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The hope for tomorrow cannot wait for someone else.

Principal Matters



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Lessons in Early Childhood Leadership

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# Leadership Matters

Ninety percent of inspiration is perspiration.

**B**ack in 2015, I met a spunky 28-year-old principal who had been appointed to run a preschool with more than 200 children, and I was struck by how much responsibility rested on her youthful shoulders. Her trajectory is typical of the hurried early childhood sector.

In Singapore, many principals (or centre leaders, as they are commonly called in the industry) take the helm fairly early in their teaching careers, as a result of the acute manpower shortage and talent attrition that plagues the sector. In a few short years, these centre leaders go from working with children in a class to leading other teachers and managing a business. Often still in their 20s, they are suddenly responsible for guiding and motivating teachers and support staff of different ages and cultural backgrounds. They must engage with a diverse group of increasingly well-educated families as well as families in turmoil. They have to keep pace with shifting societal norms, a steady stream of new policies and new technologies that both aid and hinder their people-centred work. All this rests atop their business responsibilities of balancing revenue and costs and keeping the strategic vision of the centre in sight.

This swift ascension into the ranks of leadership can be alienating. Alone at the top in their new roles and no longer working

directly with children, the attraction that drew them to the field, many become discouraged, frustrated and exhausted. Loneliness can be a great teacher only with the ability to look inwards for motivation and inspiration. Many of these talented leaders burn out and leave the early childhood field completely, draining it of some of its most valuable contributors. When they stay, it can be in a diminished state. Yet it is a known fact that principals wield powerful influence on the quality of early childhood education and are the key determinant to the success of a school. These principals are inextricably tied to the culture and quality of early childhood education. When they are energised, motivated and focused, they have the ability to inspire an optimal learning climate for staff and children.

This is the challenge Principal Matters set out to address. Rather than leave these leaders to sink or swim, we wondered how we might build leadership capabilities and at the same time nurture a tight-knit community of principals who have each other's backs. We realised that to do right by our children, we need to do more for centre leaders. We need them to succeed.

We were lucky to have met Ho Yin Fong, who was transformed and recharged from a sabbatical in Boston, and Beth Fredericks,

who assembled a coalition to structure the leadership programme. It included an overseas visit to Boston, a renowned mecca of education, as well as a local mentorship component to put their learning into action and translate vision into practice.

Principal Matters launched in the summer of 2016. Conducted in seven cohorts over three years, it came at no cost and with no strings attached for all 163 participants – high-caliber principals from anchor and partner operator chains, faith-based centres, private operators and a variety of multi-site centres. They were handpicked by a panel of veteran early childhood experts after a rigorous interview process to sieve out committed candidates with the right attitude and aptitude to reap the most benefits from the experience and mentorship. In the last two cohorts, we extended the invitation to include leaders from the early intervention sector – traditionally separate from preschool services – to bring about greater convergence and facilitate better understanding between the two systems.

Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other. In an early childhood landscape undergoing swift and sustained changes, principals are required to learn, practise, reflect and evolve. Purpose alone will not go very far to drive change without an ecosystem of believers and doers to

foster mutual sharing, exploration and introspection. This is why we will continue to find ways to grow professional learning communities and break down the silos across different professions involved in working with children. The sector's advancement can only be sustained if its professionals are empowered to effect change, in lockstep with progress in policy.

The success of Principal Matters has only been possible with partners SEED Institute, Boston University Wheelock College of Education and Human Development, Sequoia Group, Korn Ferry Hay Group and Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS). We must also recognise all the mentors and participants for their goodwill and dedication to give and learn. I believe great principals see and dare to do things differently. This community of Principal Matters alumni will hopefully go on to be role models to shape the national agenda of giving our young the best possible start in life, starting with the organisations and teams they lead.



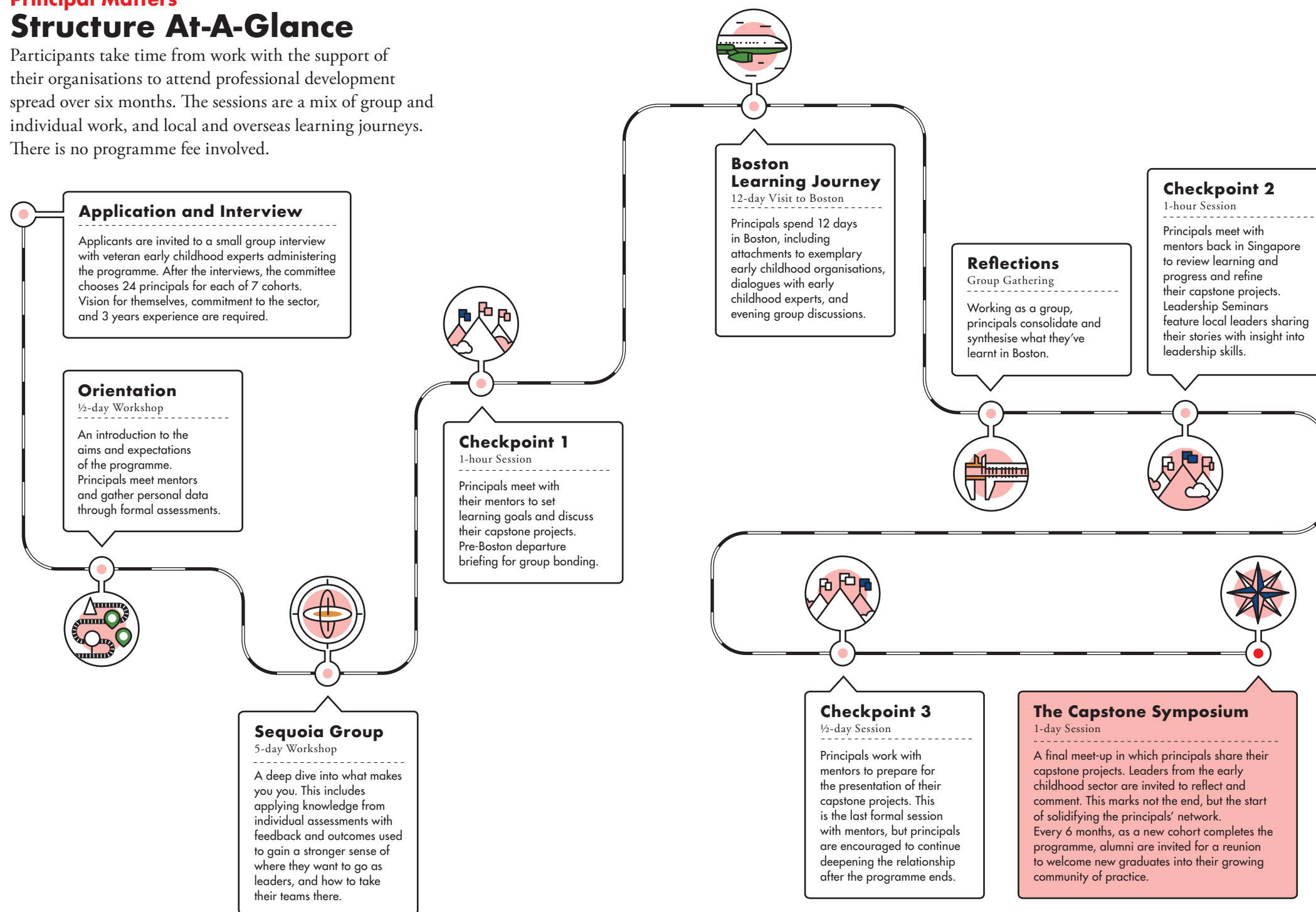
**Lee Poh Wah**  
CEO, Lien Foundation



## Principal Matters

# Structure At-A-Glance

Participants take time from work with the support of their organisations to attend professional development spread over six months. The sessions are a mix of group and individual work, and local and overseas learning journeys. There is no programme fee involved.





# Leading Through Conversations

There is nothing like having the opportunity to teach a good theory to people who really want to learn. The same goes for having the opportunity to share and reflect on experiences with people who really want to practice what they've learnt. This was the feeling of the nine mentors especially chosen to guide the principals who participated in Principal Matters. Participants were paired with early childhood sector veterans who served as mentors and friends throughout the six-month journey and beyond.

Over half of our mentors accepted the challenge of guiding the principals because they believed in paying it forward in the early childhood sector. Other motives included taking on a challenge to further their own professional development and feeling responsible as a leader to help develop other younger leaders coming up in the sector.

All the mentors reported having flexibility in their regular jobs, so finding time and getting permission to participate were fairly easy. The mentors were responsible for between fourteen and eighteen principals across the seven cohorts. The average amount of time per principal was six hours, combining both individual and group sessions.

The three most popular strategies used by all mentors were:

- ① to lead by example by sharing their own leadership journey
- ② to provide a listening ear with lots of empathy and support
- ③ to reinforce positive change.

Although each mentor had her own approach to the actual mentoring process, they used similar tools during their sessions. These included:

- the GROW framework (Goal, Current Reality, Options or Obstacles, Will or Way Forward)
  - reflecting on the mentee's MBTI, FiroB and 360-degree survey results
  - hours of conversation covering personal challenges
  - setting goals
  - reflecting on personal awareness
  - identifying personal change steps
  - reviewing and affirming the mentee's capstone project
- The capstone was a transformational change project completed by the principal in her school over a defined period of time. These capstone projects were presented to the Principal Matters community during a full day of creative demonstrations and sharing conversations.*

Here are a few stories that show the impact of the programme's mentoring process. Never underestimate the power of a good conversation.

## Principal Matters Mentors



**Shaireen Selamat**

Lead Mentor,  
Principal Matters  
Programme



**Dr Jacqueline Chung**

Academic Director  
and Senior Principal,  
St James' Preschool  
Services and  
ECDA Fellow



**Dr Geraldine Teo-Zuzarte**

Group Professional  
Practices Officer,  
NTUC First  
Campus and  
ECDA Fellow



**Dr Connie Seah-Lim**

CEO and Founder,  
Agape Little Uni



**Dr Nadhira Koyakutty**

Lecturer,  
National Institute  
of Early Childhood  
Development



**Dianne Swee-Seet**

Principal,  
Ascension  
Kindergarten and  
ECDA Fellow



**Iris Lim**

Principal,  
Chiltern House



**Loy Wee Mee**

Principal,  
Preschool-by-  
the-Park



**Yeo Hwee Cheng**

Trainer, Facilitator  
and Lecturer

## Start with what they don't say.



**Shaireen Selamat** I learnt very quickly that it wasn't what the mentee said, it was what she didn't say that led us, together, to a new awareness or insight. I would say something like, 'Really? Is that really what it is?' and my mentee would look at me a bit puzzled. Then the lights would come on! 'Oh, I get it, I didn't know I could do that,' she'd say. And that's where we would start – where she was, not where I thought we should go.

Principal Matters was never intended to be about the mentors. It was all about the principals. But in fact, all the mentors would agree that it impacted us in our own work as well. We were nine committed early childhood sector leaders who had crossed paths occasionally over the years. There were three ECDA fellows, four centre principals and me – sweating to finish my PhD thesis. When I was asked to be the lead mentor, especially alongside the other outstanding mentors, I found myself feeling so honoured, so recognised for my abilities, longevity and future in the sector. I think everyone involved in this project felt something similar. We all believed in each other.

## Transformation needs an intentional process.



**Dr Jacqueline Chung** Principal Matters is not the same-old, same-old learning journey. It is successful because it is systematic and intentional. It holds its participants accountable and it has drawn from not only leaders in the sector in Singapore, but also global leaders during the trip to Boston.

Change takes time, and Principal Matters gives principals six months to experience and 'own' their transformation. There were four key activities that influenced participants' leadership change:

- The five-day Sequoia Group training held at the British Club was a real shake-up. It was a wake-up, eyes-open, heart-open, vulnerable experience. The principals were exposed.

- The mentors then stepped in to normalise the principals' feelings, which were often anxious, confused, shaky and not sure how to get on solid ground.
- The Learning Journey to Boston immersed the principals in reflection, attachments to exemplary organisations, a deep dive into leadership in early childhood care and education and an opportunity to fully embrace what change and transformation meant to them personally.
- The presentation of their capstone project was where, with our help, the principals celebrated their labours of self-love. Their insights and 'aha' moments took centre stage and collectively we cheered their new directions.

Principal Matters unexpectedly paved the way for us mentors to rise to a higher level as well. It's been such a gift. For me and the three leaders from my organisation, the programme has been a transformational journey at many levels. Principal Matters has been a win-win for all.

## To thine own self be true.



**Dr Geraldine Teo-Zuzarte** I knew there was impact when my mentees told me that their families noticed a difference. 'Hey Mum, how come you don't have so much work?' My mentees could be described as hurried, flustered, bothered and impatient. These early childhood leaders would leave home early in the morning and often not return until late in the evening. Now, we all know that principals cannot run away from the hustle and bustle of the preschools under their care. Successful leadership requires both hard and soft skills. Hard skills are the theories and techniques you learnt in school. Soft skills include the ability to navigate complexity, the agility to adapt to new situations, expertise in communication and connection, and a strong sense of self – all of which are required for success in the early childhood sector and the real world.

I began to see a pattern: If principals look after themselves they are more able to look after their staff. One mentee said, 'I've learnt how to close my office door AND be OK with it! Why? To regroup, to take a few deep breaths, to eat lunch and to take care of myself before I face the world.' Guess what? A principal's work is never done. But many of the programme's principals learnt to believe in and speak up for themselves. Emotional resilience enables principals to handle stressful situations respectfully and professionally, minimising the escalation of problems. When they manage themselves well, they can help their staff and others to do the same.

## Community transformation requires individual transformation.



**Dr Connie Seah-Lim**

Here's how my coaching process goes:

Individual ▸ Safe environment ▸ Reveal beliefs ▸ Trust ▸ Support  
▸ Transformation ▸ Community.

My mentees used to go from:

Mistrust ▸ Misalignment ▸ Missed opportunity!

When there is misalignment of beliefs and no trust or support, it's easy to see how you would have an organisation that is not aligned.

My mentees started out with a lot of resistance to change.

Not surprising. But the five-day Sequoia course gave them a powerful opportunity to understand themselves better. From there, they started to open up to the possibility of change. But it took trust to open up about their inner struggles. The beauty of Principal Matters is not so much on the pedagogical side, but clearly on the psychological side of their well-being as leaders. Slowly but surely, they realise how they can change themselves in order to work better with their teams.

These are the foundational blocks of relationship-building: Reflective dialogue, self-discovery and shared insight about each other lead to

**N**o one is born knowing how to do this. We all have to learn and practice.

commitment and action. It's so lovely to observe how the principals have grown. They no longer see themselves as individuals but as a community. They move from problem-solving alone to a collaborative, generative thinking approach, which is a profound change.

They are now creating resources to support one another. We are friends ▸ We are a community ▸ We are the early childhood industry in Singapore ▸ We are serving the next generation.

## Leadership is never a destination.



**Dr Nadhira Koyakutty**

Leadership is never a destination – it's always a journey. And it's a journey with other human beings, so it's never going to go smoothly. People sabotage efforts, whether unintentionally or deliberately. They will trip you up and you will fall. But the thing is, you have to get up! You get up and you see your way through it and rise again.


I had a few principals who really struggled in this programme, and they didn't get so much out of it. Others found their tenacity and most importantly, their voices. They found the confidence and grit to stand up for themselves and to speak their truths. They found that they could make changes.

Back in the day, we were just chunked into the deep end of the pool. And we floated! Today, many principals think they must wait for direction from above, from the bigger players. But through mentoring, what these principals received helped them to be daring, to trust their ideas and raise their own voices. When I hear one of my mentees say, 'I'm just going to do it!' that's when I know the transformation has taken place. That's the start. I tell them, 'You go girl. Go for it!'

I am deeply rooted in my faith. I believe in the saying, 'Let your faith be greater than your fear.' This is what Principal Matters has given to our early childhood leaders.



## Finding your own purpose.

 **Dianne Swee-Seet** I was surprised when I heard so many of my mentees say that they were just swimming along and one day, because they had demonstrated capabilities as teachers, the boss said, 'I think you're ready to be the principal of this school.' They were just there at the right place and the right time. And they would bravely say, 'OK.' They received no training, no coaching in that transition to leadership. I thought this was a bit of a myth in the industry, but I've come to hear many, many stories like this. The problem comes when the principal is doing her best and trying hard but gets no validation for her work. No validation causes principals to lose their confidence. They lose their motivation; they lose their dedication to the organisation.


As mentors, we helped principals flip their perspective: We helped get them to stop thinking about the tasks and the organisation and their predicaments, but rather to think about themselves. I encouraged my mentees to settle their 'core self' before they talked to me about the busyness they were trying to manage. Our leaders are facing so much inner turmoil, going at such hectic paces, thinking they must get it all done now. They put off thinking about themselves, attending to their own needs. This is a form of perfectionism that is never going to be perfectly satisfying.

Finding your own purpose first is what helps you focus and choose your battles. Because then you are empowered to make good decisions by a framework that protects you, a confidence in your core self that moves you forward, not just the corporate vision and someone else's agenda.

I saw principal after principal become more settled, more committed, more aware after their Principal Matters experience. The capstone projects really speak to self-understanding and how that can drive meaningful change. Our principals have insights that will carry them to further successes in the sector.

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## Building relationships of trust.

 **Iris Lim** A key to helping my mentees grow and get the most from Principal Matters is building a relationship of trust with each of them. They need to know that I'm there to support them, not just for the capstone project but for other things, stress over work issues, personal challenges. And bringing the groups to Boston has really helped in building those trusting relationships.

The Boston trip actually is the crux of a lot of things in the programme. The leaders are put together in a group of people they've only begun to get to know, through the five days in Singapore, and they're cut off from their normal routines. They have a chance to really focus and connect, to challenge themselves, to deal with the discomfort of personal change without the daily distractions of work or their home lives. They are in another country with no one to depend on but the group itself. In time, they realise that there's a lot of care in that group and that it's a safe place to share important thoughts and feelings.

When I take them to Boston, I'm there with them for all of that. I hear the conversations. I watch them struggle as they get a better understanding of how others perceive them, as they try to communicate and interact in new ways. I'm with them as they probe for their sense of purpose and stretch to understand their own needs, their core selves, and as they learn to admit their vulnerabilities and depend on others. Being honest with yourself and with others can expose raw emotions, and being there with them through that process, being a good listener when they want to talk, really helps build trusting mentor-mentee relationships. Those relationships are critical as we work together back at home and as the leaders continue to grow and progress.

Important themes that come up in our work together are communication – learning how to connect and build relationships with their staff, families and others in their organisations – and self-care. They need to learn how to take care of themselves, which comes from understanding and honouring their own needs. A lot flows from self-care. You need to know and respect yourself in order to find your voice and speak up for what's important, what you believe in. There's a difference between managers and leaders. Leaders need to have an identity.

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## The importance of the learning journey.



**Loy Wee Mee** I joined Principal Matters as a mentor to guide people, to help others be successful in our field, but the benefit came back to me. The growth was there for me, as well. With each batch of mentees, I've become better – better as a mentor, but also better as a leader.

Each mentee is different, and what each of them needs can be different. Some just need some TLC, just that touch and connection to say, 'You are not alone.' Others need more guidance, more support as they struggle to understand and apply new models of leadership, new ways of connecting and engaging, as they work to find their purpose and their voice. My time with them provided a safe space, where they were not judged and where they didn't need to give a perfect answer. They could be real with me. A lot of the time my role was to listen, to be present, to ask questions and give them room to sort it out on their own.

Two of my mentees were from my organisation. And based on what they learnt about themselves in the programme, how my perspective opened through the experience and the changing needs of our organisation as we expanded, we restructured to carve out new roles for each of them. Both were frustrated and feeling stuck as centre leaders and might have left the field if they hadn't gone through Principal Matters. I saw an opportunity to apply the new focus and fire that they came back with by promoting them to strategic roles that lined up with their strengths, with what excited and inspired them. Jezmin is now responsible for systems development and Pamela is responsible for organisational development, building an organisational culture.

I believe that the learning journey is the key benefit of the programme. The capstone might seem like a definitive conclusion, an ending, but I tell my mentees that the capstone itself isn't the most important thing. It's how they approach it, how they put what they have learnt into practice, figuring out what kind of personal change they want to make. It's not the destination, it's the journey that's important. And I want them to continue that journey after the

programme ends. My group of mentees has formed a chat group, and we'll share experiences and reading suggestions, we'll remind each other, 'Don't forget, it's all about yourself, self-care.'

## From participant to mentor.



**Yeo Hwee Cheng** I have a privileged perspective on Principal Matters, having experienced the programme as both a principal and a mentor.

I was stuck in a bottleneck in my leadership position when I first heard about Principal Matters. Desperately seeking help, but not knowing what to expect, I applied and was accepted to the first Principal Matters group in August 2016. At our orientation, Yin Fong let us know that we were accountable only to ourselves, as our sponsor, the Lien Foundation, had generously tied no conditions to our participation. We embarked on this journey with the mentality of trail-blazers. While we were focused on our personal learning journeys, we also knew that we were helping to set the framework for future Principal Matters cohorts.

Principal Matters had a profound impact on me. The activities and sharing during the five-day Sequoia workshop helped me dismantle the wall I had built around myself which was preventing me from building trusting relationships with colleagues and staff. The trip to Boston was valuable, too. I returned from it wiser and recharged. As important as anything we learnt was the strong camaraderie we built within our cohort. We were keen to see a strong and cohesive Principal Matters community and we began that work within our group.

Six cohorts later, I jumped at the opportunity to be a mentor for PM07. Observing the principals as they shared and struggled to come to terms with themselves was enlightening for me as well as for them. It reinforced my belief that communication is a crucial part of leadership, whether in delegation, coaching, mentoring or vision sharing. My new role as a mentor – helping the principals identify and overcome their challenges – was like scaling another level of leadership.

## Sequoia Group Self and People Leadership Programme

Contributed by Wendy Koh, Natasha Dalmia and Jacqueline Wong

Each of the Principal Matters cohorts began their learning and growth journey with a five-day intensive leadership-development module facilitated by Sequoia Group.

Sequoia Group is a leadership and organisation development firm whose purpose is to create organisations that are truly worthy of people's commitments. At Sequoia, we envision workplaces that enable people to thrive, grow, express their talents and find deeper meaning in community. When we were invited to design a customised leadership programme for early childhood education principals, we wanted to do something that would really make a difference to enable these leaders to step up and lead at a higher level, and expand their capacity to influence the transformation of the Singapore early childhood sector.

Working in partnership with SEED Institute and Wheelock College, and with funding from the Lien Foundation, we designed a programme that would equip the principals with critical leadership skills for leading self, leading and engaging others, leading the ecosystem and the sector. A core element was personal exploration to help the principals understand their leadership strengths and development needs to help them reframe how they approach challenges they faced.

The five-day leadership module was experiential by design to go beyond “how to” lessons. The facilitators challenged participants to look deep inside themselves to understand their strengths, values and motivations and to think critically about their impact as leaders. They also helped the principals to clarify their life purpose, core values and aspirations for themselves and those whom they serve and lead. The call was for each principal to become a ‘servant leader’, whereby the people they serve and lead become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous and, in turn, become inspired to do the same (Greenleaf, 1970). The servant-as-leader makes a conscious choice to serve first, so as to enable growth of people and institutions.

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The programme was premised on a gestalt or intentional-change theory (Boyatzis), strengths-based leadership, appreciative inquiry and positive psychology. The learning process blended elements of assessment, challenge and support to create a safe space for breakthroughs in self-understanding and follow-on action. The aim was to lay the foundation for the rest of the programme by teaching a common set of lenses and tools for exploration and self-directed learning.

After the five-day learning crucible, Sequoia leadership coaches then met with the principals in one-to-one sessions to provide support for each leader to review and discuss how they can turn what were often tough messages into valuable roadmaps for personal growth and transformation. This individualised translation of feedback information into positive coaching lessons was reported as one of the most transformative aspects of their learning journey. The closing dinner on the second-to-last evening has been a high point for all the cohorts as they gather to celebrate a milestone in their personal and collective leadership journey. The sense of esprit de corps is felt tangibly by guests and mentors when they join the participants and witness the formation of a fellowship and learning community, which we all hope will strengthen and sustain them for years to come.

Five leadership tenets were emphasised across the five-day programme, anchored by Sequoia's Leadership Dragonfly framework:

- |  |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| ①  | ②   | ③   | ④   | ⑤   |
| <b>Authenticity</b>  | <b>Awareness</b>  | <b>Aspiration</b>   | <b>Alignment</b>  | <b>Accountability</b>   |
| When we lead with our authentic selves, we can transform the quality of our workplace cultures. A thriving and positive workplace brings higher levels of engagement, meaning and growth for its people. | Be the change you want to see. Self-awareness makes it possible to change thought and behaviour patterns – to choose new paths of strengths-based leadership while addressing our critical flaws. | Whatever we focus on expands. Lead from the future that you want to see manifest – effective leadership is about holding the space for a genuine shared vision. Think differently about delegation and strategic planning, take time to visualise the future you care most about creating and invite others to do the same. | Foster an alignment of strengths. Leverage the strengths of individuals but also build a culture of collaboration and synergy. Help people work together in service of a common purpose and vision and teach them how to work well with others. | Hold people accountable for both behaviours and results. An organisation is defined by its character and commitment to what matters most, making choices on the basis of our purpose and core values. Understand that relationships and business results are inextricably linked. |

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# The Learning Journey to Boston

Contributed by,

**Dr David J. Chard**

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To be a leader, you must broaden your mind. The Learning Journey to Boston was designed to pull the principals out of their daily routines and expose them to new ideas and experiences. Each of the cohorts spent twelve days in Boston, visiting a wide variety of early childhood programmes – ones affiliated with public schools and universities, faith-based centres, private and public programmes and centres serving diverse populations. The principals were able to observe and ask questions, and their eyes were opened again and again to different ways of delivering excellence for children and families. A high point for many principals was the visit to Boston's Children's Museum. They were amazed to see an institution devoted to awakening the interests and passions of children.

The principals went deep during their time in Boston. This wasn't a light-touch tour.

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## It was demanding

Principals were thrown together far from home and expected to think hard about themselves, their behaviours as leaders and their approaches to early childhood education.

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## It was thought-provoking

American practices are often very different from those in Singapore. Children nap wearing dirty shoes?

◦

## It was puzzling

How does centre-wide yoga and mindfulness contribute to collaboration?

◦

## It was inspiring

We could try these practices in Singapore.  
We could have a children's museum!

**N**aming and acknowledging your feelings reduces it by half. Ignoring it gives it double the power.

The Learning Journey in Boston blended formal and informal activities – lectures by experts and small-group reflections, panel presentations and personal encounters, late-night roommate talks, required reflection sessions, individual coaching, attachments to exemplary early childhood organisations, coffee chats, getting-to-know-you friendships, journaling, sharing lobster and of course, a group trip to the local village of premium outlets for shopping.

Through all of that, the principals probed within themselves to challenge assumptions and reconsider habitual behaviours. It was a time of sometimes uncomfortable personal stretching and growth – and a time of energising inspiration. The principals returned with new insights, which they put into practice in their work and in their ongoing personal and collaborative learning journeys.

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# Leading Through Practice

For leaders to successfully enhance their skills, they must be willing to reflect on their own unique opportunities for growth and find the resources that they need to improve their leadership competencies.

The research shows us that employees' feelings about management are the main factor that drives employees' perceptions of their company's organisational climate. The Principal Matters principals expanded their own skill sets, embraced new ways of working with their teachers and embraced 'not knowing' to positively impact their employees.

A key outcome was a clearer view of what it takes to lead: knowing that excellence is expected, knowing where the organisation is headed, communicating a

clear sense that each individual is contributing to the greater good and establishing a sense of belonging. It's relational. It sets in motion positive ripples of confidence, energy, enthusiasm and performance to 'inspire a world of good'. The synergies between the main components of Principal Matters – mentors, personal assessments, Sequoia training, Boston Learning Journey and the capstone project – created stories and lasting impacts. Principals from each of the cohorts are honored to share their reflections here.

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**Phang Shu Ann** I am proud and grateful to have been part of the Principal Matters journey. I learnt so much about myself through the programme and have become more intentional about my behaviour and leadership style. Those lessons can be applied not just to the role of principal but to any leadership role.

When I graduated from the programme, I had clearer views on what was important as I made decisions, and was able to articulate my thoughts with confidence. My boss and my colleagues were often amazed at how much better I was at communicating my ideas and opinions. Another change was in the way I dealt with my staff. To give one example, I am an extreme extrovert and I had often been frustrated in working with staff who are introverts. With what I learnt in Principal Matters, I was able to identify this issue in myself and take steps to address it. I talked about it with my staff and together we came up with strategies to improve collaboration. We worked at becoming clearer in our communication. If someone needs more time to think, they'll say, 'Can I get back to you on that tomorrow?' By being open about the issue and coming up with strategies, those work relationships are no longer so frustrating to me.

An even bigger change has been in my career path. I have been in the same organisation for twelve years and had been a principal for eight. In finding my purpose and paying attention to my feelings, I realised that I had been coasting for a couple of years. I had settled into a comfortable routine and was no longer

learning and growing. That might be fine for some people, but I had started to lose my passion for the work. To stay motivated, I found myself exploring new projects and increasing my expectations for my team. I knew I needed to get out of my comfort zone, but I didn't want to do that at the cost of my staff's well-being. When an opportunity came up for me to move into a different role, I jumped at it, even though the change came with some risk. It's not as glamorous as my previous role – I don't have my own office or a big team to manage – but it's a strategic position that gives me a chance to explore and act on new ideas.

I am glad to be continuing on my learning journey, following a path to self-discovery that never ends.



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**Jezmin Mumtaz Juseri** When I started the Principal Matters journey, I was an exhausted and discouraged centre leader. I felt isolated and drained by the never-ending demands of the team, parents and management. I felt like I'd lost my fire, my purpose. I was running on autopilot, sometimes reacting impulsively and without reflection to the job's routines and its challenges. The work had become a grind for me. It was a constant effort to face people and put up a happy front when I was struggling inside.

I think the sense of isolation was a big part of my dissatisfaction. There were lots of courses for staff and teachers offering knowledge and practical skills. But they didn't dig deeper or reach higher into the issues that centre leaders face. I needed a different kind of help. When I heard about the programme, I thought, 'Finally! Someone cares about centre leaders.'

I was in the first cohort, so everything was new. I didn't know what to expect. Even the people running the programme were doing it for the first time. But the programme's value quickly became evident. It provided precious opportunities to engage with other centre leaders, to share our experiences, frustrations and joy. It was an affirmation to find out I wasn't alone in how I had been feeling. Being a centre leader can be a lonely job and the programme brought us together in a new community. I found strength and energy in that.

With the experience in Boston, I realised that our challenges as centre leaders weren't limited to Singapore. When we met with U.S. leaders at the Brookline Early Education Program I realised they were dealing with many of the same issues. But they were looking at challenges as enriching experiences, as opportunities to learn. When a parent gave them a hard time, that was a new learning experience. They might get frustrated but they were part of a strong management team, people who truly cared for each other. I was getting a taste of a management community with my Principal Matters cohort and saw that we could build that kind of leadership community back in Singapore, with each other for support and within our organisations.

The other important lesson of Principal Matters was how important each of us were as individuals. It was a safe space to just simply be me, to be open and honest about who I am and what I stand for. For the first couple of days I held back; I was very quiet. Then I began to realise that I wasn't just representing my centre, that I was also there as myself. It was a special group of people. We bonded very quickly and it was clear that they were a genuinely caring group. And we were there just as ourselves. That made everything feel very human and very personal.

There was a Sequoia session where we got into small groups and we talked about why we're still in the industry. Dr Koh said that she was very proud to see people like me still here, that so many people have fallen off the wagon with the difficulties and stresses of the job. Hearing that and talking with the others about why we stay was very encouraging. It provided a lot of affirmation that we're doing the right thing and we're here for the right reasons. We started in the industry wanting to make a difference in the lives of children and families and we're still doing it and we're doing it in different capacities.

Principal Matters reignited the fire in my heart to do better, to be a better leader, to find fulfillment in my work and to share the importance of that with others. I think we all came away with that fire. We want to make a difference. We want to do better. We want to find joy in what we do. And a key lesson was that to do that we have to take care of each other and ourselves. For a long time I had

### Strategy 1



#### Growth Mindset

Believe your talents can be developed through perseverance, learning and feedback

View setbacks as opportunities to learn

Get outside your comfort zone





forgotten the importance of self-care. You can't give from an empty barrel. It's not just a job. I need to find fulfilment as well.

I've taken on a bigger role since I went through the programme. I was a centre leader before. Now I'm a senior manager, focusing on systems and curriculum development. My manager, the centre director, was touched by Principal Matters, too. We both reach out more now, attending events and other training sessions. We're much more open to new experiences. All of that has helped as the organisation has grown from three centres to five. With that growth, she needed someone else to take some responsibilities off her hands so she could focus on the bigger picture, on planning and strategy. So we've both grown, and the business has grown, too.

There are still bumps in the road, hiccups and mistakes that happen. But through Principal Matters I've come to see these as learning experiences. Where they might have brought me down before, now I see them as lessons to help me grow.



**Haniah Abdul Hamid** I have a dream. It is to build comprehensive institutions to care for, nurture and educate children from two to twelve years of age. I believe that quality care for children in this age range is critical, as it is a period of transformative and exponential growth. The care and nurturing children receive in these years will shape them profoundly as people. By providing that care, my dream is to build future generations who believe in

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themselves, gain self-mastery and focus their lives on helping others. Thanks to my participation in the Principal Matters leadership programme, my dream is beginning to come true.

As the owner of Cavenur Kindergarten, I hold two leadership roles. The first is as the person who sets the vision for the organisation and leads the team. The second is as a business strategist. Through my participation in the Principal Matters programme, I have become more comfortable in and give more focus to my visionary role. Before, I focused more on the hassles of the trees. Now I see the potential of the forest.

Seeing the forest enables me to look beyond what we are doing now, the daily routines and challenges, and to imagine and work toward a different future. I have learnt that the changes I wish to see – in the physical school infrastructure and the growth and development of our children and staff – can only happen if I lead in different ways. I used to work *in* the kindergarten. Now I work *on* it.

Our capstone project helped me understand the difference between my performance as a worker and as a leader. I was a good worker, but as a leader I needed to learn empathy: to walk in the shoes of my staff, to give them time and coaching to learn and practice new skills. In the two years since I participated in Principal Matters, I have developed my staff to take on new leadership roles and to assume responsibility for different functions. The school runs better now, even in my absence. That gives me time for strategic thinking and planning.

The programme also showed me the importance of cultivating and managing relationships. That led me to conduct an employee engagement survey to understand the needs of my staff. I now make time to have a 'chat' with each of my twenty staff members once a month – to learn about them as people and to understand their aspirations.

In the first ten years of my venture, I had not been able to expand it to realise my dreams. Since my Principal Matters experience, I have planned and taken steps to implement my vision. This year

## Strategy 2



## Communication

Talk less,  
listen more

Ask questions

Seek to  
understand  
before being  
understood

Be curious  
instead of  
furious

Articulate  
the vision

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we will launch the Cavenur Ed-Venture Student Care Centre for school-age children. The Cavenur Childcare Centre will open next year.

Principal Matters gave me the courage to move beyond what I had been doing and to believe in my vision. By working *on* the current kindergarten and instead of just *in* it, I have come to see that anything we want to achieve is possible, that we can realise our dreams by investing in our people and trusting them to execute on our shared vision.

As leaders, we need to learn to let go. The more you trust others and give them the tools and the authority to act, the more you, your team and your institution will grow. Be an expert in flying the kite. You hold the string to keep others focused on the vision and purpose, but let your teams fly. When you let them soar, you all reach a higher level of fulfilment and success.

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PM  
02

**Teo Xiu Shi, Sharon** 'You need to speak up.'

'You need to be brave and show up.'

'You need to unleash the potential in you.'

These statements kept bugging me, ringing in my ears. I fought against them with other thoughts: 'Why can't you just let me be who I am? Why must I speak up and show up?' I was in agony, torn by the desire to stay safely in my comfort zone and the knowledge that I needed to move beyond it to grow.

Things took a turn when I was selected to participate in the Principal Matters programme, embarking on an amazing journey of personal mastery and leadership growth.

It was 20 March 2017, a cloudy and dull Monday. I was dreading the long, tiring journey from my home to the British Club for the start of a five-day experiential workshop. I was dreading having to meet new people and expose myself to uncertainty. I stepped into the

**N**o one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.

room with buzzing and chattering ladies who all looked so friendly and sociable, and found myself a seat among ladies who were as quiet and reserved as I am. That gave me comfort for a moment – until we were greeted by the Sequoia coaches. So began a journey of deep soul-searching and stepping out of my comfort zone.

Over the five days, I became friends with those 23 strangers, connecting at a professional and personal level. I had to bare myself to them, exposing my vulnerabilities. It was an intense experience and it took all of my courage. It was the first time in my life that I had been pushed to see myself as I truly am and search deep to my core. That is where the magic happens and possibilities are unlimited.

On the last day of the workshop, I broke down. I was deeply affected by the TED talk video, 'Nature, Beauty, Gratitude,' by Louie Schwartzberg. This delicate presentation, full of life and love, inspired me to open my heart to all of my blessings and let them flow through me.

Since then, my journey of personal discovery has focused on letting go of ego, insecurity and perfectionism and allowing myself to be vulnerable as I develop the skills of self-compassion, loving and being present. That road had been painful at times, and I have often struggled, but it has also been joyful and liberating. I have seen my effectiveness grow as a person and a leader. The experience of moving outside my comfort zone has made me realise that I am capable of leading a transformation, something I had not believed possible before Principal Matters.

*Life's journey is 25 percent finding yourself and your purpose and 75 percent creating yourself.*

Two years on, I intentionally reinvent myself every day. Today, I hold the position of Deputy Head in an organisation that believes in me and never fails to recognise my potential. I accepted the promotion knowing that it would be challenging, but knowing, too, that I would come away a better person because of it. I regularly volunteer for assignments from NIEC and SEED

Institute that require me to step out of my comfort zone. I would have passed them up before, but now I say ‘Yes.’

With any change comes uncertainty, but, challenging as it can be, blazing a path to new possibilities is always worth it. When we maximise our reach, we maximise our life. I am on my journey to greater success because I have focused on my unique strengths and learnt to develop habits around them. And the more I have paid attention to my strengths, the more of them I have found!



**Lim Cai Jin, Rita** I remember feeling downhearted when I walked out of the Principal Matters interview. I was sure that I wouldn't be accepted. I even asked my bosses if they would be disappointed if I was turned down.

I was accepted and I joined the programme, but I had mixed feelings at the start, mainly negative. It was hard to admit to myself that I was scared, and perhaps wounded from my experiences in life. I didn't want to be weak. The transformation began when I accepted, deep in my heart and mind, that it is OK to feel hurt and weak. I am a human being with feelings. I don't need to be strong all the time.

With my Principal Matters mates, I learnt to be more trusting of other people, to rely on them and not just on myself. Though we fight

our own battles, we are here for each other. Together, we created an emotionally safe space, a space where we could be challenged and grow, but also a space to rest. Slowly, my wounds began to heal. I regained my confidence. I become excited about challenges to stretch myself again.

Just as I thought I was getting better, life decided to test me further. I faced perhaps the hardest point of my life, personally and professionally. In my darkest hours, the inner strength I had gained from Principal Matters became my grit to pull through. I chose to push myself out of my comfort zone and to take steps that might draw negative reactions from people around me. I decided to try a new role that was completely different from what I had been doing. The future was full of uncertainty, but I decided to embrace it. Luckily, the friendships I had gained in Principal Matters provided much comfort and gave me strength.

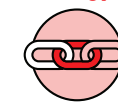
Today, I am in a different role, one better aligned with my strengths and my purpose and that pushes me to stretch and grow. I continue to work with children, families and educators, but in another capacity. I also venture into areas that are new to me, such as research and data analytics. At home, I am learning to appreciate and enjoy myself as a person, including my flaws. The transformation began with Principal Matters and is still ongoing. I am extremely blessed and thankful that I had, and am still experiencing, the magic of Principal Matters – the magic of transformation and the courage to be me.



**Yip Sook Yee, Daphne** I joined Principal Matters seeking answers to the curriculum issues I was facing. I wanted to grow in skills and knowledge. But the idea of 'growing as a person' had never crossed my mind.

My journey began with a deep look within myself. This was the time to examine how experiences and expectations from my early life have impacted my beliefs in leadership. 'Leaders have to be tough and know more than anyone else. Leaders must not be affected by their emotions. Eliminate anyone who is not

### Strategy 3



#### Team Building

Establish purpose

Hire people with a growth mindset

Engage and involve everyone

Nurture professional growth

Encourage collaboration

Embrace positivity and fun!



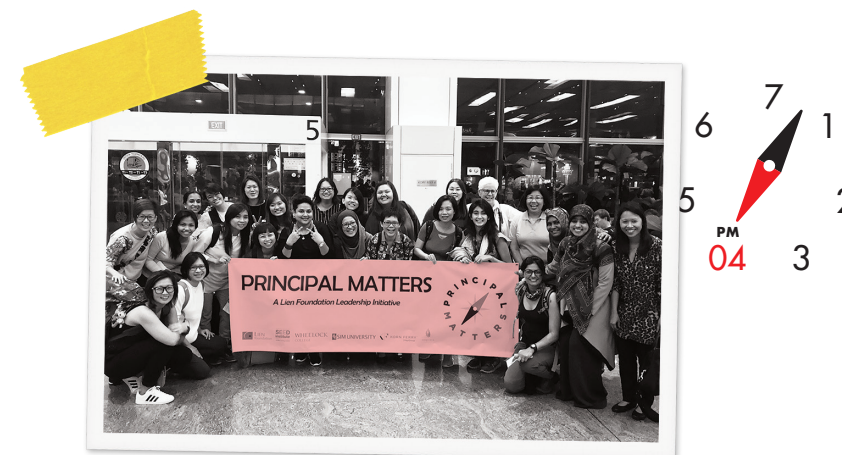
aligned with you. Keep focused and do not let anything divert your direction.’ This was my belief in leadership. There was no room for stories or relationships. It was all about what had to be done.

The moment of awakening came in the 360-degree review, when I saw how I was perceived by the teachers I worked with. I was not the leader I wanted to be. What could be done? I decided that I needed to make changes in myself and create opportunities for everyone to grow.

‘Be comfortable in the uncomfortable.’ This is the phrase I remember vividly from the Principal Matters journey. I was challenged to confront the uncomfortable. That was easier for some of the others in the programme than it was for me. It took me a while to adapt and change. The first steps were awkward. I made small talk, smiled more and tried to make sense of who I was working with. I tried crafting my questions positively. Gradually, I saw the results and received compliments for the changes I was making. When our hearts and eyes are open, we see new possibilities in others and within ourselves.

Paradoxically, I am more available to my staff now because I pay more attention to my own needs. I couldn’t be happier now that I choose to close my office door every day for a few minutes to have some time to myself.

The capstone project may have ended my time in the Principal Matters programme, but my leadership journey continues. Changes bring new challenges and new opportunities for growth.



**Noor Hayati Bte Amid** Growing up, I hid much about my life from friends. My family had issues, and I felt that others would accept me more easily and like me better if they thought my childhood was middle class and happy, like I imagined theirs to be. So I learnt to tell an edited version of my life.

The passing of my mom in February 2018 made me examine my identity and how I fit into the world. The next month, March 2018, marked the beginning of my Principal Matters journey. The timing was painful and my emotions were raw, but it meant that I was open to self-reflection and change.

I was uncomfortable at times as the programme pushed me to question my own values and beliefs. My heart was – and still is – reeling from the loss of my mother. But through that discomfort I have learnt some important lessons:

- To accept that I cannot be everything to everyone
- To embrace who I truly am
- To be curious and vulnerable

You might ask what my personal growth has to do with leadership. My answer: *Everything*.

How can you lead without accepting who you are? Without understanding your limits and your strengths? Principal Matters has rumbled my being, and I came out of it learning to trust in myself and my abilities. To be honest, I am still working on my

courage to face vulnerability and uncomfortable situations head on, to be present in the moment, to move forward and let go. But I have come to realise that I am not alone in this journey, and that gives me confidence and strength. I am a part of the team that is building a better world.

An effective leader needs courage, takes calculated risks, makes tough decisions and is willing to go out on a limb for something they believe. As leaders, we need to see strength in everyone and make the best of every opportunity. Leaders help others find their paths and discover their unique potentials. Leaders inspire people to take action and create change. For me, these were the reasons I used the Abecedarian Approach at the centre. Despite many obstacles, it was my way to raise the quality of interactions and relationships and promote early learning.

To successfully make change in the organisational culture, senior leaders must first change their attitudes and allow themselves to be forced out of their comfort zones. Only by doing this can their words and actions turn genuine. Credibility and belief are what encourage their teams to work together and accomplish lasting change.

So I am trying new things, taking risks, trusting new people. I may be uncomfortable and vulnerable. I may fall and fail. But through those efforts, others will rise, and so will I.

The Principal Matters programme, the other leaders and especially the mentors created a place where I was able to grow and learn and be my true self. I try to bring what I have learnt, and my new openness to change, to the table in my interactions with peers and teachers.

Whitney Houston says it best in her song: 'I believe the children are our future. Teach them well and let them lead the way... Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all.'

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04

**Leong Wai Yee, Pamela** 'Why am I doing this?'  
Meet my nimbus, my dark cloud of self-doubt.

I came to Principal Matters after what I felt was a completed path in early childhood education. For eleven years I worked for one organisation, evolving from a toddler educator to a centre leader. Then I left the field, and for the next three years pursued a deeper passion, a natural calling to the ocean. I found renewed purpose being in the water, educating others on the importance of ocean awareness. But that good time didn't last. In 2017, with clipped wings, I returned to early childhood education.

'Muscle memory' kicked in. It was a familiar challenge to start a new school, lead a new team, develop relationships with parents and provide a safe learning environment for the children. Everything about being the centre leader came back as though I had never been away. It seemed easy, but I wasn't completely happy. My nimbus was with me: 'Is this really what I'm meant to be doing?'

My director was a mentor with Principal Matters, and she talked with me about the programme. Perhaps she sensed that I was getting restless. She explained why she believed in the programme and the learning possibilities it offered. On interview day I sat there observing everyone, like they were a technicolour film and I was the odd monochrome. I could not fully relate to the emotions of my fellow interviewees as they talked about their daily challenges and goals. I remember sharing this, 'I would like to believe that early childhood educators and leaders can still be relevant in other industries; that our skill-sets, experience, knowledge and attributes will make us valuable in other sectors. *There has got to be something more.*'

I was accepted into the programme, and at first my mood just got darker. 'Why am I doing this? What can I bring back to the organisation? Am I still relevant in this industry?' Then it became clear. The heaviness I felt, my nimbus, was, in fact, self-doubt. I did not believe in my value as a leader. I had been away for three years. I saw life differently. I had evolved while teaching scuba diving.

## Strategy 4

**Families**

Embrace the whole family (that means everyone)

Reach out regularly

Celebrate successes

Extend learning to home

Have fun!

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I was afraid to face the possible truth that I no longer belonged in my organisation or even the early childhood field. I worried that if I did not perform well at *every* task of a *typical* centre leader, it would mean I had no value, no relevance. By the end of day two, I had had it. I broke down. But like rain with dark clouds, the storm paved the way for sunshine.

Control and courage. Those were my resolutions. The moment I decided that this journey was about me, and not just about the organisation or the early childhood field, my sense of restraint fell away. I no longer had clipped wings. I was ready to soar. From then on, every Principal Matters experience was for me. I was ready to grow and learn. But I needed professional growth that honoured my personal growth. Having found the courage to face my fears of irrelevance, I spoke to my director. We both agreed that my new skills and passions were not a perfect fit as a typical centre leader. A new role was crafted: Organisation Development Manager (ODM). *‘There has got to be something more.’*

Boston took my wings to even greater heights. I still look back on the inspiring exchanges with leaders in the field. My greatest takeaway from them is that a leader must have conviction and purpose. We need conviction and courage to advocate for what we believe in, even in the face of adversity, to do what is needed to grow as a community. We need purpose to steer the organisation and to find a sense of fulfilment. I cannot even begin to explain the sense of empowerment I felt at being in control of my learning experience.

I was truly blessed, too, to have flat mates who I could connect with personally and professionally. I had never enjoyed networking in the first phase of my early childhood journey. I found safety in the familiar. Through the Principal Matters experience I learnt how uplifting it can be when you have supportive helplines, inspiring women as friends, empowered individuals to remind me that I am a person first, above all roles. There is always something to learn from one another, from every situation.

I am more intentional now about reading to learn, sharing my takeaways with peers and applying them to my life. I look forward to presentations, training and exchanges that give me fresh perspectives

**N**ow I am more available to my staff because I pay more attention to my own needs.

on leadership and personal growth. I feel more courageous in making my voice heard. With this voice, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my director. She believed in me – not just as an employee, but as a friend. Her strong commitment to finding and nurturing the potential in all her staff has led many of us remain in the organisation for years. She has sought opportunities for us to learn from and exchange with leaders in our field outside of Singapore. With these enriched opportunities, our early childhood practices are always evolving for the better. *‘There has to got to be something more.’* She is someone more.

Do I miss my happy times in the ocean? I would be lying if I said I did not. Have I given up on diving? Of course not. Diving will always be my passion. But I have a fresh passion for my work in early childhood education, and I have found that the two spheres of my life can overlap. My experiences as an educator and centre leader helped me hone my skills as a diving instructor. In my work today, I am guided by the organisation’s purpose as I help develop people as individuals, as educators and, together, as a village. My skill-sets and approaches as an ODM are certainly inspired by all the ocean has taught me.

The ocean is humbling; a leader must always seek to learn. The ocean extends for miles; growth is never-ending. The ocean protects her creatures fiercely; advocate with heart. The ocean must be respected by all; early childhood education is a nation’s responsibility. The ocean is my happy place; be fulfilled in all that I do. When you lose your orientation in the vast ocean, go up and regain your bearings; life comes with challenges but feeling defeated or lost is a choice.

Like the endless horizon, my journey is filled with an abundance of possibilities. With so much room for growth and so many lives to touch, I know I am making a difference.

‘Why are *you* doing this?’

Dear reader, you are empowered. You are the change.



**Siti Yasmira Binte Johan** ‘Will you share during focus group?’

The question was from my curriculum advisor, and the focus group was the entire team of educators and leaders in my organisation. It was a chance to share my learning journey as I worked with my team to be featured on the Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) community, a nationwide group of educators involved in implementing and refining the Ministry of Education’s NEL curriculum.

The question from my advisor evoked a flood of emotions in me: shock, honour, pride, anxiety and many more. My answer was yes, I was willing to present and share during the focus group. And I realised that my openness to this opportunity was part of a new attitude, a new drive to reach out and work with collaborators and a willingness to move outside my comfort zone. I owed that new attitude to the Principal Matters programme.

Before participating in Principal Matters, I would never have been able to reach out in that way. I would never have embarked on the learning journey with the NEL community either.

I was inspired by Jeri Robinson, who shared her journey and her thoughts on leadership and growth during my visit to the Boston Children’s Museum. She talked about how important it is for

educators and leaders to reach out to the community. During one of the ‘Bagel Breakfasts’ in Boston, my mentors – Iris and Shai – reinforced that message. They discussed how reaching out to others opens us to new ideas and approaches and stretches us to become more comfortable in uncomfortable situations.

I am a person who likes everything planned and in order. When things don’t go according to plan, my natural inclination is to get frustrated. I still appreciate order and routine, but I am now more willing to embrace unforeseen surprises and to see the value they can sometimes offer – in new ideas and opportunities. I know that reaching out has brought this change in me. Reaching out provides opportunities to learn from the unknown and to apply new discoveries to make improvements to the existing order.

Reaching out has been good for my team, too. I know that my team was more motivated when we got the news that we would be featured with the NEL community.

Another important lesson from the Principal Matters programme came from the 360-degree feedback during the Sequoia workshop. A key message was that I had to learn to handle my emotions better. The flexibility and open-minded approach that come from reaching out have helped me with that, too. I’ve learnt to notice my frustration with surprises and to override that irritation with curiosity and a willingness to explore new approaches.

I have also contributed to an article by Jane Ng: ‘How drama creates lightbulb moments for little’uns,’ written in conjunction with Esplanade Theatre which stages plays for all ages.

I am still on this learning journey of leadership. Before, I was rigid and resistant when a meeting venue or time changed. Now I say, ‘Terrific, let’s enjoy the different scenery during the ride to the new location!’ I even have a deeper appreciation for nature.

### Strategy 5



#### Distributed Leadership

Trust your people

Let them carry and act on the vision

Empower individual and collective efforts toward improvement



PM

05

## Kalailakshmi D/O Rajahendran Pillai, Kavitha

For me, the Principal Matters programme was an odyssey of self-discovery. It pushed me to think about the ‘why’ of what I do and helped me understand the causes of my frustrations at work.

One area, in particular, was revealing: I realised that I needed to be more accepting and less critical of myself. I have always focused on completing tasks without excuses and often with unreasonable expectations. When things went wrong, I tended to beat myself up and hold myself responsible. This narrow outlook and negative energy was taking a toll on the leaders who worked with me.

I took a step back and started to acknowledge my achievements, to tell myself that I am worthy and that my self-worth is not defined by others. That helped me approach situations without being critical of myself or others. I could see the results as relationships improved and tensions eased. We had productive conversations about why we do what we do and what was hindering our progress. People were motivated as I noted their successes and talked with them about their challenges.

Progress didn’t follow a straight line, of course. There were bumps and setbacks. In one monthly meeting with my leaders, discussion floundered and no consensus could be reached. When I saw that my arguments were not convincing others, I withdrew into a frustrated silence. I started to question the ‘why’ of what I was doing, and my purpose and direction as a leader. It required some time away to process what was bothering me. Self-reflection and conversation with a special friend helped me come back and have a productive follow-up meeting. We revisited our shared vision together and had an open and respectful discussion that put us back on a good path.

Handling this type of conflict is part and parcel of leadership. Today, when I face a challenge in my role, I am able to ground myself by considering my purpose and by remembering why I do what I do. I am able to see those challenges as opportunities and to embrace them in a positive way.

The Principal Matters journey has liberated me. It has helped me see and discard unwanted aspects of myself and shown me a new direction for healthy growth as a leader.



**Quek Sy Ching** I learnt of the Principal Matters leadership programme through colleagues who had participated. Out of curiosity, I asked one of them about it. Her reply triggered something in my heart; she said it was about leadership and involved ‘soul-searching’ of who you are. Without a second thought, I recommended myself to my executive principal to embark on this journey. I went through the team interview, a first for me, and was accepted!

The unique Sequoia workshops truly opened my horizons. I learnt so much about myself through the three personality assessments and from the 360-degree feedback model. There were so many meaningful messages and exercises that prompted me to think differently: the power of full engagement, manage the energy, the change framework and many more. It was a refreshing experience, one that awakened my mind and soul.

During the twelve days in Boston, I absorbed insights and ideas like a sponge, eager to explore the different dimensions of myself.

**S**uch an “aha” moment for me!

Highlights included Beth's insightful thoughts and understanding of Singapore's early childhood landscape, the warm-hearted leaders from the Tobin school and many more.

The goodwill and generosity of my mentors and coaches, including Iris, Wee Mee, Diane, Susan Chang and Wendy from the Sequoia Group, have given me a glimpse of how I can 'BE' differently.

After these experiences, I can see myself in a different light. This change in me comes from gaining a deeper understanding of myself and viewing those around me through a very different lens. The programme has been a revelation to me. It has shown me that leadership is not only about knowledge but about a person's being. The insights I have gained will give me wings to think, feel, act and live truthfully as a human being.

Principal Matters has been a transformative experience that has given me the courage to reach out in ways I would never have considered before. An example of that is the suggestion I made to the CEO of URA to consider transforming the old Kallang airport into a space for all children to play and explore, an idea inspired by Boston's Children's Museum. He acknowledged the suggestion and thanked me for my passion.

I do have a profound passion for my work as an early childhood educator, and I will continue to move forward, keep dreaming and give my best efforts. With my fellow Principal Matters teammates, I will continue on this journey of self-discovery and hope that we all grow into inspiring 'Beings'!

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06

**Gan Mei Hui, Valerie** I had thought about applying to Principal Matters for a long time, but there were always reasons to put it off. When I heard the programme might be ending, I decided to be courageous and try for it. I really wasn't expecting to get in, and was thrilled to find out I'd been accepted.

The five days of leadership training here, before we went to Boston, were a big eye-opener for me. I learnt a lot about myself. I got to see

myself as a leader from a different perspective, what I look like to others as a leader. It also pushed me to consider my own 'Why?' as a leader – why I want to do this.

The time in Boston was hard for me. It was hard to be away from my two young kids, and after the first few days I grew very homesick. Then, as I was feeling down, I lost my voice. I started to doubt my abilities as a leader and to feel that I didn't belong in Principal Matters.

Because we had all grown so close by then, and it had become a safe place to share our thoughts and feelings, I actually shared that with the group in one of our exercises – that I felt I didn't belong there. It wasn't anything anyone had done to make me feel that way. It was more that I couldn't find my identity. What happened then was a key turning point for me. People came to me and assured me that I did belong, that I was an important part of the group.

That's a critical vulnerability for me, a very strong need for belonging. Things have happened in my life that make me very afraid of losing people. So when that extra-high need for belonging isn't met, I can really crash. Wendy helped me realise this during our coaching sessions. So, while that experience in Boston was hard, getting it out, talking about it, made me feel so much better. I'd never had the courage to talk about it before. And I could see how that has affected the way I lead, why I constantly feel the need to involve people, to make sure my team has a voice.

When I came back to my team, I felt a lot brighter, like a huge burden had been taken off me. The team felt the difference, too. I think it's the way I started talking to them. I was more open with them. I was able to share with them when I didn't know the answers, when I felt vulnerable. I got them talking about their 'Why?' in life, encouraging them to find their purpose and to find out about each other's. They started sharing their personal stories and how those link to why they behave in certain ways or why they have a certain needs today.

**Strategy 6****Self-care**

Set goals to reduce stress and avoid burnout

Close your office door sometimes

Don't take work home

Eat well, exercise regularly, sleep soundly

Have fun with your teammates

Sometimes, as leaders, we are expected to be perfect. And when my team members see that I'm allowed to be human, to be vulnerable, to be soft with my feelings, they realise, 'Oh, I can be like that too.' It has helped drive a very nice change in the team's culture.

I'm thankful to Principal Matters for that, and for helping me learn to see things from different perspectives. The programme didn't just improve me as a leader, it has helped me become a better person.



### Lim Yixian, Ford “Why not?”

Adventure is literally about what we do, not what we plan for or dream about. Have you ever wondered whether, 10 years from now, you might actually be laughing at what has stressed you out today?

The first steps of this journey were filled with more questions than joy. When I expressed my interest in the Principal Matters programme in 2015, a senior member of staff told me that I “wasn't good enough” and sent a different principal. I must admit, that did convince me that I *wasn't good enough*.

In my 15 years in this ever-radiant industry I have had to handle countless episodes of gender stigmatisation as an educator and a

**N**ever underestimate the power of a good conversation.

leader. At times it has been a challenge to stay afloat, but I have continued because I love my job. Running various teams in a female-dominated industry was actually the easy part. The struggle within myself – taking care of and being true to myself with a heart that was always giving to others – was the toughest.

When I was accepted into the programme, I was ready to break the shackles.

Like, why not?

I was instantly welcomed into the fraternity in a way that really allowed me to be vulnerable. That not only involved new learning, but pushed me to stretch myself and to dive into the minds and vibe of these leaders. I realised that while I was successful professionally, I was struggling to be authentically Me.

The Learning Journey in Boston allowed me to be Me. There, I was able to learn and share with intention – both positively and constructively. I also had ample opportunities to be Me, and to help assure others that their well-being – mentally and physically – were looked after.

This experience stoked the fire within me. I now see that in order for me and my teams to succeed, I would have to forge *extreme ownership* – not just professionally but as a whole person. I would have to finally place myself first, giving myself permission to pause and replenish my spirit. Only by doing that could I continue serving others. Empty vessels are not able to serve.

Anything human is mentionable.

Anything mentionable is manageable.

Giddy up.

PM  
07

**Benjamin Kwek Peng Soon** Together, we can make our dreams become reality.

A memory from my attachment in the Eliot-Pearson Children's School at Tufts University stands out as I think back on the impact of my Principal Matters learning journey. It was lunchtime. The children squeezed around the table and unveiled their food surprises as if they were the most significant discoveries of the day. In the midst of this excitement, one child stood up and walked steadily to stand with the teacher. He confidently stretched out his tiny hands to clasp a mallet and a bronze bowl. After standing still for a few seconds and with a calm, unhurried poise, he struck the bowl with the mallet. Immediately, a rich mellow hum resonated through the room, quieting the clamour. In an earnest tone, he announced, "Enjoy your lunch." Though the rite was brief, it was profound – an element in the school's emphasis on mindfulness as a tool for self-regulation. This strong belief in empowering children to rise above their challenges was noticeable in our interactions with leaders here and in other centres we visited.

Another memory, at The Learning Center for the Deaf in Framingham, MA, has also stuck with me. Though we were not versed in American Sign Language, the children continuously reached out to us with their gestures. Their cheerfulness and beaming smiles as they so eagerly pushed to communicate reminded me that children themselves are powerful advocates for their own cause. The tour of the school, led by a deaf volunteer, spoke volumes to what works best for their community – a lesson that we must strive to understand the world from others' perspectives.

The leaders we encountered in our school attachments were happy to share their successes, but were also passionate about sharing their convictions and commitments, and what drove them to realise their vision for their schools.

We were under no illusion that to introduce any new educational approaches or practices that we had seen or learnt in Boston involved critical planning and effective change management to ensure success. This is where I felt the Principal Matters learning journey made an impact by giving us the tools and the self-awareness to lead those

N

transformations. It also launched us as a collaborative cohort who could connect with, learn from and help each other as we took our next steps. The belief in the value of sustained, authentic collaboration was at the heart of our experience as a cohort.

What is next after Principal Matters? There are moments when I identify with Peter, a character from EJ Keats' *The Snowy Day*. On his return home, while immersed in his warm bath, he realises that his new delight in the snow that day might not survive beyond his memories. The snow he had amassed in his coat pocket would melt away. In the same way, we tried to stuff the insights from our Principal Matters experience into the pockets of our minds. Will we make our dreams become reality, or will we let them melt away? Thankfully, we've had the support of our mentors to encapsulate our findings and plans in our capstone projects, and we've gained the commitments of our stakeholders to move them forward. We are also surrounded and supported by an energised, passionate and committed flock of educational leaders: the Principal Matters alumni. Together, we can make our dreams of a better tomorrow for Singapore's children take root and flourish.

## Strategy 7

Coaching/  
MentoringIdentify  
coaches/mentors

Set goals

Nurture the next  
generationEmbrace  
self-directed  
lifelong learning



## 3

# Leading Through Research

The Principal Matters Research Study adds to a growing body of global investigation into early childhood leadership, with the aim of gaining insight into Singaporean practice for a local audience. Work from other parts of the world has shown how leadership is associated with the quality of early childhood care and education (ECCE). What a centre leader does and how she or he shapes the centre's professional and learning culture has a direct influence on the kind of programme that is offered to young children and their families.

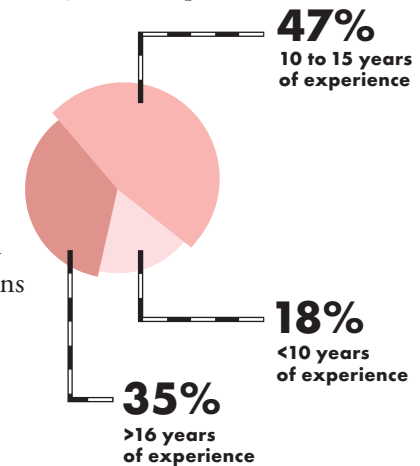
## Research Study Findings

The Principal Matters study gathered quantitative and qualitative information on the participating principals: what they do in their daily work, what has motivated them to remain in the sector, the dilemmas they face and how they have overcome workplace challenges. The Principal Matters programme offered a uniquely broad perspective because it attracted centre leaders from a wide range of organisations and ECCE settings – large-scale, small-scale, for-profit, non-profit, faith-based and secular.

## Principal experience

Across the cohorts, the principals had a range of 4 years to 35 years of experience in the ECCE sector, mostly starting out as teachers. Almost half (47%) had 10 to 15 years of experience in the early childhood sector. A smaller percentage (18%) had less than 10 years of experience in the sector and 35% had more than 16 years of experience.

The principals had been in leadership roles for between 1 and 28 years. The great majority (70%) had been in those roles for between 5 and 12 years. Most were in different types of organisations than the ones in which they had started out as teachers.



## Varied job scopes

The centres in which the participants worked varied in size, structure and management. Responsibilities varied widely by type of organisation:

- Principals working for anchor operators, partner preschool operators and chain childcare operators were accountable to the organisation's personnel overseeing business development and marketing, human resource management and finance. They also had direct contact with a centralised curriculum development team and in-house professional

development personnel. In some cases, these centre principals only handled petty cash and did not need to deal with annual fiscal budgeting or procurement of equipment and resources. Some even had limited involvement in the hiring of staff (teaching and non-teaching).

- Principals working for non-profit, independent, smaller-scale centres affiliated with social services or religious establishments were often required to be involved in all aspects of operations – including hiring, budgeting and purchasing – on top of being a curriculum leader. Such centres are usually answerable to a board of management comprising external volunteers who may not be educators and yet may have a particular vision for the centre's operation.
- Principals in Ministry of Education kindergartens reported to the primary school principals and had to translate broader organisational goals into realistic tasks for their teachers' daily practices and engagement with families and the larger community.

### Juggling multiple roles and responsibilities

A major theme to emerge from the study was the principals' struggle to find a balance between their personal, family and professional obligations, combined with the need to juggle administrative and managerial responsibilities while leading a team towards professional growth and development in improving the quality of services for an increasingly diverse population.

Some principals described work schedules that demanded many hours away from their own children, requiring their spouses or parents to take on significant care responsibilities. Beyond the home-workplace balancing act, many of the principals faced steep learning curves when they first became principals or when they moved to a new workplace or organisation. The skills they had mastered as teachers were different from those they needed as principals. In their leadership roles, they had to learn how to be effective listeners, motivators, communicators, delegators, coaches, mentors and business managers. Many were still learning how to create a cohesive team and a learning culture. Several had to learn

how to be firm with their staff, to increase staff accountability and performance. Some had to find ways to increase the centre's enrolment to attain profitability. Some were working to integrate foreign-trained teachers into their staff.

### Conclusion: Growing Leadership in ECCE

As Manjula Waniganayake (a professor specialising in global ECCE leadership research) states, 'change is always occurring in both roles and responsibilities and this is one of few constant principles of this profession'. In Singapore, ECCE centres have been facing many changes within a growing sector with multiple dimensions. The sector lies within a competitive, privatised market; it is trying to shake off its traditional babysitters' image as it professionalises; it is short of qualified staff; and it is facing increased top-down regulatory measures in the government's efforts to increase the availability of affordable and high-quality ECCE services.

Given this complex and evolving context, ECCE leaders must embrace change and not be afraid to learn. At the same time, leaders must not act as lone heroines and heroes. Instead, they must build teams with shared visions to provide the best possible care and education for young children. One person cannot do it all. 'Leadership must provide the dance floor and pick the right music to get colleagues dancing together and building trusting relationships'.\*



**Dr Sirene Lim**

Singapore University of Social Sciences

\*Carter, K., & Sood, K. (2014). 'It's complicated: Apprentice leaders on the edge of chaos.' *Management in Education* 28(2), 64-69.

# Lessons Learnt and Future Paths

We launched the Principal Matters programme with three key tenets:

- ① **Leadership matters**  
The leadership of the principal is critical to the quality of early childhood education in the centre.
- ② **Invest in principals**  
We need to invest in our principals to ensure that they have the knowledge, skills, tools and self-awareness to lead effectively.
- ③ **A community of practice**  
Ongoing mutual support and shared learning are important to principals' sustained success and long-term improvements in Singapore's early childhood sector.

Through Principal Matters, a strong signal has been sent to the early childhood field that leadership is of paramount importance to building quality teachers. If teachers take care of educating children, the principals' role is to organise, manage and create a conducive environment for their teachers. There is much truth in this simplistic view.

The personal stories in this booklet give evidence of individual transformations through the Principal Matters programme and the effects those have had on the principals' organisations. With deepened commitment and new approaches to leadership, these principals are motivating and inspiring the teachers they lead. They are making time in their busy days for planning and strategy. Some have taken the risk of assuming new positions that better use their skills and talents and that are allowing them to make a bigger difference for their centres. Many cite the connections made through the programme as sources of support and strength.

Organisations and training institutes in Singapore must continue to invest in building principals' capabilities if we are to raise early childhood standards

and make a lasting impact on children's development and learning.

Looking forward, some key characteristics of the programme may be useful in designing future early childhood leadership programmes:

- **Begin with the self**  
Unlike many leadership programmes that begin with theories and principles of leadership, Principal Matters begins with managing the self. Participants have learnt the importance of self-care to sustaining their passion to serve others. They have also become more aware of their own feelings and thoughts and learnt coping strategies to manage stress and to refocus on their purpose and direction. A strong leadership programme should have a strong element of personal mastery as its core.
- **Leadership competency model**  
Using the image of an iceberg, skills and knowledge are the visible competencies that can be measured. Behaviours, on the other hand, are the underlying elements below the waterline. They refer to one's social role, self-image, traits and motivation. These characteristics are less visible but no less important. They determine the leaders' ability to apply

experience, skills and knowledge to manage a high-quality preschool.

- **Tools and frameworks**  
Management tools provide a useful framework for strengthening leadership practices and experimenting with new approaches. Meeting Wise, Appreciative Inquiry, AID feedback model and GROW coaching questions were among the tools the principals found valuable and were able to apply directly in their work.
- **Mentors for leaders**  
Experienced mentors guided the principals in their journeys. Mentors challenged, enlightened and supported their leadership growth through conversations and critical questioning. These relationships helped turn the more difficult aspects of deepening self-awareness into positive paths to personal improvement.
- **Leaders' sharing**  
Successful leaders from different disciplines inspired the principals by sharing the stories of their own leadership journeys, including struggles with work-life balance, lessons learnt from human relationships and work challenges. These sessions helped to anchor what the principals had learnt and encouraged them to be change agents to uplift themselves, their families and their organisations.
- **Observation of exemplary leaders at work**  
As part of the Boston Learning Journey, principals were attached to a diverse range of model preschools to observe strong, inspiring leaders at work. These attachments were eye-openers for the principals, offering them a chance to observe different approaches to leadership

and centre management, and to ask questions about what they were seeing.

- **Evening conversations**  
After their centre attachments and visits, evening reflections and conversations among the principals encouraged sharing, reinforced learning and strengthened relationships. These sessions fostered the development of a community of practice – a culture of sharing that has grown into ongoing learning and support networks.
- **Capstone projects**  
The capstone project required principals to identify a specific leadership challenge they faced at work and to work toward its resolution. This pushed the principals to apply what they had learnt in the programme to significant issues in their work. The requirement to work in small groups offered an opportunity to deepen sharing and learning and reinforced the value of collaboration.

The final curtain for Principal Matters will be drawn in 2020. But a community of practice has already begun to emerge among the graduates. They are connecting, sharing and collaborating – through WhatsApp chats, support for events, conversation evenings and learning visits to one another's centres. Moving forward, this network of 163 trained Principal Matters leaders has the potential to be a significant force in Singapore's early childhood sector.



**Ho Yin Fong**  
Academic Director (former),  
SEED Institute



**Shaireen Selamat**  
Lead Mentor,  
Principal Matters Programme

**N**ever leave till tomorrow what you can do today.



## It's Not the Destination, It's the Journey



Sharing the knowledge

PM02



There's a first time for everything

PM07



Keeping the tradition alive

PM03



Finding inspiration everywhere

PM01



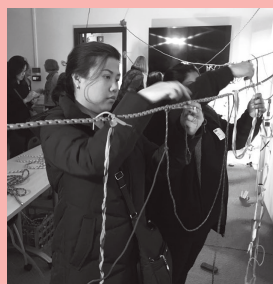
Shiok Boston's lobster makan time

PM03



Fun in the sun

PM04



The Wonder of Learning

PM05



Saying hello to MIT

PM07



Dreaming big

PM06



Our growing network of leaders

PM06



Jumping for joy

PM01



Visualising our collective future

PM06



Experiencing the power of play

PM05



Teamwork makes the dream work!

PM04



Mentors matter

PM



Empowered women, empower women

PM06



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Couple

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Acorn Early Education and Care

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Ellis Memorial

Epiphany School

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Lexington Montessori School

Newtowne School

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Tobin Family of Schools

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Prof Kenneth Grover

Prof Susan Kosoff

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@ Nurull Syaahidah  
Bte Abdullah





N

Time is one of your best friends in change.

W

E

Be authentic and let others be authentic too.

Our mindset frames the mindset of others.

S