



# WE BRING YOU OUR PASSIONATE EDUCATORS

**MR SYAM LAL SADANANDAN**  
RECIPIENT OF THE PRESIDENT'S AWARD  
FOR TEACHERS (PAT) 2019

**MR OW YEONG WAI KIT**

RECIPIENT OF THE OUTSTANDING  
YOUTH IN EDUCATION AWARD (OYEA)  
2019

**MR GOH THYE HENG**

WINNER OF THE DR RUTH WONG  
MEDAL FOR BEST OVERALL  
PERFORMANCE IN THE MANAGEMENT  
AND LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS (MLS)  
PROGRAMME (JULY 2018)

**STANDING ON A FIRM FOUNDATION TO:**

**LEAD - SERVE WITH VALUES, PRINCIPLES AND IDENTITY**

**CARE - REACH FOR THE BEST IN EACH OF OUR STUDENTS**

**INSPIRE - TO EMPOWER OUR STUDENTS' ASPIRATION TO REACH FOR THE BRIGHTEST POSSIBLE FUTURE FOR THEM**

## Walking the Talk

05 SEP 2019



Trekking across Singapore, Syam Lal s/o Sadanandan is out to 'save' nature and his students.

*Mr Syam Lal s/o Sadanandan, Bukit Batok Secondary School, President's Award for Teachers 2019 Recipient*

What are the chances of teenagers choosing to spend part of their weekend trekking across Singapore with their teacher? If you're thinking, 'low', you have to meet the growing members of Bukit Batok Secondary's One Earth Club, and their teacher Syam Lal s/o Sadanandan.

The 30 members of the One Earth Club (OEC), which raises awareness of environmental issues, heads out on half-day treks across the country every month. What could be the attraction? Endless conversation in the absence of mobile phones, rich experiential learning about nature and nasi lemak for breakfast.

Says Syam, "I created this club for students who may drop out of Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs). I saw this happen a lot with Normal (Technical) students. So I used this club to 'catch' these students, get to know them better and build rapport with them." Syam also invites those with disciplinary issues to be members of the club.

In his 23 years of teaching, Syam has seen students who lose focus and perform poorly as well as those with disruptive behaviour. To get to the root cause of their issues, he realised that he needed to spend time interacting with his students.

The OEC enables him to do that. It also gives him the opportunity to empower the students and build their self-confidence by providing them leadership positions and responsibilities.

The club has grown in popularity over the years. Current students from CCAs, as well as alumni, seek to participate in the club activities. Together they have explored, in groups of about 40, Pulau Ubin, Coney Island, Sungei Buloh and MacRitchie Reservoir. They have also conducted 3-4 coastal cleanups at Pasir Ris Beach annually.

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"My aim is to make these treks a fun learning experience. Along the way, we stop to talk about nature, about plants and symbiotic relationships. Walking with a handful of students each time, I get to speak to them and get better insights into their lives."

For Syam, establishing the OEC is part of his broader approach to motivate and educate his troubled students, who are mostly struggling with academics, challenging circumstances and despondency. Some contemplate dropping out of school.

"I want students to taste success somewhere [in their lives], to be good at something," he says. "Once they have this success, they will feel confident and be able to progress [in other areas]."

## Turning Points

Syam's own setback in school as an easygoing and sporty teenager helped shape his perspective on teaching.

He used to spend countless afternoons playing football, often too tired to devote much energy and focus on studying. Yet, this former school prefect back in his school days was unconcerned as "passing exams had come naturally" to him.

The O-Level examination proved to be a harsh reality check. He did poorly across his subjects, failed English and repeated Sec 4.

"It was a humbling lesson," Syam says. "I was a repeat student in a 'strange' class because all my friends had moved on. It was a very hard lesson. But, maybe this is the reason I can relate with students who may feel looked-down upon, to counsel and champion them to do better."

By the time Syam graduated with a degree in Biochemistry, he had already started to seriously consider a teaching career.

"I think it was in my blood," says Syam, whose great-grandfather had been a teacher and a principal, and whose grandmother had also been a teacher. "I liked the idea of teaching from a very young age."

As a teacher, one must "build a rapport and develop a basic trust" with students, to quote Syam.

In the course of his career, Syam estimates he has taught and guided about 800 Normal (Technical) students, with nearly all progressing to the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), and some to polytechnics and universities. He talks with great pride about his students. He has also gone over and above to assist some students through tough times.

Syam shares the story of a student with anger management issues. He and his fellow teachers learnt how to avoid triggers, and also came up with a code word to indicate a meltdown, so they could intervene in the right way.

He also encouraged the student to take up rugby, which the student's father had excelled in. The student was later appointed to a leadership position in the rugby club. He curbed his outbursts as well.

Syam shares another student who wanted to quit the National Cadet Corps because he felt uncomfortable wearing the uniform. Syam persuaded him to remain as his assistant in a non-uniform role. The student fulfilled his responsibilities and completed his CCA.

In another instance, Syam counselled a student who had been playing truant behind her parent's back. He held a family conference for the mother and child to engage in a heart-to-heart conversation.

"I told her, 'Look, you're a very good student. You have leadership qualities, and I want you to come back to school. I have confidence in you,'" he recalls. The intervention worked and

the student returned to school. She later became president of the One Earth Club and is now pursuing his studies at ITE.

## Building Confidence

Over the years and with a multitude of experiences, Syam realises that the needs of students differ significantly.

He used to believe that his students' needs were like his, hence he taught them the way he was taught in school. But a special education needs (SEN) course he attended made him rethink the need to cater for different kinds of learners.

"[Understanding] SEN opened up my mind." says Syam.

To enliven his classes, Syam shares fun facts, real-world anecdotes, and game-based learning, such as an escape room concept. He also conducts learning journeys. After a trip to a hydroponic farm, he and his students implemented the technology in the school's nursery.

"My conviction is that you have to build the confidence of students, so that they believe in a brighter future. They must find success in our programmes to gain this confidence. So long as they have confidence, they will achieve."

# The Joy of Learning Club

03 JUL 2019



Playing our Joy Luck Club card game promotes collaborative learning, while igniting students' curiosity and creativity with Mr Ow Yeong.

**Mr Ow Yeong makes Literature lessons 'lit' again: his students don't just read their texts; they also play and perform. More importantly, they aren't afraid to ask questions.**

*Ow Yeong Wai Kit, Bukit Batok Secondary School, Outstanding Youth in Education Award 2019 Recipient*

## A card game for Literature class

My class of secondary four Literature students squealed with delight when I showed them stills from the mahjong scene in the film *Crazy Rich Asians*.

They were all film buffs, but more crucially, they were also studying a Literature text in which mahjong plays a vital role: Amy Tan's 1989 novel *The Joy Luck Club*.

It was precisely to foster such a lively conversation about the symbolism of the game, and its significance in their O-level text, that I made a card game based on the novel.

As with mahjong, the card game requires four players. It allows students to assume the roles of the characters and develop a deeper sense of empathy for them, so as to better understand the plot and the novel as a whole.

My motivation was simple. I believe that effective teaching is about creating memorable events and experiences for students. My students should enjoy their Literature texts, because the study of literature is the study of life. It helps students understand others' words, recognise biases, and explore their innermost emotions. It also aids them in articulating ideas about texts, while responding actively to one another.

## Start your own Joy of Learning Club

I believe that every class, every school, and every community can be a 'Joy of Learning Club'. During English class, this may entail getting students to dress up and role-play characters in comprehension passages or Literature texts. Or students can analyse popular songs by Bruno Mars or Ed Sheeran. They can conduct mock trials in class, acting as plaintiffs, defendants, judges and bailiffs, delivering their own speeches about their texts, and cross-examining one another. In this way, they can learn the importance of argumentation and evidence-based reasoning, while enjoying every step of the process.

## Related



Walking the Talk



Young Man, Don't Give Up



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Fun, The Only Constant



The key consideration is that students must be involved in the process. In my English classes, students take ownership of their weekly oral presentations. Every Thursday, each member of the class gives an 'expert talk' on a topic of their choice, after being given a week to prepare. One girl gave a fascinating talk about dentistry; another about the history of memes. The question-and-answer segment is a crowd-pleaser, as rows of hands shoot up and the presenter has to defend his or her arguments. We analyse one another's speeches in detail, with comments such as: 'It was a great speech but when you finished, people didn't know when to clap because you didn't end with a thank-you. What other ways could you have concluded more effectively?'

Other efforts that my students and I initiated included a poetry mural on our school campus, which was painted by our own alumni, students, and staff. We also edited a magazine, featuring all of our school's arts events, which we shared with schools in China and other countries. These initiatives - fuelled by our enthusiasm, fervour and zest for learning - have sparked joy amongst the students.

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*Students dress up and play characters in their Literature texts*

Promoting a positive attitude towards errors

A Joy of Learning Club is not only about playing games. It is also about fostering an environment in which it is normal to make mistakes. Being comfortable with struggles and errors is a vital step towards learning.

During English lessons, I may ask students to fill in the blank for 'A leopard never \_\_\_\_ its spots.' They will give a range of responses, to which I would say, 'Which of these options do you think is my favourite *wrong* answer?'

A few students may stare blankly. Some will hazard a guess. The common wrong answer that many students give would be 'change' and it shows how easy it is to forget to inflect a verb to suit the subject of a sentence (the right answer is 'changes'). I praise students regardless of whether they give the right or wrong answer, because the class can discuss their contributions and learn from them.

Sometimes, students might avoid asking questions out of fear and embarrassment. We can make a difference by being mindful of the words we use when inviting questions. After I finish covering a topic, I have stopped asking: 'So do you have any questions?' This invites a yes-or-no response, and the 'no' is almost never true. Students often claim to understand things even when they don't.

Instead, I ask: 'What are some questions you now have about this topic?' The small shift in the phrasing signals to students that having doubts is normal, asking questions is integral to learning, and that they should never fear to seek clarification.

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*Our poetry mural shows that poetry is for everyone: poetry can inspire students to develop lifelong habits and dispositions.*

Ultimately, instilling the joy of learning is critical for students to be prepared for the future. Of course, some might claim that joyful learning experiences are secondary to what really matters—results. My response would be this: when students are led to enjoy the process of learning, the results will take care of themselves. Students can become genuinely self-directed learners, gaining the drive and self-confidence they need to succeed in life. Perhaps the mahjong players in *Crazy Rich Asians* would approve.

“*The relentless pursuit of self-improvement and making a positive difference to the lives of the people around me, while I see the wonders of the world, is how I best learn.*”

The prestigious Dr Ruth Wong Medal is awarded to Mr Goh Thye Heng (HOD/Mathematics) who demonstrated the best overall performance in the Management and Leadership in Schools Programme (MLS).

This programme aims to develop middle level leaders to expand their roles beyond departments and take on direct leadership for teaching and learning for the innovative school.



An Institute of



## Management and Leadership in Schools Graduation Ceremony

February 2019

Officiated By  
Professor Christine Goh  
Director  
National Institute of Education



*Congratulations to  
Mr Goh Thye Heng  
Winner of the Dr Ruth Wong Medal*