

Outstanding Youth in Education Award

Exercising the Caring Muscle

By Ms Yap Sze Hui Stella

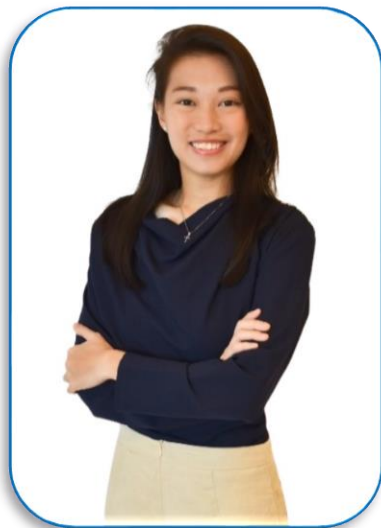
The concept of team spirit seen on playing fields spills out from Ms Stella Yap's PE classes to the entire school. "My vision is for every student to be a peer supporter, and every class and CCA a network of support for students to feel safe and know that they belong."

Every student entering Secondary 1 receives a card with the word C.H.E.E.R. on it. Sized to fit into a wallet, it is an initiation to the strong culture of peer support that exists in our school. The acronym is:

'C' for 'Checking in on a friend's emotions'
'H' for 'Hear them out'
'E' for 'Empathise with them'
'E' for 'Encourage help-seeking behaviours'
'R' for 'Refer to a trusted adult'

We have around 60 Peer Support Leaders (PSL) in school, but every student – around 880 of them – is also empowered to be a peer supporter. At any one time, there will be students actively looking out for peers who may be troubled.

I see the impact of this on the student community.



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When a student posted a photo of a classmate with a rude word, it was noticed and flagged out by another student. Similarly, when a student showed signs and thoughts of self-harm, it was spotted by a classmate,

who raised the alarm. Thanks to their vigilance, both students received timely counselling and more harm was averted. Sometimes, students are brave enough to approach the troubled student themselves. At other times, they will raise it to me, so I can step in to help.

Every day, I am inspired by how every child holds such great capacity to be an agent of change. Sometimes, our students' compassion for others show up outside of school. One student came across an elderly person who was unwell at an MRT station. She decided to accompany the senior to the doctor and came to school late. "I couldn't bear to leave the elderly person who was unwell alone," she explained.

Little acts of kindness go a long way

I like to believe that these actions stemmed from the school-wide practices that we have put in place to show care, appreciation and sincerity for the school community and beyond. It is my core belief that our approaches must permeate throughout as part of a bigger endeavour to educate for character, because behind every child is a powerful story and behind every story, a powerful learning journey.

One of the practices I kick-started last year is New Town Kindness Week, led by our PSLs. To spread the spirit of positivity, students folded or drew paper cranes, which they gave to School Leaders, teachers, school staff and their peers. Our PSLs created motivational e-cards with messages that were sent out daily as a reminder to appreciate and look after themselves and others. Students also put together gift packs for various non-teaching staff in school.

As a strong believer in the power of the arts to inspire and heal, I have coached my students in storyboarding, song composition, recording and video-editing. Consequently, New Town Kindness Week was launched with a song, 'Starting with You', written by a student who had been going through a tough time herself, which resonated with many other students.



Ms Yap preparing for Kindness Week with her Peer Support Leaders

To unify classes and empower positive peer helping, bonding and influence, I conceptualized the Kampong Class Bingo Challenge. The game included challenges such as making a short video to show support for Secondary 4 and 5 students sitting for their exams, co-creating their class gratitude wall, encouraging positive attendance and discipline standards, and sharing about an act of kindness experienced during class, to make a difference. At every step of the way, my students learn to look out for one another.

Inculcating the right spirit

In my early days as a PE teacher, I noticed how students would struggle with conflict management and engage in rough play in order to win. At times, they challenged the decisions of the referee, leading to heated arguments. To inculcate the right values and instil sportsmanship, my team and I developed the Spirit Score feedback tool for our Secondary One Tchoukball module. After a game, I would get each team to discuss and write down how they felt they and the opposing team had fared in following the rules, being respectful, managing conflicts, etc. Had they committed fouls, for instance? Had they done something to endanger another player? Had they encouraged their peers towards excellence?

The teams would then read each other's feedback before playing the same game again with the feedback and positive progress in mind. I did this over 16 lessons and the results were heart-warming. In fact, after 3 weeks, a student confessed, "Ms Yap, I used to be unable to control my anger and make hasty remarks to my peers, or walk out on my team, but not anymore."

Before their inter-class competitions, I also have all students recite the Sportsmanship Pledge I wrote, in which they promise to "respect others and myself, and to have confidence that I can achieve". I believe that if students believe in themselves, care for others and are motivated to learn, they will win. It is when each student does his or her best and looks out for others that amazing things can be achieved. And it is my

privilege, joy and passion to motivate them through this journey of theirs.

The long game

To keep my students motivated and engaged in Physical Education and Sports, I aim to keep things fun, be it through gamification (like organising an Amazing Race challenge to quiz students on facts about healthy living), incorporating the meaningful use of technology to make routines more interesting, or incorporating music into PE routines. Music energises students and plays a key part in many of my lessons.

Last year, during the Circuit Breaker, I conceptualised and directed the Basketball STOMP Music Video, which had almost 70 students and teachers bouncing their basketballs to different rhythms. These videos were filmed individually by the participants and then stitched into one ensemble piece. The purpose was to connect and unite the basketball community at a time when we could not physically meet.

Through everything I do, I strive to empower, develop and inspire my students to become agents of change. I strive to bring people together, for I know that they hold a significant capacity to make a difference in the lives of others, and for themselves. I have had the privilege to grow under very nurturing mentors and I am heartened when I see my students taking up this mantle to nurture others. Many of my ex-students have gone on to choose areas of study inspired by their

time as PSLs. One student, who was President of the PSL Board, is pursuing Psychology as she said she wishes "to bring a smile to the faces of people going through a storm". Another student is studying Community Development and serving as a PSL at his polytechnic, while yet another wants to bring the idea of peer support to younger students in the field of Early Childhood Development.

Every day, I am inspired and uplifted by these developments and I say to all my students: to make a difference, one need not be talented, brilliant or perfect, one just needs to care. That's what makes peer support so powerful!

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Peer support and encouragement in a PE Tchoukball module

