

## NG GIM CHOO

FOUNDER, CHARWONNA AND GROUP  
MANAGING DIRECTOR, ETONHOUSE INTERNATIONAL  
EDUCATION GROUP

If only Ng Gim Choo's grandfather could see her now. Barred from joining the family's sesame oil business for being a woman, the former-accountant-turned-housewife started an enterprise that would impact more lives than a condiment ever could. In founding EtonHouse school, she has endowed children with the joy of learning and in the process, transformed Singapore's early education landscape.

Like all visionary business ideas, EtonHouse began as a solution to a problem, the problem being Ng's daughter's aversion to Singapore schools. When the family moved to London, the pre-schooler had a taste of an alternative system. Her teachers had encouraged instead of scolded; deferred to her imagination instead of insisting on convention; respected instead of belittled. It was magic dust the little girl could not get enough of. When Ng returned to Singapore, she had a ready idea to make learning fun.

EtonHouse opened its first school in 1995 in East Coast with an educational approach that aligns with children's curiosity and creativity. In inquiry-based learning, the teacher notes the interests of his or her students and generates activities based on them. If the children are intrigued by ants, for example, their lessons will revolve around the insects. No two classes are the same; each takes a unique, free-style route to encourage students to observe, explore, inquire, discuss and share.

Nevertheless, EtonHouse lost a million dollars in its first year because it had no track record. According to Ng, it was not until the first batch entered primary school, when the students' confidence and articulateness could be discerned, that EtonHouse found its footing. Since then, it has grown into an international education group with 120 campuses in 11 Asian countries, 40 of which are in Singapore. About 75 per cent—100 per cent in the case of Singapore—are owned by the group. The rest are franchises or joint ventures.

"I just wanted to make an impact with one good school," says Ng. "But because of demand, I had to expand the business." This entails not just venturing into Asia, but also opening more schools in Singapore's well-heeled districts, as well as expanding into primary, secondary and high school education, to allow students to progress within an EtonHouse ecosystem.

So how does inquiry-based learning hold up against the need to do well in examinations? After all, secondary and high school education revolves around assessment. Ng points to the long-term objective of education, asserting that this type of curriculum is good for children in the long run as it develops their interest in learning, social skills and critical thinking—skills that artificial



intelligence cannot replace. "If we just drill [a syllabus], students will score in exams, but eventually, they may not do well in life," she says. "Knowledge changes so fast now. What is studied today can become obsolete tomorrow."

The beneficiaries of the system include children from Singapore's heartlands. The company launched E-Bridge Pre-Schools in 2014 in response to the government's call to provide affordable early childhood education.

"I thought it was a project we could do to help the community," says Ng. The programme has been adapted for those who will eventually attend Singapore primary schools, which have a more structured curriculum.

Ng is 70 this year and has bought out her investors to own 100 per cent of the group, the operations of which are now managed by her son. She wants EtonHouse

to stay within the family. "Making healthy returns is important to sustain the business, but (maximising it) is not the top priority for us," she states. It is this conviction that led her to say no to early EtonHouse investors' exhortation to list the company. "There will be pressure to be profitable and if we don't do well financially, shareholders, teachers and parents will lose confidence in us," says Ng. "Quality education is very important to us, so I prefer not to list."

Ng is aware of her responsibility to society, having taken away ethics if not business lessons from her grandfather. As a child, she would accompany him to Kusu Island, just off Singapore's shores, where they would give coins to beggars lining the steps of the Buddhist temple there. It is a small sum, he had told her, but it

would improve the lives of the impoverished. Now a successful entrepreneur with views of her own, Ng believes that education and charity are two sides of the same coin. "How can you nurture the next generation without imparting the value of caring for the less fortunate?" she says.

Last year, the company's charity arm, EtonHouse Community Fund, trained about 60 volunteers to teach underprivileged children in Singapore's neighbourhoods. The outcomes of the Teacher Everywhere project are now being traced, but Ng shares the story of a K2 student who when he entered primary school, could hold his own against students from higher-income families. "We feel so motivated," says Ng. And that is the fuel to energise any enterprise, as she well knows.

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