

Preface

This book brings together a collection of selected lectures given by international eminent educationalists in memory of Ruth Wong to perpetuate her vision and contributions to education.

The Ruth Wong Memorial Lectures were set up by the Wong Family to commemorate someone who devoted her whole lifetime career to education. Her vision and rich legacy she left behind serves as an inspiration to the younger generation of teachers, teacher educators and administrators. She instilled the excitement and the challenge of education in those who chose teaching as a career.



Ruth Wong Hie King 1918–1982

"I don't think that the late Dr. Ruth Wong has really left us. She is very much with us in that many of us are still guided by some of her seminal ideas" (Sim 1983, p. 3). She is an "imperishable teacher" who left an "indelible mark on the lives" of her students (Tan 2013, p. xiii).

Ruth the eldest of 10 was born on 10 June 1918 in Singapore to Christian parents. Her upbringing and her own Christian faith and beliefs formed the foundation of her strong, resilient character and all the values manifested in her life. Being the eldest, she learnt to shoulder responsibility for the family very early in her adolescent years and was always mindful of her filial duty towards her parents. She received her school education in the Methodist Girls' School (MGS) in Singapore and excelled in her studies. However at the crucial period when she had to decide on a career, due to family circumstances, she gave up a scholarship to fulfil her desire of becoming a doctor. This she willingly did out of filial piety and obedience to her parents in accordance with biblical teachings. She became a teacher to help in the family finances as her father's business was failing due to a worldwide slump in the 1930s. She described herself as being "shunted into education" (Wong 1982, p. 7). It was not her choice. After 44 years of teaching students at all levels, from kindergarten to university, she looked back "with joy to thank the Lord for His choice for my life... God has shown me that what gives joy is the fulfilled life" (Wong 1982, p. 10).

Ruth started as a part-time teacher while she was undergoing tertiary education at the Raffles College which later became the Faculty of Arts in the University of Malaya in Singapore. After obtaining her diploma in education, she taught in her Alma Mater and later in several other schools. It was not till 14 years after graduating from secondary school that she had the opportunity to go abroad for a university education in Queen's University in Belfast. Her outstanding performance won her the Sir John Porter Scholarship and the Isabella Tod Memorial Prize. She returned to Singapore and to teaching in school but shortly after was seconded as a lecturer to the Education Department of the University of Malaya in Singapore.

In 1959, Ruth was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship and spent time as a testing associate at the Educational Testing Service at Princeton in the USA. She then proceeded to Harvard University where she obtained her Master's degree and a PhD in education. Her achievements in Harvard University won her a Merit Scholarship and she was made a member of the Pi Lambda Theta Honor Society of Women in Education.

Soon after her return to teaching at the University of Malaya in Singapore, she was appointed in 1963 as Professor and Head of the School of Education in the University of Malaya in the Kuala Lumpur campus. At that time, Singapore was a part of Malaysia. When the school attained faculty status in 1965, Ruth was its Foundation Dean and Professor. She brought about changes in the curriculum incorporating her learning from Harvard and internationally. Most importantly, she instituted an extensive staff training and development programme. She was inspirational in her quest for excellence in education, introducing many ideas and innovations in teaching and teacher training in Malaysia.

In 1969, she returned to Singapore and was appointed Director of Research at the Ministry of Education. In 1971, in addition to the post held, she was appointed Principal of the Teachers Training College. She directed attention to the quality, as opposed to quantity, of schooling and teacher training. In both areas, the curriculum needed rethinking and renovating. She was made Chairperson of the Advisory Committee on Curriculum Development (ACCD) and exercised a strong influence on the structural planning and development of a revised curriculum not only for schools but also for teacher training as well. When the Teachers' Training College became the Institute of Education (IE), Ruth was the Foundation Director and held the post till she retired in 1976.

As an educationist, Ruth introduced several new perspectives in education. She maintained that each child was a unique individual with feelings and emotions and needed different treatment to bring out the best in him/her. She had a great compassion for the weak and disadvantaged. She attempted to change the mindset of teachers to demolish some entrenched beliefs, "sacred cows", about children and classroom teaching and in teacher training as well. She encouraged and tried to improve the ability of students and teachers to think creatively and critically. The changes Ruth introduced at the IE resulted in a new curriculum for teacher education giving emphasis to linking theory to practice. A number of so-called experimental and demonstration schools were established to teach and ensure linkage of theory to practice. Her institution of research particularly in schools to monitor the impact of changes introduced for the enhancement of education led to the formation of the Educational Research Association Singapore (ERAS) and many major research initiatives pertaining to pedagogical developments in subsequent years. A massive training programme to train teachers in methods of evaluating and assessing coursework was mounted. She set up a mechanism for graduate teachers to attain higher degrees that were awarded by the former University of Singapore.

One of the innovations she introduced was to expand the classroom relationships to extra-classroom guidance. She believed in pinpointing problems and giving the right guidance and motivation. The first guidance clinic was set up in IE to introduce counselling in schools. This proved very successful in providing counselling to children and youths as well as fostering a bond between students and teachers. By 2007, about 400 schools in Singapore had at least one full-time school counsellor. Under Ruth Wong's leadership, the concept of teacher training gradually evolved into teacher education. Similar to what she did in the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, she emphasised on staff training and development in the Institute not only at academic staff level but to all other staff as well. Ruth sent the librarian of the Institute Mr. Wong Heng abroad for training to upgrade the status of librarians. Time has proved that in many ways Ruth was ahead of her time and hence many of her ideas could not be implemented during her lifetime.

Above all, she brought a rise in the status of teachers both academically and professionally.

“A woman of rare and unusual quality, she devoted herself on humanity: she gave constantly and asked for nothing in return. Achievements which would have been even greater had the politicians allowed the scope needed” wrote Sir Alexander Oppenheim, Vice-Chancellor University of Malaya (personal communication. February, 1982).

As a person, Ruth was very disciplined and her students and colleagues describe her, amongst other adjectives used, as being firm, fair, flexible, approachable, friendly, far sighted, visionary, a motivator and an inspirational yet humble leader. She has been referred to as a dynamic lady, a lady of towering intellect and outstanding scholarship, *une dame formidable*, a beacon to all. A colleague portrayed her as a great teacher, counsellor, mentor, dean, leader and above all a great motivator. She motivated a Shakespearean play “As You Like It” to be enacted successfully in the Malay language to a large audience.

She was well founded in biblical knowledge, caring not only for the minds but also for the heart and souls of others especially the young; grounding them not only in competences but also in the values which she held in life. What made her a role model to many whose lives she touched is that she practised what she preached. Mrs. Ellice Handy, principal of MGS, loved Ruth as a pupil, as a fellow-teacher and as a friend. In a personal communication, she said, “Your sister has gone to her rest but she has left behind memories which will be treasured in the hearts of all her life touched. In her time of suffering she rang to give me comfort in my sorrow, ... after the sudden passing of my husband. This was Ruth—always thinking of others and forgetting self”.

Her influence and contributions to education did not stop when she retired from the Institute of Education but she continued to participate in research projects on a voluntary basis. She was an advisor to a survey conducted by the Singapore Teachers’ Union and led a project on the improvement of mathematics achievement in schools. She was a member of the Council of the University of Singapore and also served as a part-time student counsellor at the University of Singapore. She was actively involved in several voluntary organizations, including the Children’s Society as well as the Girls’ Brigade where she was President from 1976 till she passed away in 1982.

In summary “what Wong achieved in her career, in demonstrating a professional commitment to improving the learning experience and education of children, was part of a vision she had. The power of that vision, the courage to confront the ‘sacred cows of education’ in whatever form, her development of a rational framework for curriculum planning and development, her ideas in curriculum innovation for the training and education of teachers, the strength of her belief in developing a high level of indigenous manpower in educational research and teacher education constitute her legacy to education and teacher education, in Singapore” (Ho 2012, p. 1275).

Her recognition as an educationist *par excellence* went beyond Singapore. She was recognised and honoured internationally. She was elected Fellow of the College of Preceptors (London), Fellow of the World Academy of Arts and Sciences and held a position of Visiting Commonwealth Fellow in Australia. She served as a consultant to the Regional Centre for Science and Mathematics

(RECSAM), based in Penang, Malaysia, as a Member of the Governing Board of the UNESCO Institute of Education, based in Hamburg, a member of the International Institute of Educational Planning Council of Consultant Fellows, served on the Board of Directors of the International Council on Education for Teaching, the Editorial Board of the International Review of Education, the Research Review Advisory Committee of the International Development and Research Council of Canada, and the Faculty of Education, University of Toronto.

“She never really retired from education... It is impossible to find anyone here to match Dr. Ruth Wong in experience, knowledge, scholarship and, most important of all, selfless dedication where education is concerned. Her vision and decisions were guided purely by noble educational considerations. She was non-partisan in the cause of education, a real beacon to all and sundry... May we find the courage to look at where the beacon stood and take our bearings from there” (Lau 1982).

The memory and influence of Ruth Wong will never leave all those who knew her, especially those whose lives she touched.

Hee Ong Wong

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