

To students facing challenges, she says: Don't just dream, reach for the moon

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Like a whisperer to students struggling academically, Science teacher Ashikin Bte Abdul Ra'uuf has no end to the techniques and programmes she designs to inspire them to greater heights. Ngee Ann Secondary School's Lead Teacher of Educational Support is also a recipient of the President's Award for Teachers 2023.

At Ngee Ann Secondary School, when students struggle with their lessons and their teachers have tried different ways to help, Mdm Ashikin Bte Abdul Ra'uuf is often called in for informal consultations.

She also takes on classes that are less motivated in learning and attending school. She sees encouraging and empowering reluctant learners as her mission.

One could say, that's the job of a Lead Teacher of Educational Support, isn't it? But there's a whisperer quality to the way Mdm Ashikin diagnoses issues that has earned her the respect of her colleagues.

It could be how she draws from a well of 27 years of teaching experience to share pedagogical tips and insights with colleagues, and how she journeys alongside them to address their students' needs.

Or it could be how she goes the extra mile for students, especially those from troubled backgrounds.

To break a cycle of poor habits and disengagement, Mdm Ashikin uses reason and invokes positive emotions in her students when they think of school.

To Secondary 4 student Muhammad Rayyan Mikhail Bin J Maler, for example, an 11am knock on the door to wake him up was not unheard of. The first time he heard a knock, he had been absent from Mdm Ashikin's Science classes for many days. So she showed up at his home for a chat to understand his situation better. Several home visits later, he

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understood that school might be more important than part-time work for the moment, and might give him and his mother a better future in the long run; his attendance gradually improved.



Using a mukbang video for a discussion on digestion

Interestingly, Mdm Ashikin's foray into her current role stemmed from her term as a discipline mistress 20 years ago. "I came to the realisation that discipline enforcement can only go so far with a student," she reflects. "I wanted to do more. I want to empower the students and improve their well-being."

She started to reassess her approaches towards students in need and seek more innovative ways to better support them.

She could relate to the students and connected with them through a shared background of growing up in a low-income family. "I grew up poor, living in an environment of drugs and coffee-shop gang fights. I understand the rationale behind their actions," she shares. Her bond with her students is so strong that, as one student coins it, she's like 'family' to them. Growing up, school was Mdm Ashikin's happy place. School provided routine and discipline for young Ashikin. It gave her a sense of purpose and something to look forward to each day. School offered a glimpse to a world beyond her own.

"In school, all things made sense. Decisions made were consistent with the values of the school. Most importantly, it was a place where I felt that I mattered," she says. "I want to create the same wonderful experiences that I had for my students to make them feel like they matter, regardless of their background."

It was apparent that disengagement was the underlying problem of High Support Needs (HSN) and low-progress students. To tackle the root issue, she adopted the 'Relevant, Appealing and Personal' (R.A.P.) approach in her lessons to increase engagement.

In one example, she used a trending mukbang video to teach about the human digestive system. Her students' eyes opened wide seeing in class what they had all been watching online, and before one could say "TikTok", they were racing on about what they thought was going on in the digestive tracts of those influencers who were gorging on food for Likes.

"That was definitely relevant, appealing and personal to them!" she recounts, laughing.

She also gamifies her lessons, such as by adopting the Jeopardy gameshow format to teach Science concepts. "My job is to make the students realise that they want to learn, which gives them another reason to come back to school."

"I want to impart to my students the value of learning – to recognise that life is a continuous process of learning,

unlearning, and relearning. I hope to make them feel like they matter, regardless of their background."

Moonshot mentality: Inspiring way beyond the classroom

While fostering connections can be effective in correcting behaviour, Mdm Ashikin believes it is not sufficient on its own – students need to be motivated from within.

She champions what she calls the 'moonshot mentality' – for students to dream big and far, and believe that their dreams are within reach. "I tell my students: Don't kill your dreams, be who you want to be. Why settle for less? You can shoot for the moon. After that, we will plan to fulfil the dream."

For HSN students, Mdm Ashikin saw a way to inspire them towards big dreams by introducing an in-house Education & Career Guidance (ECG) programme that is customised for the students in the Normal Technical Course.

When the students attend interesting after-school activities such as dragon boating, she capitalises on the buzz to facilitate discussions on possible occupations associated with the activity. "For dragon-boating, we explored related careers such as coaching, being an athlete, or even setting up a dragon-boat company. This widens the possibilities that they see out there, and they realise there's more than just the usual options for them," she shares.

As the programme offers students many different opportunities to learn new and interesting skills, it was such a hit that students from other classes started requesting for it. It has since been made available to all students in the school as the Skills Discovery Elective Programme to benefit all students, as the school embarked on Full Subject-based Banding.

The power of collaborative learning

Mdm Ashikin's dedication towards HSN students extends beyond her work in school.

She is part of MOE's Core Team of the Education Subject Chapter, a national platform where teacher leaders come together to strengthen the teaching fraternity through professional development activities.

She also initiates professional learning sessions among the Senior and Lead Teachers in the East Zone to discuss and address emerging concerns involving HSN students.

When asked what keeps her going all these years, Mdm Ashikin pauses to reflect. "My students," she says simply. "I want to impart to them the value of learning – to recognise that life is a continuous process of learning, unlearning, and relearning. I hope to make them feel like they matter, regardless of their background."

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