

Mary fulfils her dream to earn PhD

ADMITTEDLY, all in all, it was the most difficult and the longest drawn-out academic effort that MP for Tawau cum Deputy Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Mary Yap Kain Ching had put herself through. "But praise God, He had seen me through against all odds," she remarked.

She had virtually sacrificed doing all the things that she would love to do...no shopping, no reading of novels, no chatting with friends on the phone or dining out.

"Right after the day was done as the Deputy of Higher Education or as an MP, I lived and breathed my PhD thesis, so to speak!" she said.

Her thesis is a qualitative case study that investigated the leadership practices of the Head Teacher in turning around a failing school against the setbacks.

On the rationale for the study, Yap said she had wanted to see what it was that made the Head Teacher tick despite the school being tucked away in a very remote area.

According to her, he (Head Teacher) was able to turn around the failing school within three years against all odds so it was really worthwhile studying his leadership practices.

"In my opinion, if his success stories are not researched and documented, they will be lost forever. Literature on rural school leadership is rather scanty so I had wanted to contribute to the existing knowledge corpus on rural education. However, I need to do this research in a scientific way," she said.

In her research, Yap found two significant findings: you can establish an excellent school without implicating much cost, and unveiling a framework for effective leadership, and that is, Self-Organising Leadership for Excellence (SOLE). "SOLE is the novelty of my research study, and theoretical contribution to the corpus of knowledge."

She said the findings emerging from the coding processes and mapping of the Knowles' Process Enneagram fell into two domains. "The organisational domain comprised leadership practices that transformed the school while the socio-psychological domain revealed leadership practices related to establishing relationship with people. These leadership practices and their interrelationships were depicted in the creation of the Self-Organising Leadership for Excellence (SOLE) Framework (that I mentioned earlier)."

Dr Richard Knowles created Process Enneagram, a tool that helps people to solve complex problems and make the connections with the other people they will need to do the work well. "We use this Process Enneagram to think of organisations as living systems where all the parts are connected. People are constantly interacting with each other and adapting to changes in their environment. A healthy organisation is centred on self-organising processes."

Yap also found that the study has further sharpened her analytical think-

MEMBER of Parliament for Tawau cum Deputy Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Mary Yap Kain Ching obtained her PhD in Education from Asia e University (AeU) recently. She received her graduation scroll from Academician Emeritus Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dr Syed Jalaludin Syed Salon, who is the Chairman, Board of Directors of AeU. Her doctoral thesis is on "Leadership Practices of an Award-Winning Head Teacher in a Remote Primary School in Sarawak, Malaysia". It is a qualitative case study consisting of six chapters spanning over 300 pages. It took her five years to complete the thesis though she had aimed to finish in three years. Owing to her political responsibilities as a Parliamentarian and a Deputy Minister of Higher Education, she took two more years to complete it. Yap, a former Super Principal, fielded questions from *Daily Express* on how she embraced the dream of earning a doctoral degree and embarked on the PhD programme despite the seemingly insurmountable odds to emerge victorious after "sleepless nights" and being "grilled" by the Board of Examiners in the Oral Examination. In summing up her five-year academic struggle, she described her endeavour as really tough. Mary Chin reports.



Dr Yap (right) with the Minister of Higher Education, Dato' Seri Idris Jusoh (centre) after the conferment of PhD on her at the Convocation Ceremony.



Dr Yap with her spouse Jeffrey Shim after receiving her doctorate at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur.

ing skills and enhanced her belief that leadership matters. "Lead the way it leads you - do it," she said.

When called for the viva voce examination (or oral examination) to defend her written thesis, she was extremely nervous as the examiners were all prominent professors in the field of leadership. "Despite the anxieties, I gained my courage to face the Board of Examiners; after all, I was the one who had done the research and written the thesis. I was 'grilled' by these examiners for three solid non-stop hours of intellectual discourse on my research

work," she recalled, adding that one of the external examiners was video-conferencing from New Zealand. It has been said that PhD students will not survive the viva voce examination if they have not done the study themselves. "This is because they will need to defend their work chapter by chapter, and on certain instances, the examiners even refer to certain pages and ask for a justification so the thesis defence is really rigorous and nerve-racking. But if one had done the work himself or herself, he or she can defend the thesis competently and effectively,"

Yap pointed out.

She continued: "Despite my confidence in answering these queries, especially the least unexpected questions, my stomach was filled with butterflies. When I was called back into the examination room for the verdict, I was feeling really tense and motionless, praying to God for His favour."

"However, when the Chairman of the Examination Committee read the recommendation from the three examiners that I had passed my thesis with minor changes, I was overwhelmed and nearly burst into tears!"

Rest of the Interview:

DE: Rarely do we hear of a full-time politician pursuing and succeeding in securing a doctorate. Was there any before Datuk?

Mary: Yes, we have had Ministers who had earned their doctoral degrees while in office. A fine example is our Deputy Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi who obtained his PhD in Communications from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) while in office.

DE: How did your dream of earning a doctoral degree come about?

Mary: It has always been my dream to embark on the PhD programme as I am very interested in conducting educational research, especially in the field of school leadership. After I retired in 2007, I told myself that I would have all the time in the world for my PhD degree as I am a strong believer in lifelong education.

DE: Given your hectic schedule as an MP and Deputy Minister, how did Datuk prepare for your doctorate?

Mary: To begin with, I registered for my PhD programme in Asia e University (AeU) in 2011 after spotting an advertisement that it was offering 50pc discount for poor pensioners like me, to do the post-graduate degree. I was also encouraged to know that the mode of study was e-learning with a blended method of face-to-face interaction with the lecturers and supervisors. Most important of all, the degree programmes in AeU are recognised by the Malaysia Qualification Agency (MQA).

Actually, I started on my PhD programme even before I entered politics and every weekend saw me flying to Kuala Lumpur to learn up the different kinds of Research Methodology courses in AeU. I did pretty well and in 2012, I passed my proposal defence, to do a qualitative case study on the leadership practices of an award-winning head teacher in a remote primary school in Sarawak. Passing my proposal defence meant that I could start on the next important phase of my study and that was data collection in the remote school. That took place in early 2013 but only to return to Kota Kinabalu to be informed that Chief Minister, Datuk Seri Panglima Musa Aman was looking for me. The purpose was for me to enter politics. The rest is history.

DE: What did your preparation entail?

Mary: The qualitative case study involved three phases, namely Phase 1: Designing the research, Reading up literature review on leadership, Learning up research methodologies, Preparing Proposal of study, Proposal Defence.

Phase 2: Incorporating recommendations from Proposal Defence, Conducting a pilot study, Data collection of the Head Teacher's leadership practices through interviews and observations and document analysis.

Phase 3: Transcribing interviews and data analysis, Coding and triangulating of findings, Validation and trustworthiness of findings, Writing the thesis, Contributions to new knowledge, practice and methodology. What is the novelty of my research? Submitting the thesis for examination.

DE: Was it a struggle on your part?

Mary: Indeed, it was an academic struggle as time was a constraint that I faced after joining politics. I had aimed to complete my study in three years but it

was just not meant to be. In fact, I was on the verge of giving up but the former Secretary-General of the Ministry of Education, Tan Sri Dr. Madinah Mohamad and the former Director-General of the Ministry of Higher Education, Datuk Prof. Dr. Asma Ismail egged me on NOT to give up, and that revitalised my interest in completing my study. The fact that I was blessed with a very patient and competent supervisor in the name of Prof. Dr. Siow Heng Loke had helped tremendously. Needless to say, my Minister of Higher Education, Dato' Seri Idris Jusoh was all for lifelong education and saw me as an authentic living testimony in articulating the third shift in the Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan (PendidikanTinggi) (2015-2025).

DE: Effective time management has become a cliché answer. Still, Datuk must have adopted a different approach or strategy in managing your time?

Mary: I have always used Stephen Covey's Four Quadrants in terms of managing my time and priorities:

Do what is important and urgent first (Q1)

Do what is not urgent but important (Q2)

Do what is not important but urgent (Q3)

Do what is not important and not urgent (Q4)

The sense of urgency was also another aspect that I had looked at and setting a deadline was important to get my work done. Self-discipline and a sharp focus on completing my thesis were also two very important drives. On top of it, I slept for four hours only working on my thesis up to 2am every night and praise God, He blessed me with the ability to stay awake during the day as I carried out my other inherent duties.

DE: Was sleeplessness worth it?

Mary: At the end of the day, the sleeplessness was worth it as it was my dream coming true at long last. Honestly speaking, there were many times when the spirit was willing but the flesh was weak and I had to do a lot of 'intra-scolding' to push myself towards completing my work. Like other PhD students, I had suffered from writer's block and had to coax myself not to throw in the towel.

DE: How did you find the time to write your thesis?

Mary: Writing and reflecting on my work while travelling back to Tawau and back to KL was the best time for me as this two and a half hours journey each way was the time that I did not get any interference. I had used these hours to continue with my writing and reflections. This means that I really did not waste any valuable time in order to complete my work. But...it was really tough.

DE: With a doctorate under your belt, how is it going to enhance your performance in your current ministerial portfolio as Deputy Minister of Higher Education?

Mary: It is hoped that my study would be useful in informing about leadership practices in the Malaysian rural schools. Being a scientific research, it is also my hope and intention that my study would begin to fill the gaps of educational leadership research relevant to rural schools in Malaysia and that the findings, implications and conclusion would prompt further actions, investigations and improvements by practitioners, researchers, educators and even policy-makers so that students in the schools are not left behind.

I have already shared my study with the Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) this month and other universities have expressed interest in inviting me to share my work and publish in their journals. I would also be able to work more closely and effectively with Leadership Academy for Higher Education using the findings of my study.