



# Outstanding Youth in Education Award

## THE HEART OF DISCIPLINE

By Cai Zhiwen

To develop strong values and meet students' individual needs, Mr Cai Zhiwen believes in adopting a school discipline approach that is focused on values and character education beyond the management of offences and consequences.

I believe that every child is unique. Each of them comes from a different background with different upbringing, hence they will have different needs. When they misbehave, there are often deeper underlying issues such as unmet needs. As a Discipline Master, I have always approached discipline from an angle that is anchored in values, one that focuses on understanding the child and the intentions or reasons behind his behaviour and actions, rather than entirely on the administering of punishments.

### A Values-Driven Discipline Approach

I had a student, David\*, who was disrespectful to teachers and often refused to follow his teacher's instructions. He seemed like a defiant child, one with utter disregard for rules. Should the school punish him for this?

Well, it turned out that David was a troubled child. His parents were separated and he lived with his father and a new family. He didn't have a good relationship with his father and often got beaten up. This was a boy who lacked love and a sense of belonging at home. This resulted in his outbursts in school. These issues were slowly revealed as his teachers and I got to know him better over time.

As an educator, I have always placed the child's learning and character development at the heart of what I do. I knew that David eventually had to face the consequences of his actions. However, the consequences had to be meaningful and be able to help him address his needs. There are children who need help, and schools are here to help. It is this motivation that drives me every day as a Discipline Master—to work towards a values-driven discipline approach in the school.

### Our Character Defines Who We Are

Through the camps offered by the Outdoor Education and Student Leadership programmes, I learnt how we as teachers could positively impact our students beyond the classrooms. Aisha\*, one of my student leaders who assisted me in the running of a Secondary Two Adventure Camp, had encountered many setbacks during the camp, but with my encouragement, she pressed on and shone. It was extremely fulfilling for me to witness her growth.

To me, our character defines who we are. With strong character and values, a child will take responsibility for his own learning and development, and demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity.



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Discipline work in school is not just about the punitive measures when students break rules. I believe that no student comes to school just to create trouble. There is a root cause behind every wrongdoing; and preventive measures can be implemented to tackle these problems before they escalate into something more serious.

Working closely with students from various backgrounds allowed me to reflect on how disciplinary processes should entail both the management of offences and, more crucially, the educational follow-up actions to help students learn from their mistakes.

### Targeting the Needs of Individuals

In 2015, the school started a Time-Out Programme (TOP), which aimed to reduce the dropout rate among at-risk students. In the past, we had engaged vendors to run programmes for this selected group of students, but the outcomes were far from ideal. We then adopted a more targeted approach, where students were categorised based on their issues and underwent different programmes, including mentoring, counselling, and drumming.

Tim\* was one of the boys who benefited from TOP. Since secondary one, Tim had often been rude to teachers and classmates. In the first briefing on TOP, Tim and I had some unpleasant exchanges. He complained about having to stay back after school and eventually left without attending the briefing. I approached him the following day to encourage him to join TOP, though I reprimanded him for his act of walking away as well. Tim eventually joined the drumming interest group and performed well. He revealed that he enjoyed the experience and appreciated my effort in persuading him to join the programme despite his reluctance and lack of respect. He even said, “Sometimes you scold me, it’s for my own good and I understand.” He has since improved his behaviour and attitude. More importantly, Tim feels a greater sense of belonging to the school and believes in doing well in his studies.

**“In the area of discipline, I believe that all students are unique individuals where sameness may not necessarily mean fairness.”**

**- Zhiwen**



**Mr Cai Zhiwen and his students from the drumming interest group, which was set up to better engage the students.**

### Catching Students Doing Good

More often than not, teachers in charge of school discipline find themselves spending most of their time and effort on students who misbehave and commit offences. These students are usually the minority, and as such the general school population is overlooked. Moreover, many teachers tend to be quick to notice and are “wired” to catch and report students doing the wrong things.

To cultivate a positive discipline culture in the school, I introduced an initiative to affirm and acknowledge good behaviour and to reinforce the inculcation of the school values. This initiative, known as the Good JYian Notice, encourages teachers to keep a lookout for good behaviour and catch students doing good. Teachers write on a printed card to praise any student who has displayed good values. To add on to its significance, the card will also be signed by the Year Head and the principal before being mailed to the student’s home. Students realise that teachers recognise their good acts and this gives them greater motivation to exhibit good behaviour based on values they have learnt.

In my short teaching career so far, my belief in the importance of character education has grown stronger. In the area of discipline, I believe that all students are unique individuals where sameness may not necessarily equate to fairness. Each consequence and follow-up action must be targeted to help students grow and develop as a person. With a firm foundation in values and morals, we can be confident that our students will be able to contribute positively to the society and country in future.

*\*Actual name has been changed.*

