

Creating a bridge for kids with learning difficulties

Areena Ng, who has set up two schools, wins DHL award

By **MATTHEW PHAN**

IS your child intelligent but somehow underperforms at school? Do teachers complain about naughtiness or lack of attention? Or is your child struggling in the normal stream but too smart for a special school?

Areena Ng wants to help. Ms Ng, who recently won the inaugural Young Entrepreneurs for Sustainability award from DHL, is the founder of Bridge Learning, a “diagnostic learning support and specialised intervention centre for mainstream children with learning difficulties”, as she puts it.

It’s a mouthful. But simply put, it means that Bridge caters to children in mainstream schools who, because of learning difficulties that teachers fail to spot, are not doing as well as they could.

“Most teachers recognise only autism or dyslexia, but there’s a spectrum of difficulties and disabilities,” says Ms Ng, who spent five years with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and has a degree in special education from Flinders University in Australia.

One example is auditory processing disorder, in which a child has perfect hearing but cannot fully organise and interpret aural data. If a teacher gives lengthy instructions, the child may only follow the first and last and mix up the rest.

Bridge uses an activity-based diagnostic test to assess a child. This draws out weaknesses in, say, visual spatial awareness, which Ms Ng says is directly related to being good at maths. If a child has strong spatial ability but is failing maths, this could mean the child could do well but was pushed from basic calculations to abstract concepts too quickly.

Ms Ng, who is 29, originally studied tourism at polytechnic before joining MOE as a primary school teacher. While teaching mainstream youngsters, she was seconded to a specialised programme for children with learning difficulties, and trained as a counsellor.

After three years, she joined MOE headquarters, where she was formally trained to teach children with autism or dyslexia.

She then spent two years training teachers, but was dissatisfied.

At MOE, “the system got in the way”, she says. “No matter what, there is pressure to complete the curriculum, and children need support beyond that.” Yet, outside the formal system, there are few places that are able to deal with the full spectrum of learning disabilities. And as parents might expect, fees can be “exorbitant”.

So Ms Ng – at her own expense – set off for further training in Australia, then visited schools in the US, Australia and Taiwan to see how they handle the issue. Bridge Learning, which she started out of her home in 2003, is the result.

The school, which is now based in Choa Chu Kang and has just opened a second centre at Clemenceau, has more than 100 students. Ms Ng refuses to guarantee results but says virtually all students make progress of some sort within six months, in behaviour, communication or motor skills, if not always in grades.

As a social enterprise, Bridge must turn a profit, though it received seed funding from the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports. DHL’s field visit report shows the centre had revenue of US\$233,500 in 2006, with a profit of US\$23,600.

Fees vary depending on a child’s needs – sessions can be in groups of eight to 10, or individual – but are lower than at private schools or even some charities, says Ms Ng.

Bridge also offers up to 90 per cent subsidies to families with monthly incomes below \$2,000.

Through referral schemes from schools like Nanyang Primary – “one of the most supportive” – Ms Ng wants to grow enrolment at the two centres to 500 students. She is also thinking of franchising the school overseas as well as asking for donations to extend the programme to orphanages in Singapore.

To support these plans, Ms Ng needs about 25-30 more staff, on top of the current dozen. Given that Bridge pays its teachers an average of \$2,000 – she draws a salary “slightly higher” than \$3,000 herself – is it hard to hire and keep staff?

“Hiring may be a problem,” she says. “But my first two staff are still with me, not starving, and enjoying it.”



Ms Ng: Started Bridge Learning to help children who, because of learning problems that teachers fail to spot, are not doing as well as they could

DHL YES award winner to represent S'pore in region

Areena Ng of Bridge Learning receives \$5,000 in prize money

DHL launched the Young Entrepreneur for Sustainability (YES) Awards in the Asia-Pacific this year, in support of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals.

The awards were judged by a panel of six, including National Kidney Foundation chairman Gerard Ee, the Singapore Environment Council's executive director Howard Shaw and National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre chief executive Tan Chee Koon.

The national winner – Areena Ng of Bridge Learning – received \$5,000 of

prize money and will represent Singapore at the regional awards at the end of this month.

Besides Ms Ng, two other individuals reached the finals.

Kenny Low, 31, set up the City Harvest Education Centre as a non-profit school to help private candidates take GCE O-level or N-level exams. The aim is to give those who leave school a second chance to succeed in education.

Wilson Ang, 25, founded ECO Singapore, an organisation that aims to get Singapore youth involved in protecting the environment. ECO Singapore publishes a digital magazine on topics like bio-diversity, health and pollution, and arranges environmental events and campaigns.