
FOREWORD



There was a time when what we wore to school did not matter.

School uniforms were just that – uniform (defined in the Oxford English dictionary as “constant, unchanging in form and character”). Standard-issue white shirt with trousers or skirt in blue, grey, or brown, there was little to distinguish one from the other. Anonymity was the order of the day.

To differentiate pupils of one school from another, school pins or badges were introduced. Along the way, the iron crest pin was replaced with an iron-on fabric badge.

Over the years, school uniforms began to be taken more seriously. School traditions and heritage are associated with official attire dictated by custom if not fashion.

From ceremonial blazer to dri-fit PE attire, prefect’s tie to house T-shirts, there are outfits and accessories that shout out a school’s identity. At the same time, the various accoutrements pinpoint an individual’s position on the chessboard of life.

Today, there is a growing trend of personalising uniforms. For some schools, students not only wear school badges, but have their names stitched in bold letters on their shirts. Anonymity is out the window, and the focus has shifted to the individual.

There is good reason for this change.

Education is about developing the individual. Beyond intellectual growth, a good education nurtures the whole person.

Secondary school education shapes a person's life in profound ways. For many, it is the first introduction to a universe of possibilities. In contrast, the world prior to the PSLE (Primary School Leaving Examinations) is stark: Pass or Fail.

The transition from primary to secondary education prepares young adults for the future by laying down a strong foundation in both academic learning and character-building.

Students spend at least 30 hours each week attending formal classes and another 15 hours in the library, at the school field, or just hanging out with their peers. In fact, at least half their waking hours revolve around school.

School is not simply about the acquisition of intellectual knowledge. Emotional maturity, self-confidence, and mutual respect are important qualities and life lessons.

As young adults, students learn to critique,
just as their peers and teachers evaluate them.

Students learn social skills through daily
engagement with people from all walks of life.

Students learn that justice does not always prevail,
and that the world is not always fair or benign.

Students learn compassion and passion,
irrational though it may be sometimes.

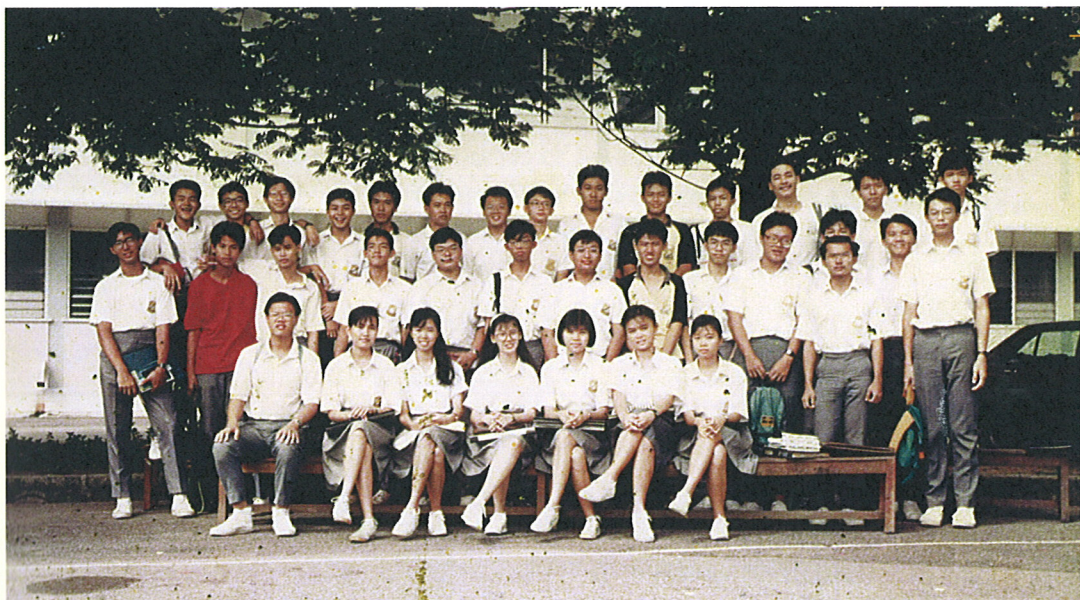
Students learn that there are no simple solutions
to life's complex problems.

While these are the indelible traces of the real world order, they are also the most valuable lenses any institution can empower their disciples with.

What we learn inside and out of the classroom is part of this learning journey.

The four or five years of secondary school education are the most formative years of our lives, and the school uniform is the emblem of the ethos and strength acquired.

As we reflect on 50 years of nationhood and identity, we would do well to revisit the role and place of our educational institutions and how we can preserve their rich heritage.



Dr Leong: last row, fourth from the right. Tanglin Technical School (1985–1988).

With an ageing population and low fertility, many neighbourhood schools with admirable history were shut down in recent years due to dwindling enrolment.

The demise of these institutions, and the drift towards chasing ‘brand name’ schools, papers over the invaluable legacy of these decommissioned schools and highlights the importance of preserving our cultural inheritance.

Lest we forget the debt we owe to the numerous unsung individuals who dedicated themselves to the mission of nurturing young minds, let us not forget our pioneering schools and their role in our nation-building journey.

This book is dedicated to all the schools in Singapore, past and present, in celebration of their legacy and contribution to our city-state’s education history. It is a testament to the selfless educators who devote the best part of their lives to guiding the next generation of Singaporeans.

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