

Reaching out

Adding value to what they do made these two educators winners at the 2013 ECDA Awards For Excellence In Early Childhood Development.



CLARA LEONG
31, Pre-nursery
Head of Level
St James' Church
Kindergarten
(Harding)



Outstanding Early Childhood Educarer Award 2013

PARENTS AND FELLOW teachers know Clara Leong as the "singing teacher" — and the children love her.

"I've always loved to sing and dance," says Ms Leong who has been working in the early childhood sector for 12 years and has been with St James' Church Kindergarten for half that time. "And since I started teaching, I have been using music in class all the time."

Impromptu jingles — such as the one she sings to the tune of 'London Bridge is Falling Down' — work best with younger children during transitions or in between activities. It grabs their attention. "Of course, my fellow teachers and the parents who overhear me are amused by [what I do]," says Ms Leong.

One such parent is Brenda Wong, 41, a former investment banker and mother of one.

"I was very privileged to have Clara as a teacher when my daughter, Beverly, started at St James' Kindergarten," recalls Ms Wong. "My job needed me to travel a lot

and work long hours. I had to rely quite a fair bit on my mother, who was Beverly's primary caregiver at that point, and Clara. She really made a strong impression on me because she made the effort to understand Beverly and understand her home environment."

"On the first day of orientation she asked if Beverly was the only child, what languages she spoke, and who her primary caregiver was," says Ms Wong. "I immediately felt better, knowing that Beverly was in safe hands."

Ms Leong holds a Diploma in Early Childhood Studies from Ngee Ann Polytechnic as well as a Bachelor in Early Childhood Studies from the University of Melbourne, offered in partnership with the Singapore Institute of Management.

"I pursued further studies because I wanted to be better-equipped to reach out to the children," says Ms Leong, who is married but has no kids. "My diploma course gave me many activity ideas and introduced me to early childhood theories, but I wanted to discover my own philosophy as an early childhood professional."

"Winning the award has broadened my perspectives as an educator. It opens up more opportunities to grow professionally. I feel empowered to constantly encourage in-depth learning and promote critical thinking among young children."



Ms Suhana with some of her team of teachers.



Outstanding Early Childhood Leader Award 2013

Every morning, Suhana Binte Salleh wakes up at 5am to cook the day's lunch for her mother, husband and two sons. On occasion, she cooks for her staff as well, whipping up dishes such as *ayam masak chilli padi* and *subsuka*, a Middle Eastern dish of minced beef and vegetables.

"Cooking and baking gives me great satisfaction," says Ms Suhana, who is at her centre by 7.45am. "This is my way of reaching out to the people I value."

It is this personal touch that sets her apart as a leader and the award she picked up at the 2013 ECDA Awards is testament to this quality of hers. Ms Jasmine Ham, Assistant General Manager of My First Skool, praises Ms Suhana's low staff attrition rate and attributes this to the close relationships the principal develops with her staff.

"Suhana values her team's suggestions and she has created an environment in which they feel safe to express their opinions. She respects them as early childhood educators, regardless of experience," says Ms Ham. "In turn, the teachers have developed a strong sense of belonging to the centre."

Because of the teachers' strong attachment, Ms Suhana is then able to develop the team and stretch their potential.



SUHANA BINTE SALLEH
43, Principal
My First Skool
(Blk 803 Tampines)



Ms Suhana did not expect to win the award but doing so has motivated her to attend more workshops and training for her professional growth.

"I also hope to have more opportunities to influence our stakeholders with this award — to reach out and touch more families and children, to see how the centre can grow further, and at the same time, be a role model for aspiring teachers and centre leaders" she says.

Ms Suhana has over two decades of experience in the sector. In 2013, she graduated from Wheelock College with a Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Education, offered in collaboration with SEED Institute, an NTUC training institute.

"I decided to pursue a degree as I felt that it was my responsibility, as the leader of a centre, to upgrade myself and make a positive difference to my centre's practices," says Ms Suhana, who also holds Diplomas in Teaching and Leadership in Early Childhood Education.

Ms Ham says Ms Suhana's achievement has inspired the teachers under her to follow suit and sign up for degree courses too.

"I believe in leadership through action. One of the most rewarding aspects of my job is supporting my teachers so that they can give their best to the children," says Ms Suhana. ♥

