

# Closing Address by Mrs Tan Ching Yee, Permanent Secretary

## OPENING REMARKS

You have had three days of keynote speeches, concurrent sessions, and, perhaps most importantly, lively dialogues, debates and discussions amongst yourselves over lunch and along corridors. Our Prime Minister spoke. Education Ministers from 6 top-performing systems had a dialogue with you. You gave Dean Kishore Mahbubani standing ovation this morning. Now I am here. Things are definitely winding down!

I was warned against giving you any more suggestions on what you could or should do. After all, here I am, standing between you and a rousing end to the convention. As the best form of defence is attack, I shall go on the attack. Instead of adding to your already content-rich conversations of the past three days, I am going to give you a small amount of homework. Research has shown that the appropriate amount of homework can reinforce learning and boost learning outcomes: I hope a Principal from Singapore is doing an action research project on this.

We do use textbooks a lot in Singapore. I will therefore be referring you to one book. This is a book entitled *Dynamic Governance* by two local professors, Professors Neo Boon Siong and Geraldine Chen. I intend to introduce you to a framework from their book.

4. Your homework consists of 3 simple questions. I will explain each one in turn. As this is the closing address, I will provide you with two hints, to help scaffold your learning and help you get your answers.

## ARE YOU THINKING AHEAD?

Thinking about the future is crucial for educators. The results of our labour may not begin to bear fruit for years to come. A primary school teacher who teaches a child right from wrong may not know how he turns out as an adult. We must constantly look to the future because only by keeping our eye on our destination, will we be able to get there. We journey always with the end in mind to ensure we remain on track and move in the right direction.

I cannot emphasize enough just how different the future is likely to be from life as we know it now. Advancements in technology, for example, will drive new demand and expectations placed on the workforce of tomorrow. (When I was on the threshold of university, which was really not that many years ago, the electronics industry in the form of wafer fabs, were non-existent in Singapore. I had not heard that people could become market researchers, or that one might even need a PhD to be a good one!)

Big trends in the form of the 3 "Ts" (for Technology, Trade and Tribe) will at once make our young people "uniquely look more and more like each other" (as described by Professor Andy Hargreaves) but also push them to assert their distinctive identities.

Educators cannot be clairvoyants. But we inherit a proud Socratic tradition, of questioning our students. Why not question ourselves? Allow me then to offer two simple "tests" to check if you are devoting enough time to thinking ahead:

- Have you spent time talking to employers, scientists, artists? Some educators find themselves in the unique position where their charges stay the same age while they get older each year. So you need to ask people who are in touch with the future, who are creating the future, for clues about the future. Hang out with young kids. You may realise that they even speak a different language from us.
- Have you thought about who might take your place if you were run over by that proverbial bus tomorrow? One year from now? Five years from now? If we are not devoting enough time and attention to nurturing the talent who can build on our work, it means we are not thinking enough about the future.

In some ways, thinking ahead can be the easy part; it is fashionable to look forward. How about looking back? Not a casual backward glance, but a serious process of reflecting on the past and present.

A great exponent of it is Zeng Zi, a disciple of Confucius. (Let me share a secret - he and I share the same surname though I have not established any lineage from him.) According to an Internet source I found, he said:

*"I daily examine myself on three points - whether, in transacting business for others, I may have been not faithful; whether, in intercourse with friends, I may have been not sincere; whether I may have not mastered and practiced the instructions of my teacher."*

(I do apologise for the translation. I am assured that the original in Chinese is a lot more elegant.)

Some of our organisations have imbibed good ideas, like conducting an After Action Review, to glean learning points when things have not gone as well as we have liked. But do we pause to ask why we have done well? Not as often.

As our first keynote speaker Sir Dexter Hutt, put it so well, "Maintain your position ...with doubt". This ability to look at the present, especially a successful one, with a good degree of objectivity is critical. As we sometimes say here, less elegantly, "Do not believe in our own propaganda!"

In a May 2009 interview, Mr Jeff Raikes, Chief Executive of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, revealed that after pumping billions of dollars on projects aimed at improving high schools by reducing class sizes and providing scholarships, the foundation found no significant improvements in student achievement or in how many students left school ready for college. Instead, their latest research shows that the key to better education is simply more effective teachers. Not exactly shocking news to all of us here perhaps, but I give the Foundation credit for its courage in confronting the brutal facts, challenging existing beliefs and practices, and making necessary changes. In a similar vein, how many of us are prepared to admit mistakes and start over? How many of us are prepared, to use Sir Dexter Hutt's words, to "change our default settings"?

Using the same tack as before, let me also offer 2 more tests:

- Do you know what is really happening in your classrooms today? Without an accurate picture, there can be no meaningful reflection.
- Do you find out why things fail, and why they succeed?

### **ARE YOU THINKING ACROSS?**

Many gurus of thinking encourage the discipline of thinking across, even if they call it by different names - lateral thinking, thinking out of the box, putting on your green hat.

Two professors of management at INSEAD, Professors Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, came up with the concept of Blue Ocean and Red Ocean. Briefly, the Red Ocean competitive strategy is one where a company mimics the actions of its competitors and hopes to do everything the same, just better and cheaper. The outcome is predictable: cut-throat competition and blood everywhere. Hence the adjective "Red".

In contrast, a company can opt to open up a new Blue Ocean, where no competitor has been, by offering to consumers a combination of attributes never before available. One of the methods to discover what combination of attributes works well is to look at different industries. A classic case of "Looking Across".

A good example is that of Southwest Airlines. It did not seek to compete with the big boys of aviation, all of which have since run into financial difficulties, even Chapter 11, but to ask itself how it could compete with road and rail for the short-haul traveller. By offering friendly service and cutting out frills, Southwest made air travel competitive against rail or road travel.

The iPhone phenomenon can be explained in many ways. Personally, I would like to offer a simple one - that it has successfully combined engineering with design and savvy marketing. Who can resist that elegant look, the simplicity and intuitive nature of the user interface? Again, the product not of one single discipline, but the ability to think and execute across.

When it comes to Thinking Across, consider the following:

- Do you ask "why" when you learn about the practices in other systems? Understanding the "why" is the beginning of true insight and will best help you to position new knowledge for your own context.

- How often do you participate in anything "international" - be it a benchmarking test or a conference of this nature? It is when we look across the landscape, that mountains and valleys show up clearly, reminding us of the peaks yet to be scaled.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

So, in short, the 3 questions boil down to 3 "sights" - foresight, hindsight and insight.

When our Grade 10 and 12 students sit for their national examinations in the Sciences, they know that practical skills are an integral part of the test. I hold the ICP participants to the same standards.

Working out the answers to the three questions, each with its two hints, in your heads is not enough. There is a litmus test for the effectiveness of the learning you have acquired in this convention.

Here it is: Will you do something about your answers?

Inaction on the best insights creates zero impact on the world. For the sake of our children and the future of our respective communities, do something!

I am confident that when you next meet in Toronto in 2011, you will be exchanging notes on all the wonderful things you have put in place to make our schools the dynamic, creative, inclusive and happy places of learning that our children deserve.

On this note, I would like to thank all of you for your participation and the organisers for their hard work. I also hope that our international friends have enjoyed their time in Singapore and that those of you who are visiting schools tomorrow will find the learning journeys to be fruitful.