sea to be fed to the "sharks", but till today, never once have I regretted my trials and errors in organising diverse activities for the girls and at the same time experienced many teachable moments with them in Biz Club.

To tell the truth, I panicked when I was first told to take care of this brand new CCA. This was perhaps because there were no concrete expectations or activities that were assigned to the programme. However, knowing that I would be dealing with at-risk girls, I comforted myself that the girls were in this programme for a reason. They needed much help in many areas especially their low self-esteem and inability to make wise decisions in life. There were no other CCAs or programmes in school that could better cater to their needs. Therefore, it was up to me to create meaningful activities to enrich their experience in the CCA.

In addition, teachers in this programme, Ms Thila and me, have a huge role to play - to change the girls' mindset and to instil a positive attitude towards life. I believe that they all have tremendous potential and these should be harnessed into actions and achieve some tangible desired outcome. However, the one thing that determines the level of their potential was their ATTITUDE. Eventually, the girls learned that having the right attitude was the prerequisite to success and happiness in life.

The Biz Club girls have found their niche in being involved and engaged in small Entrepreneurship and Business-Innovation activities in school. In 2012, I combined kite-flying with art-making to make the sessions with the Biz Club girls more interesting. I had to develop unconventional approaches to find the girl's hidden talent. Every session became precious moments to the Biz Club girls and their attendance was constant. The regular meetings every Wednesday allow them to meet, exchange news and expertise, and learn something new in the company of their trusted peers. The girls created souvenirs and gifts for many school events such as the Official School Opening cum Speech Day in 2012, Teacher's Day Celebration and Normal Technical Showcase Day. The girls also set up a photo-taking booth for the school's Graduation Day and their efforts certainly made the event more memorable for the graduands.

There had been some occasions when some girls would display signs of inappropriate values or behaviour, and that became the opportune moment for the teachers to intervene and support the practice of character building, benefitting the rest of the Biz Club members too. More often than not, the other members would motivate and encourage one another of their own accord.

The Biz club girls had the opportunity to experience and attend a course on Entrepreneurship Programmes at Republic Polytechnic (RP) which aims to facilitate their learning via various authentic learning platforms. The girls even set up their first Push-cart business in RP which allowed them to experience tapping on each member's expertise, assigning responsibilities, proposing ideas on sale items, compiling simple business plan by consolidating what they have learnt and preparing the necessary materials needed to start their pushcart business. The pushcart venture was such a great success that the Design & Technology (D&T) department designed and constructed a pushcart for the Biz Club for future sale events. The girls had the opportunity to use it to sell the Official School Jacket which was launched earlier this year.

In order to equip them with the necessary skills to publish their retail and entrepreneurship experience, I conducted a basic Photoshop workshop for the Biz Club girls and allowed them to explore and attempt designing brochures, personal tags, cards and even event stickers.

The Biz Club girls have benefitted not only in terms of the skills and knowledge acquired for Entrepreneurship Programmes but also in areas such as character building and teamwork. The Biz Club may not be perfect on many fronts, but perfection is definitely not what the girls are aiming for.

In a nutshell, when you have the right attitude, you can do the most remarkable job and make the impossible change in someone else and yourself.

Ms Izyan Ismail
Shuqun Teacher (2012 – present)

Football Plus as a Source of Motivation

Football continues to be the most popular sport in the world. In an effort to align with Ministry of Education's drive to instil values and character in schools, Shuqun Secondary has engaged the services of Football Plus Academy as part of the Shuqun Sec's Cabin Hideout Initiative. Shuqun Football Plus champions and believes in inculcating values through football. The school intends to use Soccer as a vehicle to develop character amongst its players and aims to inspire and motivate Shuqunites through values that can be taught and modelled during football training.

The Football Plus programme was launched as part of a befriending character development programme that is also an after-school enrichment activity comprising soccer clinics and games. It has kept students meaningfully occupied by pursuing their interests and honing their skills at the same time. To date, Football Plus' membership has grown steadily for both the boys and girls teams.

Shuqun's participation in the B Division Soccer Tournament was after a hiatus of almost ten years. A team of 19 boys were selected to represent the school. It was impressed on the boys that participation was strictly conditional and they must adhere to the school's 5As Discipline framework both in the classroom and in their own CCAs. Hence, they could only join this CCA if they were able to meet these expectations both in their lessons and CCAs. To be able to don the soccer jerseys and represent the school became the most powerful incentive and motivation for these boys. They treated Football like their unofficial second CCA. From the school's perspective, it allows soccer to be better recognized as a sport that continues to be widely popular, especially amongst the boys, in the school. As a result of the conditional participation, most of the boys have displayed positive attitudes both on and off the field.

Though put together barely days before the tournament started, the boys performed considerably well largely due to the support of the school leaders and teachers. Shuqun's Soccer team received a big boost this year as the school won the 7-A-Side Soccer Carnival Plate tournament in 2012, prevailing over stronger opponents.

One of the more outstanding players is Anis Dani from Secondary 43. Anis is the Chairperson of his class and also the Vice-Captain of the team. He has played in all the games as he has fulfilled his responsibilities and met expectations set for him both in the classroom and his CCA, Volleyball. He has always been able to follow and carry out instructions well. He is often focused and shows initiative to help the teachers and his peers.

Like most boys, Anis loves to play soccer. He shows good ability and competency in the position he plays. These are the main reasons why he was selected for the B Division tournament in 2013. With his competency to lead through his capability and understanding of the game, it was no surprise that he was chosen by the team as the Vice-Captain. He also shows exemplary behaviour and character through his voluntary work with the Taman Jurong Residents Constituency under the Youth Chapter.

Mr Faizal Bohari
Teacher (2010 – present)

A New Vision

As I drove into the Shuqun school building, I saw red letters tucked under the wing on the left. I couldn't quite make them out from afar but as I got closer, I smiled. They read: *Touching Hearts, Inspiring Learning*. Those four words caught my eye and I thought to myself, that's a high call. I had just returned from a year-long fellowship with the Mexican Ministry of Education strategy team, transforming teaching and learning through a pedagogy called Tutorial Relationships and I knew how powerful inspiring learning can be but also how tough it would be to achieve. *Touching lives* was already difficult but to *inspire learning* in a climate of tough competition, exam stress and homework and more homework, inspiring learning is often only a faraway dream that just sounds good.

However, within Shuqun's walls, I found a team that truly wanted their students to love to learn. Working closely with the Allied Educators like Mr Iqbal, Ms Thila and in the Maths department with Mrs Liang Mei Xuan, and in the Art department with Mdm Rafilah and Mr Faizal, I saw a deep consciousness and hunger to be better, to learn more and to inspire. I saw a longing to bring learning from good to great. At the start of Jan 2013, we set out on this common vision to see how we could inspire learning at Shuqun Sec in the Maths and Art lessons for students in the Normal Technical (NT) stream.

Using the Tutorial Relationships pedagogy, we conduct lessons where one-to-one teaching is possible in the classroom. And where does the teaching force come from? From inside the classroom itself. Embedded into our lessons, the students are trained to question and think like teachers. They are armed with the tools to successfully reason through a learning project and they have to explain the process of arriving at their answer or outcome. In Maths, students after working with an expert (someone who has already gone through the same process and in this case, the teacher) in a learning project or "Challenge", reflect on their learning process and then convert into the tutor of that same challenge until the person they tutor also becomes qualified to tutor as well. In this way, the number of potential "teachers" in the class grows exponentially as more students learn more from these learning projects than they can offer to someone else.

We tried this in Fractions in Maths and Sculpture in Art and personally, I didn't know what to expect but I knew I would always be surprised by the abilities of our students when we give them a real opportunity to teach and when we truly believe they can.

That week, to be honest was a lot of ups and downs, trying to modify the lessons as we go, provisioning materials, trying to get students used to the idea of tutoring, guiding them and learning a lot myself. On our second day working in this method, the students slowly adapted to their new roles as tutors in class and two examples came to mind and kept me energized as a vision for what is possible.

The first was a student Swee Kiang (not his real name) who was bright but lazy, a little sluggish in his work and responsibilities. He adapted only a little to it and found writing down and explaining his work tedious. He finished quickly and when he was done, sat next to another student, Darren (not his real name) who was a little slower than him. Darren was still stuck in the concept of equivalent fractions. *What are equivalent fractions?* I prodded. *Don't know.* Suddenly Swee Kiang's eyes lighted up. *Ms Meixi, can I give him some examples to help him?* I was astounded. *Yes, of course.* I let Swee Kiang take over. That was a 'WOW' moment for me as I saw the students thinking differently, being conscious of the other, sharing knowledge and taking initiative – that's a beautiful classroom.

The second story is about another student Zima (not her real name) who was conceptually weak in Mathematics, very quiet, always seemingly lost in class. Zima at the thought of tutoring someone else, was a little nervous and afraid. However Mrs Liang guided her along her role as a tutor and slowly she began to open up. I saw her and her tutee from across the room and that was a snapshot moment for me. She became a different person, was patient, was conscious of everything her tutee was doing and I think in that lesson, grew more confident of her own abilities as a student.

That's the kind of change I believe is possible for our students, that they are inspired to think critically and develop a hunger and curiosity to learn, that through learning *how* to learn, self-direct their learning process for life. Learning is driven from within the classroom as the joy of discovering fractions and sculpturing in art and responsibility to learn for not just themselves but their fellow classmates are placed in their hands. We create a different fabric in the classrooms, a different kind of relationship where students begin to be concerned for the other, where competition is replaced with collaboration, a new social order where it is in sharing that we improve and excel. Of course, we still have a lot to learn, refining our work each time but the teachers and students here at Shuqun have given me a new vision of what is possible in education in Singapore and I do believe we are slowly getting there.

Ng MeiXi

Project Leader of Tutorial Relationship Programme

The Fallacy of First Impression

My first impression of Shuqun Secondary School was that it is a notorious school filled with a lot of students who are either gangsters or bullies.

Hence, when I realized that my practicum and final posting was to Shuqun Secondary School, I was devastated with the outcome. My prior (misguided) experience with Shuqun students gave me the impression that they were not ideal students. I had preconceptions that being a teacher in the school would equate to dealing with bad students and therefore it took me awhile to come to terms with the posting.

Coincidentally, the school which I was supposed to work with for my Group Endeavours in Service Learning (GESL) project was Shuqun secondary school. The experience we had with the students was not as positive partly due to the fact that it was a one-day programme with the students. The group of teachers whom I went with had a hard time conducting the activities, and thus it further reinforced my belief that Shuqun Secondary was not a good school.

However, this poor impression drastically changed on the first day of my practicum with the students in the school. As a teacher, I observed and realized that the students in Shuqun are very polite and respectful towards every teacher and adult figure. Students here have a positive relationship with all the adult figures and they would always greet the teachers whenever they walked along the corridors. The students were so much more obedient and well behaved than I had imagined them to be.

Later into my practicum, I got to interact more and learn from the teachers in the school. As time passed, I finally understood why the students were so respectful and loved the school. This love they had for the school was the result of teachers who tirelessly loved, nurtured, cared and taught them every single day in school. The love that the teachers have for the students and the strong support among the teachers in the school made this place a school that touches the heart of the students and a place where learning is inspired by the teachers. The school's vision is to be an inviting school that brings out the best in everyone. I believe that Shuqun has achieved this vision, as it is really an inviting school where the students treat it as their second home. The reason they love school is because they love the teachers, culture and family they have in Shuqun.

Today, as a beginning teacher in Shuqun, I would like to say that I totally love Shuqun and I am proud to be a teacher of Shuqun Secondary! This is my second home. May the people who come to Shuqun experience this second home sensation we all feel in Shuqun Secondary.

Koh CaiHua

Beginning Teacher (2013 – present)

Lessons at the Singapore Turf Club Riding Centre

Students from Shuqun Secondary School started coming to Singapore Turf Club Riding Centre (STCRC) for riding and horse management lessons since 2010. The first group of students began in January 2010, taking the opportunity to learn to ride horses as part of their school's CCA programmes. Since then, the number of students enrolled has grown, with 28 students currently seizing the opportunity to learn about horses. There are two courses that Shuqun students can choose from: to take instructions in riding, or in un-mounted horse and stable management lessons.

Riding classes cover beginners' basics such as safety and fundamental principles of horsemanship. Over the weeks, months or even years, basic foundations are built upon. Students who began in 2010 have developed greatly in experience and skill. Their efforts and dedication have borne considerable and positive results.

Horse and Stable Management classes cover practical aspects of the daily care of horses. Shuqun students have learnt to care for other living beings – horses – to the highest of standards. The students have acquired skills and knowledge that are essential, but far from glamorous. Horses require hard and physical work. The students have to clean out the horse's stables, scrub water and feed buckets and groom horses. Both riders and non-riders are taught how to handle horses safely from the ground and how to fit riding equipment on (or 'tack') the horses.

Aside from the opportunity to learn and experience skills that otherwise may prove difficult to come by in Singapore, the horse riding CCA benefits the students in many other ways. Riding and looking after horses are strenuous activities. The students therefore must develop strength and fitness levels in order to succeed in their tasks. Potentially, dealing with animals can present risks, especially when the animal concerned is perhaps 10 times the weight of the student. As such, the students must master safe practices that require much self-discipline. A disciplined approach learned from working with horses, has wider benefits in all areas of life. Perhaps the most significant developments that can be seen in the students are in the areas of confidence and communication. The students are exposed to non-verbal communication and over time, the students have learnt how to read body language and are conscious of how their own body language would be interpreted by others in turn. Confidence grows in many ways, from the sense of achievement derived from the mastery of a new skill to the relationship the students built with another animal.

All in all, from an instructor's point of view, it is very rewarding to watch the students develop and grow, not only in their riding skills but also in their self-confidence and maturity. With every new group of students, it is a privilege to witness their journey, and the entire team at Singapore Turf Club Riding Centre is proud to be a part of that meaningful and momentous development.

Mr Andrew Dunn

Instructor at Singapore Turf Club Riding Centre

Becoming Men and Women of Character

Having spent 5 years teaching in Shuqun Sec, I have certainly grown as a teacher and as a person. I remember the first week of 2008 most vividly because despite all that I have prepared myself for, I almost threw in the towel after 3 days. Bearing in mind that Shuqun Sec of 5 years ago was teeming with teenage angst, and had disciplinary issues galore; I was clearly out of my depth in dealing with these issues (having been posted to be part of the Discipline Department as my other portfolio besides Humanities). My form class also proved to be challenging, having the usual make-up of troubled teens.

Teaching was a struggle too; having to take over from respected and well-liked teachers didn't help either. Kids naturally did not take to my teachings and there were many a times when I just questioned myself, why should I bother to put in so much efforts into my teaching and learning practices for these kids who gave me the stare, the apathetic look and sheer lack of interest, regardless how much I tried to make the lessons better for them.

So how did I manage to pull through this trying first year? Well, it was made easier with the help of great colleagues, a culture of helping hands in the school and the fact that I finally found meaning in what I was doing as a teacher.

I honestly don't remember being in an environment where people took a genuine interest in really helping the newbie to adjust to the school. I was truly thankful for all the kindness extended to me when I joined Shuqun. Colleagues around me offered all kinds of advice and they shared with me a nugget of truth in handling problematic kids, "Try to understand how they feel before you do anything."

I still remember Mrs. De Silva (Theresa) sharing with me how vexing and tiring teaching these kids could be, but always ending with a chirpy note, "We need to help these kids more because deep down inside, most of them genuinely want to learn but do not know how to go about doing it." Then came Mr. Ismail telling me that these kids sometimes need a listening ear because they are seldom heard. Then came this tall guy telling me, "Hey, you need me to go talk to those kids for you? Just say the word, man, sometimes it's easier to have someone they are familiar with to talk to them." I was glad they had given me good advice and help. It had really enabled me to grow as a teacher.

An incident I recall from my days as a disciplinary teacher was an SMS I received from a student (Earring Boy), "Cher, I think I not coming back to school already. I suspend myself, because I always bring you trouble. I come back, promise you this and that, but always still get into trouble." That really got me thinking that some of these kids really are aware of what's going on. Even the worst of them have some realization of what is right and wrong, though not all can act on them or control themselves. This has somewhat come to shape how I deal with students both in discipline and in teaching: give them the chance and space to prove themselves, you never know, maybe some good can come out of it. This was confirmed very recently when I received a letter from a student who has decided to stop schooling, "I understand why you had to be strict with us, but I also know that you care for your students because of the belief you have in us." Oh and my form class in 2008? I survived them, and every so often, I do see them outside or online and we still shared some great laughs over the silliness that had taken place that year.

I really want to thank Shuqun Sec for these beautiful five years of experience that has enriched me so very much. I would never have experienced so much personal as well as professional growth as a teacher had I not been given the opportunity to serve in this school. The school has become a wonderful place to be at and a wonderful teaching community to be part of. A Master Teacher from the Academy of Singapore Teachers who came to the school remarked, "You know, this place just feels so welcoming, and the students all look so happy. It must be the good things you guys have done here." He took the words right out of my mind in describing how I see the school now and it's a testament of the good work everyone in the school has contributed. I know the school is in good hands and will continue to develop students towards becoming 'men and women of character'.

Royston Low

Subject Head, Humanities (2008 – 2012)

Mr Low is now with the Social Studies Unit at Curriculum Planning & Development Division, Ministry of Education.

Connecting with Others

One of the things that I fondly did and greatly appreciated during my time in Shuqun Sec was reading our Principal, Mr Chia's, weekly reflections. When I read the weekly reflections, I realised how I could connect with others and aspire to achieve the shared objectives.

Reflections present to us the seeds of encouragement, motivation and hopes for a better school community. Through reflections, the Principal serves as a role model of acknowledging everyone's contributions and achievements in realising the school's vision and mission. I find these reflections an important communication channel to help strengthen the school's ethos. Through these reflections, teachers are constantly made aware of how the school leaders value and appreciate the efforts of staff and students in the school community. The positive comments, concise explanations and suggestions contribute significantly to a caring school ethos, and in particular, help us focus on "Touching Hearts and Inspiring Learning". The teachers feel a greater sense of belonging when the school leaders regularly communicate and reflect with earnest on the issues, events, challenges and aspirations of the school. When there is regular communication and a constant flow of ideas, the school will benefit more.

Also, I am inspired by many of our staff's collegial attitude and collaborative efforts to create a school environment where there is empathy and concern, support and encouragement, and the constant sharing of professional ideas and expertise. Collegiality among staff in Shuqun Sec forms the backbone of the school's drive to meet the organisational challenges. The school leaders and the key personnel have also helped to continually provide and strengthen professional development opportunities. The focus on "The Skillful Teacher" is one good example where there is a lot of sharing and exchange of views to enhance teachers' competency level and overall professionalism. One recurring message from the school leaders and key personnel is this: "If you want to do any worthwhile job or programme well, do it with meticulous planning and communication, provide good and timely support through coaching and mentoring, yet set high and realistic expectations".

Vellasamy Rasandran

Head of Department, Staff Development (2011 – 2012)

Mr Rasandran has opted for early retirement from his teaching career and is enjoying his leisure helping out with community work at the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA).

Touched by the Hearts

A school is not a private enterprise where students enter from one end of the production line and come out from the other, with perfect scores and many awards. A school is a place where values are taught, where opportunities for innovation abound, where failure is neither fatal nor final. Shuqun is a school that I have just described.

My most memorable episode at Shuqun was when I was confronted by two Upper Secondary boys along the corridors. They looked too cool to be in school and from their commanding height, they questioned me, "Cher, where you going?" I tried to hide my fluster and hoped that my safety would not be compromised. "Why?" I retorted and glared back at them sternly. "Oh, because we saw you looking at the map and we can help you with directions if you need." This was not the only case of helpfulness I encountered. I was queuing up for food a week later and was reaching out to get my cutlery. I was frustrated that a student was blocking me, and slowly getting her cutlery though it was not even her turn. She picked up two spoons, put back one, and picked up a fork. She then turned to me, personally handed me the cutlery and smiled. I was surprised. I did not even remember her class or her name. Those acts of kindness deeply touched me and showed me that students have the potential to learn, and it is the teacher's belief in students which realize their potentials.

I had the privilege to teach a Sec 1 N(T) class. I was surprised at how interested students were in learning about the history of Singapore. Before I left the class, two memorable episodes happened. The first was that a boy came up to me and asked if I had extra chocolates for his brother and sister after I gave a piece to all students in class. It occurred to me that his family may not be privileged enough to buy chocolates, which is very common, given the fact that more than half the class was under the Financial Assistance Scheme. The second incident was that students knew, at the mention of Hitler, who he was and what he did in great detail. I was impressed as I knew that much only in university. While teaching a class of students who seem disinterested in studies may be challenging, students know when teachers care and would go to great lengths to work for the teacher.

All these make teaching meaningful. Thank you, Shuqun.

I am grateful to Shuqun for the opportunity to do an attachment in the school. Most of my peers would agree that Shuqun is a "heart school" and we all agree that we got more inspired to teach after completing the internship.

I am most thankful for my mentor, Mr Royston Low, for making my internship what it is. The project was important, because it was one which Royston was strongly considering introducing in the following year's work-plan, and I felt a great responsibility to give the best that I could. I had to identify the teachers in-charge of various committees and departments, catch them in the staff room and interview them on the National Education (NE) programmes in their departments, which required me to be very familiar with the NE process in Shuqun Sec. That resulted in me being familiar with what all departments were doing and allowed me to observe what teaching as a profession entails. Royston was also helpful in optimizing my productivity by providing the Optical Answer Sheets (OAS) for my survey, which immensely cut down the time needed to tabulate survey results, and hence gave me more time to do more meaningful tasks. I am also thankful that my mentor tried to answer my never-ending questions even when he *could have* told me that he was busy, would get back to me, and then forgetting to get back to me. That never happened.

Royston was also very helpful in introducing me to experienced teachers. Because of that, I did not hold back in making my requests to teachers to sit in and observe their lessons. I sat in and observed 14 different teachers from English, Science and Humanities Department. The patterns observed amongst various teachers, streams, and students taught me more than I could glean from books. I would not have done that if my mentor was comfortable with me observing just his classes, or if he was too uptight about my project, or if he adopted the mentality that *I am an intern and I should just relax*. (I observed Royston, Ms Maisurah, Mdm Sumiate, Mr Noel Ong, Ms Harliany, Mrs Elsa Quah, Mr Dennis Tham, Ms Louisa, Ms See Ruiyin, Mrs Wee, Mrs Chloe Huang, Mr K.C. Tan, and Mrs Shirin Goh.) I also got to teach 3 classes (five 1-hour lessons) because I asked and Royston arranged for me to take Ms Maisurah and Mdm Sumiate's classes. The teachers first made sure I understood thoroughly what young teachers needed to face the students. However, I saw myself improving and being able to conduct my classes smoothly in Secondary 11, 12, and History lessons with Secondary 33 and 34 combined. Through this, I also found many teachers who were very willing to share with me what they had gone through and how to handle, manage and teach students who are disinterested and sometimes rude.

Last but not least, my mentor took time to share at length with me his insights in his career thus far, which might not have been part of his job scope.

There were also low periods, especially after I taught my first class at Shuqun. I put in immense effort in preparing for the History class I was going to teach to Secondary 33 and 34. I was afraid of my students, and decided to treat them like adults by giving them ample freedom. They were obviously uninterested in my lesson. I felt like I was pleading for their attention throughout the lesson and begging them for a chance to impart to them. In spite of my fear, I maintained a cheerful disposition

throughout the entire class though I felt like a clown with some construction going on outside the window. I was glad that teachers in Shuqun were encouraging towards me and told me that I should focus on improvement and not perfection. I was glad that I managed to move on, and even managed my expectations by seeking improvement and not perfection in my students. The following class I taught was more successful as I got myself together and maintained my no-nonsense countenance. At the end of the internship, students reflected that I was fierce, to which I secretly laughed inside. My Sec 1 students also thanked me and reflected that they learnt a lot from my class, which was heartening to hear.

Guiding my new partner, an overseas scholar, was also challenging. I knew she was more qualified than I. I did not want to appear bossy, yet I did not want her to feel lost. I tried my best but failed to accurately gauge what she knew, what she needed to know and what she needed to find out for herself. In retrospect, I should have directed her to our mentor Royston earlier, who was away on the first week of her attachment. Leading fellow peers is much harder than leading students.

I have a few suggestions on some aspects which Shuqun Sec might have overlooked. First of all, I noted that students in general enjoy Community Involvement Programme (CIP), maybe because they feel important when they are able to serve others. The school has done well in that CIP is always designed such that students can directly help than just raising funds. I think the CIP or Service-Learning (SL) component in Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) can be more centralized to benefit the students. Awards for CIP achievements, such as Southwest CDC YEAH (Community Development Council Youth Excellence Award in the Heartlands) award can be highlighted to teachers, as I realized that CCA teachers make their students go for CIP without knowing the existence of such awards. The school may wish to ask students for reflections on their CIP and SL projects, which I believe that students have a lot to contribute.

Secondly, I feel passionately for students who would like certain CCAs to be introduced in school. I thought that the school may come to a compromise by allowing a certain number of interest groups to be set up every semester provided they find a certain number of interested participants and students are allowed a few avenues to recruit members into the interest group. CCA is one of the best ways which students of different ethnic groups work together and leaders are grown, and since this is part of the school's direction, it may benefit students to a large extent as well as increase the sense of appreciation in students towards the school and staff as they realize the difficulty of coordinating co-curricular activities.

Thirdly, I noted that teachers usually chat amongst themselves during the Reading Period. The school may consider encouraging teachers to bring a book during Reading Period or to chat one-to-one with the students every morning. The students do notice that teachers are chatting while they themselves are not allowed to chat. Alongside, I noted that the National Anthem often fails to play in the Upper Sec assembly. While this may be a minor issue, a smooth assembly can kick-start a positive day. The hiccup could possibly be minimized by finding out what exactly the problem is.

Next, I think many teachers in Shuqun focus on the fact that students come from under-privileged backgrounds. While that is true, I do think that sometimes that is overplayed. After winning the students' hearts which many teachers have already done, teachers may wish to push students, whether Express or N(T), in academic results. I noted that teachers invest lots of effort on getting students back to school and caring for them but sometimes neglect honing their instructional expertise to ensure students are academically stretched. Nonetheless, I am aware this does not apply to all staff of Shuqun and that Shuqun has achieved the Value-Added Award for several years.

The internship at Shuqun was an unforgettable one. I was inspired to see teachers who could talk about students like they were the best students in the world, regardless of their grades. Quoting Steve Jobs, "Love your job, not your company, because your company may not love you back." While (unfortunately!) not all schools have a "heart" culture like Shuqun, Shuqun affirmed my passion in teaching. A school is not a corporation; it is a safe haven for students to grow.

Chen Zhinian

After the completion of her teaching experience at Shuqun Secondary School, Miss Chen Zhinian returned to the National University of Singapore (NUS) to complete her degree in History. After that, she would study for her Post Graduate Diploma in Education at National Institute of Education.

School Attachment Reflections

Whenever I see students greet teachers with warmth and enthusiasm along the corridors each day, my mood at work would be somewhat lifted. The general politeness of the students in Shuqun Secondary is something that struck me as very positive. The Hideout Café was particularly impressive, both in terms of the student-prepared food and the excellent service standards provided by the student waiters. From where I was seated that day, I could hear the students whispering to double confirm and triple check their customers' orders and up till the moment the food was served, everything was done with extra precision and care. It was a really an enjoyable meal.

I like that the school provides a comfortable and welcoming environment for all its students, and from all the small details that I had observed these past few weeks, it is clear that Shuqun is a school that cares. This past month had taught me a lot in both academic and non-academic aspects. Aside from being competent with their content knowledge, a good teacher must also be able to teach his students about 'life' – perhaps a relatively abstract notion, but otherwise excellently espoused in the care and concern shown by the teachers here.

I will work hard to achieve that in the future.

Lastly, thank you Shuqun for giving me a chance to get in touch with the education system again. In particular, I would like to thank the Mother Tongue Language department for all their help and guidance this past month and especially to my mentor Mr Li Yundong.

Hwee Yanne

After the completion of her teaching experience at Shuqun Secondary School, Miss Hwee Yanne returned to the Fudan University to complete her degree in Chinese Language. After that, she would study for her Post Graduate Diploma in Education at National Institute of Education.

Letters for the Principal from Kazan

My name is Liliya Mukhametshina. I am in charge of the International Relations at School No 19, Kazan. We have organised PD courses and sent two teachers to Singapore recently. Thanks to Educare, one of them – Mr Dinar Gabidullin, a Physics teacher, was attached to Shuqun Secondary School for a week.

I would like to thank you and the school for the great hospitality and kindness extended to us. Dinar was excited to learn about the peculiarities of the educational system in Singapore and experience how Physics is being taught in Shuqun Secondary School. He found the time spent in your school highly productive and shared that the staff was extremely friendly and caring. Mr. Tan Thiam Chye's mentorship and professional style of teaching should be mentioned separately, Dinar has learnt a lot!

I hope the attachment to your school didn't bring any trouble and was as fruitful for your school as it was for Dinar. I hope the program would be a good start for further collaboration between our schools if you are interested.

Liliya Mukhametshina

First, I would like to thank you for accepting me at your school and apologize for interrupting the educational process in any way. As a teacher I know what it feels like. However, all these days I had the support of the school and felt at home here. Special thanks to the Principal, Mr Darren Lai and Mr Tan Thiam Chye who helped me.

First of all, I was amazed by the architecture, size and organization of the school classrooms. I like the idea of using all the space in the school for educational purposes: the seats in the hall and the garden and even the students' recreation room – the Cabin. I was also pleasantly surprised to find so many young teachers who are interested and engaged in their work. I believe that effective collaboration with parents is one of the keys to the success of your students. You are on the right way. Keep going! However, I was very surprised to see classes including up to 40 children. We usually have 25 students per class in Russia. So, I think it may be more beneficial for you to use more cooperative learning tools.

Lastly, I want to say... Our school is always open to visitors. So we will be glad to see you in Russia. We are very interested in developing international collaborative projects between your and our students. We believe that it will be a powerful tool of engagement.

Once again, I want to thank you and wish you good luck, with more good students and parents coming your way. Goodbye!

Regards,

***Dinar Gabidullin,
Physics teacher,
gymnasium #19,
Kazan, Tatarstan, Russia.***

Growing with Shuqun

Five years ago, after my eldest son, Chai Leng's PSLE results were released, my husband and I decided that Shuqun Secondary School would be his first choice to continue his education. His previous primary-school teacher was shocked and concerned, and phoned us advising us to choose a "better" school. She was worried that he might be bullied in Shuqun.

My husband, Piya Tan, said that if all the good students avoided Shuqun, then the school would never have a chance to be a good school. It is the students who make the school, with the help of dedicated teachers. We were adamant about this. Despite having to juggle work and family duties, with two teenage sons and without any domestic helper, I decided to join the Shuqun Parents' Association (SPA) and volunteered myself as the SPA secretary for three successive years (2009-2011).

Our second son, Chai Seng, who is in Sec 4 this year (2013), is also in Shuqun. This is mainly because Shuqun is just opposite our home, and he liked the delicious food prepared by the parents at the annual SPA Potluck "makan" events, especially the barbecue event to send off Mr Chelva Rajah, the ex-teacher-adviser of SPA. And, of course, he likes the school ambience, too.

My experience with Shuqun is both enriching and fulfilling. As parent volunteers, we are given a free hand to plan activities for parents to help them be better equipped with parenting skills. Most of the parent volunteers have full-time jobs, some are professionals. Even though we are busy people, we always try our best to see to the needs of the school, students and other parents.

Parents like Samy, Bob, June, Adeline, Yamini, Dinoh, Hayatee, Peggy, Patricia, Pamela, Nedun, Vivian, Padma (Mrs Sobrielo), and Veronica, amongst others, are very supportive of SPA. Of special mention are Yamini and Dinoh, who, even though their children have left Shuqun, still come back to volunteer.

SPA volunteers meet regularly over coffee to exchange parenting experiences and plan new activities. The atmosphere is always happy, cordial and full of laughter. Mr Adolphus Tan, the previous Shuqun Principal, attended almost all the meetings to share with us the school's progress. Through working together, the parents and teachers became good friends.

The HOT Mrs Shirin Goh (Happy Ordinary Teacher, as she called herself) conducted three English workshops (2010-2012). She easily captivated the workshop participants with her humorous and lively presentation. Her passion and dedication for the subject benefitted parents and students who attended the workshop.

Mr Gopalakrishnan, despite his heavy duties and external studies at that time, was kind enough to set aside some time to conduct two Math workshops (2009-2010) for parents. He is a very busy Maths teacher who is also the HOD ICT (Head of Dept for Information & Computer Technology). His expertise and dedication to the subject had benefitted the Sec 1 parents who attended the workshop. External trainers were also engaged by the school to equip parents with parenting skills.

In 2011 and 2012, the SPA organized two fund-raising events to help the needy students of Shuqun. About a thousand dollars were raised each time. In collaboration with the school and the SPA, a class of Sec 1 students helped clean the Blue Cross Thong Kheng Home, a shelter for healthy adults with disabilities in Jurong East. SPA also sponsored lunch on that day for the residents.

Up to 2011, SPA organized annual Potluck gatherings, when parents and teachers prepared all kinds of food, such as Chinese, Indian, Malay, Vietnamese, Thai, Taiwanese, Burmese, Filipino and Peranakan. We had home-prepared sumptuous food, such as braised chicken, briyani rice, mutton curry, fish curry, chicken curry, nasi lemak, rendang ayam, ponteh ayam, pasta, potato salad, sandwiches, and ginger tea, just to name a few.

Our SPA ex-chairman, Mr KRK Samy (2010-2012), a very generous and caring man, contributed briyani and curry dishes which were unforgettably fragrant -- the best our family had ever tasted! Working parents who had no time to cook would order satay, ketupat, otak-otak (the proper spelling actually), curry puffs and other food. The annual potluck gave opportunity for parents, teachers and students to mingle freely. Parents exchanged parenting skills, while teachers gave feedback and precious tips.

On Teachers' Days, Shuqun teachers were treated to a buffet lunch prepared by some parent volunteers. One of the parents, Hayatee, who specializes in cookies and cakes, baked cakes for the occasion.

When Chai Leng was in Sec 1, he left his electronic dictionary on his desk, some students took it. Despaired at the loss and that we could not afford to buy another, I mentioned it to Mr Adolphus Tan (the School Principal then). Through Mr Tan's gentle persuasive address to the class, the lost item was recovered without any aspersion on anyone. Chai Leng, being a gentle person, was often bullied in his primary school, but he felt very safe and at home in Shuqun.

Early last year, Chai Leng was lax in preparing for his O-level exams. Naturally, as parents, we were very worried that he might do poorly in the exams. Serendipitously, when the school called for a parent-teacher conference, we were put at ease during the briefing by Mr Chia Hai Siang, the current School Principal, followed by personal consultations with the teachers. The school has launched various projects to help students excel in their studies. It is up to them how high to soar as the sky is their limit.

Chai Leng was allowed to take English Literature as a core subject in O-level exams, though the school did not offer it. He was home-tutored in the subject by my husband (a full-time translator of early Indian Buddhist meditation texts) and me because we could not afford a personal tutor, who charged very high fees for such a subject. Moreover, we already had a personal Maths tutor for him since Sec 1.

Chai Leng did well in his O-Level exams, and we were happily surprised that he even got a B3 for English Literature. He managed to secure a place in the Singapore Polytechnic to study Materials Science, both the poly and the subject being his first choices. He was also awarded "Good Progress Reward" by the Ministry of Education last year (2012). Many thanks to the school for helping him to get his best result in all his schooling years.

Our younger son, Chai Seng, was puzzled why my husband and I did not scold him or his brother, when they had previously failed in their school exams. He remarked that his friends' parents would scold them severely if they failed. Our answer is simple: "Failing the exam itself is bad enough, a 'punishment' in itself; learning from failure is the next right thing to do."

We are also careful not to promise any material or monetary reward to Chai Leng and Chai Seng if they did well in the exams. For, they would be studying for the wrong reasons. Motivation should come from within, that good results are their own rewards, for they are the foundation for a better future. However, we do occasionally reward them appropriately when they do request for it.

Mr Henry Tay, the gentle and caring Operation Manager of Shuqun, was my husband's childhood friend. Through his recommendation, my husband conducted meditation classes for the students and teachers. He also occasionally sought mentoring advice from Piya.

The most pleasant and ever happy full-time school counselor, Mrs Linda Chia, is always ready to offer help to the students and parents. I deeply admire her dedication and positive aura. On several occasions, when I felt I had failed as a parent, her counsel greatly reassured and benefitted me.

Our two sons, now at the height of adolescence, can be very difficult with us at times, as they struggle out of their enigmatic boyish ways towards more adult independence. We are simply amazed at the Shuqun teachers' immense patience and care for their students, without ever complaining to us about their behaviour.

At every meet-the-teachers session, besides discussing their progress, we would make sure that we thank the teachers for their patience and dedication. They are always ready to offer help and to do their best for our children. Having been teachers ourselves decades back, both my husband and I really appreciate the daunting, often unthanked, tasks of being a teacher.

As a nuclear family, we feel that Shuqun is a part of our extended family, one that is directly concerned with the education of our children. To educate, as the word connotes, is to bring out the best in the students (and the teachers, too). Shuqun has been doing this with care, skill, respect, and dedication, true to the school mission statement: "Touching hearts, inspiring learning."

We dedicate this short article with grateful thanks for all Shuqun teachers. Needless to say, teaching is indeed the noblest of professions, serving as one of the vital foundations of a nation.

Ratna Lim
Secretary, Shuqun Parents' Association (2009-2011)