

## Reinvigorating the teachers

A very learned-looking professor is blowing bubbles at the back of the class. And his teacher is egging him on. Bedlam? No, says SCHRWEN TAN, it's Alvin Lee helping teachers to be creative



ALVIN LEE Practical dreamer

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The last thing busy teachers want is to attend a workshop. And definitely not one that teaches to count backwards or do headstands.

All a teacher needs, at any given point of time, is time, time, and more time.

Alvin Lee understands that. He's a practical man. But then he's also an idealist. He's out there on the loose, daring teachers to daydream. And he's definitely in touch with the real world.

'When I walk into a school, I feel like a plumber who is there to repair the pipe in the toilet,' he says.

'I empathise with the

problems faced by the children, teachers and the entire educational system. I do not come down with an attitude, the *all-of-you-know-nothing, I-know-everything mentality!*

'I go the other way round: How we can do things together.

'We can be practical, but we must continue seeking idealism. We must touch both ends,' Alvin says and adds quickly. 'Of course I'm not saying that's easy,' he quickly adds.

'Some educators say they know everything about creativity and innovation before I even have the chance to say hello.'

Alvin Lee tailors his workshops. Some schools want to be known for being holistic, others for good pastoral care. Some give special attention to EM3 students.

But teachers at most schools have one thing in common.

'I sense a lot of stress coming from educators,' Alvin says. 'Stress is not bad, but *Hello!* What kind of life is that for a teacher? So



stressed you can't even go back to the starting point—which is the enjoyable experience of imparting knowledge.'

So, while your teaching career may ask of you to move up or implode, this creative guru encourages you to daydream and be a kid all over again.

'I had an aged, authoritarian-looking senior lecturer from a polytechnic. During the two whole days, he did nothing but blow bubbles at the back of my class. I think he really treasured those moments. It is about feeling how it is like to be a child all over again.'

### ABOUT ALVIN

ALVIN LEE is perhaps best-known for his sandcastle building, in Singapore and beyond. He has an MBA and a background in industrial engineering. He's also a toy designer: his kits to make sandcastles, called Beachworks, have won prestigious American awards.

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▶ degree-awarding institutions around the world, and the MOE can't keep track of all of them.

The only sure way to find out if your foreign or part-time qualification is acceptable or not, Boo Cheng Han, the deputy director of recruitment, says, is to apply.

**IS THIS FAIR?** What about 18-year-olds who want to become teachers, and have been offered places at a foreign university and a local one?

They know that an NTU or NUS degree in the right subject is going to be acceptable. But the MOE won't tell them if the foreign university is recognised.

So does that make them more likely to go abroad or not? If they do, they risk wasting three or four years if the MOE doesn't approve of their choice.

And that is a barrier to trade in educational services. The MOE doesn't appear to be breaking any international trade rules here. But it certainly goes against the spirit of the free-trade agreements that Singapore is negotiating or has signed. Some of them are with some of our biggest rivals in the battle for international students, such as Australia and the United States.

More than one foreign diplomat we spoke to complained that the MOE's recruitment policy was discriminatory.

It's not a trade issue to excite the public in the same way as the trade battles between Europe and America over genetically modified food.

But increasingly education services are being scrutinised in World Trade Organisation talks and other free-trade negotiations.

Trouble may be brewing.

Trade negotiators might also argue that the way the MOE discourages applications from people with part-time or distance-learning degrees is discriminatory.

There are only a few opportunities to do such courses at Singapore institutions of higher learning. Foreign providers supply most of Singapore's