



Mr Tan Chor Pang, principal of Boon Lay Secondary School, with some of his students. During his 35 years as an educator, he has taught students from both the Normal and Express streams and has never minded teaching weaker children, saying: "I felt like I could make a big contribution." ST PHOTO: KHALID BABA

If not for streaming, many might not have made it through school, says principal

Jolene Ang

If not for streaming, things might have turned out differently for many of Mr Tan Chor Pang's former students.

Mr Tan, 59, is the principal of Boon Lay Secondary School and has been an educator for the past 35 years. In that time, he has taught students from the Normal (Technical), Normal (Academic) and Express streams.

He tells Insight: "The N(A) and N(T) streams were good; if the curriculum and exams had not been adjusted, many students (in the earlier years) might not have been able to move on from secondary school."

Mr Tan's first posting, in 1984,

was to Pasir Panjang Secondary School (which has since closed), where he taught mathematics. He still keeps in touch with some of his students, even meeting them occasionally, and many have carved out a successful path for themselves, he says.

Recalling what it was like teaching an N(T) class, Mr Tan says: "It was a challenge – we're talking about a different strata of students. They were difficult to engage, they were hyperactive, talkative and many had learning challenges that went undetected."

For instance, one of his former N(T) students discovered he was dyslexic only years after he had left school, when his son was diagnosed with the condition.

But he never minded teaching

weaker children. "I felt like I could make a big contribution... It's also the Normal students who remember you and try to keep in touch after graduation – they feel you made a difference in their lives."

He remembers a student by the name of Jason Chua, whom he met in 2009 during his time as principal at Millennia Institute (MI).

Mr Chua was a former N(T) student who was posted to the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), but instead chose to sit the O levels as a private candidate.

He eventually made it to MI, which offers a three-year A-level programme, and to the Singapore Management University where he read law.

Mr Chua, 29, who graduated just last year, tells Insight: "Being in

N(T) usually means a confirmed route to ITE... It's relatively difficult for people to shine."

He attributes his success on an "unconventional path" in part to the educators he met – like Mr Tan, who would go out of his way to ask how he was coping in school, and teachers who gave him encouragement.

Mr Tan notes that while the streaming system has been heavily criticised for playing a role in exacerbating social stratification, students like Mr Chua show that it was possible to break out of streams.

"The limiting factors were more their own mindsets and societal expectations," he says.

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