



# Patterns of a professor

Our columnist comes away impressed with an award-winning professor who attributes his success primarily to his school teachers.

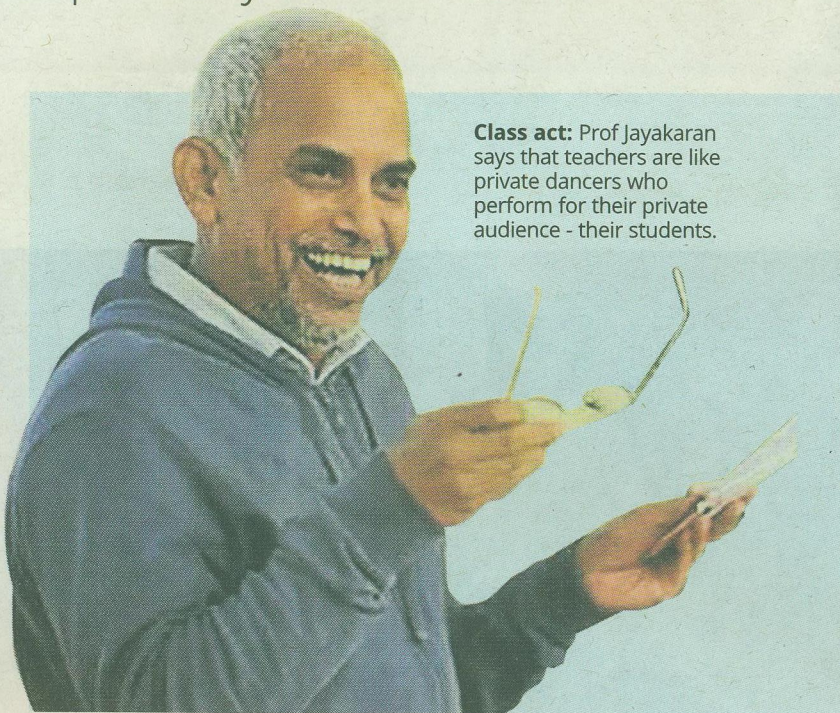
THE gap in time is wide. Scores of years have whisked past and many things have happened in between which have changed the very face of the national education scene. And yet when Prof Dr Jayakaran Mukundan, a recipient of the 2013 National Academic Award for teaching is asked about the influences in his life that had contributed to this outstanding success, his reply is immediate.

“My Standard One teacher Miss Ong Siok Lay,” he says without hesitation and offers me the correct spelling of her name.

“It was 1963 and I was a shy and frightened six-year-old, unused to crowds. Being dyslexic I had a major problem with the letters of the alphabet.

“I remember how Miss Ong would go round the classroom and stop at every desk, beside every child. When she saw how I had inverted my ‘b’s and ‘d’s she would hold my hand and guide my pencil strokes until I got them right.

“And even when I didn’t, instead of looking at the mistakes, she would hold my paper up as if it was a masterpiece and say ‘very good, you’ve got some right’. Then she would point to the little row of patterns we all had to do at the end of every page.



**Class act:** Prof Jayakaran says that teachers are like private dancers who perform for their private audience - their students.

true to what he terms his core calling – teaching.

He talks with candour about his first posting as an English language teacher in Kampung Awal in Jengka, Pahang.

“There was no water, no electricity, and 0% passes for PMR English when I first started teaching.

“Believe me, teaching there was definitely not my first choice but I

of MICELT and ICELT, (Malaysian International Conference of English language Teaching) Prof Jayakaran’s name has become so associated with conferences that he is sometimes affectionately referred to as “The Conference Maker”.

The conferences that he organises are always sell-outs. In fact, the recent MICELT held in The Palace of The Golden Horses this year, saw a

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Prof Dr Jayakaran Mukundan

In the field of English Language Teaching especially, Prof Jayakaran talks about “steroid-like prescriptions”. Mistakes are made he says because of desperate and hastily implemented programmes.

“The repairing of the damage is sometimes done by putting in place other hastily conceived remedies, quite like introducing steroids to keep people going with a false sense of well-being.”

Despite the biting sarcasm that can sometimes make people a little uncomfortable when they are on the receiving end, Prof Jayakaran is also well-known for the tremendous motivation and generous support he gives to those around him.

His transformation into an over-indulgent and pampering Santa Claus figure when he is with children is

"I was good in art, fortunately, and she would tell the whole class. 'Look at Jaya's patterns. Aren't they beautiful?' When she said that, it was as if the sun suddenly came into the classroom and all my inverted letters didn't matter so much anymore," says Prof Jayakaran.

"She was the first one who actually made a difference and probably the reason I am where I am today."

The Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) professor remembers his other mentors too.

## Mentors

"There were other wonderful teachers like Mr Koe Kee Hin who was my science teacher in the lower forms, who so skillfully wove stories into his lessons that we learnt so much about science without even realising it was science. And Mr Ignatius Sim, my articulate Fifth Form physics teacher who never taught anything without relating it to real life.

"Mostly he showed us that learning and teaching could not be confined within the classroom walls," he adds.

It was a little surprising at first that someone of Prof Jayakaran's standing, who has won numerous awards for teaching and excellent service, and who recently received an award for teaching from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, would instantly cite his school teachers as the primary influence in his life.

However, after listening to him recount the early years of his career it was evident that despite his many achievements and the accolades he has received for his vast contributions to the field of education and knowledge in general, he remains

was there to teach English and that was what I did.

"From zero we had 6.5% passes the first year, it slowly increased to 11% the following year, then 33%.

The year before I left the school we had managed a 50% pass rate in English. In 1986, I moved to Sekolah Menengah Sains Raub and took over the hockey team.

"In 1988, for the first time ever, Raub became state hockey champions. I just love the game," he says with a glint in his eyes.

On completing his post-graduate degree, Prof Jayakaran joined UPM's Faculty of Educational Studies where he still teaches today. He is also visiting professor at several universities abroad.

The results of his research have won him no less than 37 National and International awards and he has more than a 100 publications including journal articles and books.

As a founding member of the Asian Regional Creative Writing Group, Prof Jayakaran not only writes and publishes stories and poems but helps train teachers all over Asia to become future writers.

He invented the first on-line textbook evaluation checklist and the software he developed for evaluating English language teaching textbooks won Gold medals at the British Invention show in the United Kingdom and in IENA, Germany.

Because of his expert knowledge and perceptive insight on many issues related to education, the professor is often invited to be part of many advisory panels related to developing curriculums for Malaysian schools.

Being the conceptual founder

of almost 1,500 participants from all over the world.

His conference successes are more feathers in his cap, and this he readily and almost gleefully acknowledges.

"The reason my conferences are so popular," he says, "are because I give teachers what they want and they keep coming back for more. I have been there. I know what they need and this is always of paramount importance when I choose the speakers for my conferences."

## Focus on development

As someone who is directly invested into professional development he emphasises how important it is for teachers to be aware that teacher development is ongoing.

He minces no words when he talks about teachers who have become "fossilised" and warns new teachers who are about to become assimilated into the school system to be on guard against such individuals.

"It is so easy to be sucked in by the system and go under because of herd mentality and the overwhelming culture of conforming," he says.

"Teachers need to build up endurance. They need to create their own culture. This will sustain them throughout their journey of teaching."

Prof Jayakaran's ideas are often radical and sometimes border on the revolutionary but they are never dull.

He is known for his sharp wit, dry sense of humour and low tolerance for pretentiousness or affectation in people.

Although his comments on certain proposals by education committees are sometimes sharply critical, they are never off the mark.

especially amazing.

"She was the Julie Andrews of my life," says the professor referring to Miss Ong again and smiles a little.

"I remember how we used to huddle in front of the school piano bright-eyed and eager for her stories which were always accompanied by a hearty jingle.

"On very special occasions some of us would get a treat, a cup of hot milo from her thermos flask accompanied by a muffin, not the kind you get these days but the real original Hainanese sticky cake with crystalised icing."

"We teachers are like private dancers," he says, adding that one of his favourite performers is Tina Turner. "In a sense, we do our little performances for our private audiences, our students, and in the end you feel like you have given your life away – for a cause and it has eaten a lot of you.

"Miss Ong ... she would use one hand to block the smudges and holes I made in the paper and use the other hand to point to the beautiful pattern at the bottom."

The gap in time is certainly wide. Almost half a century has passed and many educational reforms have been made since that time.

Thankfully for the whole English Language teaching scene, there was a teacher who stood by the side of a boy 50 years ago, and guided his hand until he got his 'b's and 'd's right.

And perhaps our schools need more teachers like Miss Ong. Those who look at the patterns instead of the smudges and help us believe that we too can create something beautiful.