



## UNDERDOGS CAN RULE

By Chiew Jing Wen

The stressed, the bullied, the wayward and the disadvantaged, Mr Chiew Jing Wen has their backs.

I invited the angry student to sit down as he ranted. “I only leaned against the wall, and only because I was tired. I wasn’t rude. He is always picking on me,” he seethed with rage. Sitting down beside him, I spoke to him softly, “Young man, remember what we talked about yesterday? Your action will always speak louder than your intention.” He looked up at me, subdued. “Your teacher is concerned about your action, but he is not criticising your heart.”

### Compassion for the Lost

Though I had not led a life of hardship, I knew enough people who did. Still, this had not prepared me for the first few schools I was posted to as a teacher. They had many students from underprivileged families.

My daily encounters opened my eyes to students who had to live through more hardships than I could imagine when I was their age – some had parents who were in jail, some came from families facing dire financial situations, some never really saw their parents. And almost all these young teens underperformed as they struggled to cope with the rough hand life had dealt them.

It was daunting for them to have to come to school with smiles on their faces, when they harboured deep anger against this world. To witness their struggles was terribly heart-wrenching. Fortunately, through the support that their schools provided, many of them eventually channelled their energies positively. They formed healthy relationships with their peers and went on to enjoy meaningful school experiences.

I realised that all parts of the school ecosystem – from teachers to the discipline committee to school leadership – must work hand-in-hand to help these students overcome their seemingly insurmountable challenges. Deeply inspired, I was determined to do my part to make this happen no matter where I was posted, to help the less privileged win the game of life.

### From At Risk to Ready

Intent on developing a greater understanding of these students so as to better support them, I seized the opportunity to join an MOE HQ project team which was working on the challenges faced by under-achieving students. Under the guidance of more experienced educators in the team, I gained deeper insights into the support that schools can provide to these students.

Key to this endeavour is creating meaningful and authentic experiences outside the classroom, which are more suited to these students’ hands-on learning preferences. This understanding has sharpened my focus in designing overseas learning experiences for my students.



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Service learning trips to Vietnam and exchanges with schools in Hong Kong and Xi'an played a very important role in shaping the character of my students. We had nightly debriefs for students to reflect on what they had learnt during the trip. This helped those who faced challenging circumstances realise that they could choose to adopt a more positive attitude towards their challenges today, so that they could face a different, better tomorrow. While they might still struggle, I felt I had a duty to help them realise that they should not let their present problems become bigger than their future.

I also wanted to prepare my disadvantaged students for the future. In 2016, I worked with partners such as Infinite Studios to expose students to future career options which they might not have considered on their own. While many of these students usually prefer part-time work at fast food restaurants to supplement their family's income during the holidays, these attachment opportunities in attractive fields such as the media industry caught their eye – a number of them went on to learn about values, habits and collaborative skills needed for success in the future workplace. By tapping on the students' areas of interest, I helped them access the value of workplace experiences.

## Parental Support

Helping students to rise above their circumstances, however, is just one piece of the puzzle. Many parents wish to play meaningful roles in their children's education, but may not have the time or means to learn more about how they can work with schools to achieve this outcome.

I work closely with the Parents' Support Group (PSG) to identify areas of concern for most parents, and over the past three years, we have organised relevant parenting workshops.

These workshops addressed issues such as the responsible use of social media, coping with the transition to secondary school, as well as managing examination tensions. Enabling parents is the next best thing we can do for these kids, so that they have another strong pillar of support on their education journey.

While these support structures of care are important, I believe that firm discipline and tough love are still pivotal to nurturing in students a positive and responsible learning attitude. When the role of Acting Discipline Master was made available, I took it on.

## Heart to Heart

On the second day of assuming the role, I had to cane a student because of a serious offence arising from an unwise decision. Before the caning, I had a long conversation with the young offender. "You make your own choices, so you can do anything you want.

But should you?" I asked.

The time spent was well worth it – I am glad that I never needed to have another long conversation of such nature with him again!

I believe that, as teachers, ultimately, our job is about building relationships of trust with students, and creating safe environments for them. When they know that you give from your heart, they will open their hearts to receive.

And this is what makes moulding the future of our nation so meaningful – knowing that we can change lives, so that our next generation can have hope and a better future.

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