



Ms Bianca Tan working with four-year-old Leong Kar Hoi during a music therapy session that helps to regulate emotions and behaviour. Ms Tan, who is dyslexic, thrived during her developing years thanks to the dedicated support of her parents, educators and mentors. ST PHOTOS: NEO XIAOBIN



Ms Tan's mother, Mrs Zita Tan, handing out cake during a birthday party at Pebble Place Development Centre, which she co-founded in 1999. Mrs Tan, 57, does not permit the use of erasers in her classes as she believes that mistakes have to be accepted in order for true learning to take place.

STRUGGLE WITH DYSLLEXIA  
**Because I didn't do well in school, I regressed. If you can't read, you can't do anything.**

MS BIANCA TAN, on her school years. She learnt how to compensate by absorbing knowledge through other means.



Ms Tan (second from left) at a meeting with her schoolmates at the Singapore Institute of Technology's student lounge. They are part of a 12-member group involved in Project Myanmar, an overseas learning project that will help to set up a pre-school in Myanmar next year. Ms Tan is pursuing a Bachelor of Science in early childhood education.

# Helped as a kid, she now teaches other kids

Inspired by support she had growing up with dyslexia, Bianca Tan is becoming an early childhood educator



Kindergarten children at Pebble Place Development Centre working on a task that requires them to make a few tree branches stand. Through this activity, they use their problem solving skills and learn about teamwork.



Ms Tan greeting her former sailing coach Kelvin Tan, 41, whom she bumped into at the National Sailing Centre. He took extra care to ensure that she understood the briefings he gave. She credits him as a positive influence on her and a great support, and says that sailing played a huge role in building her self-confidence during her formative years.



Ms Tan (right) with her boyfriend Mr Davior Leong, 23, (second from left) and her cousins at East Coast Park, where they went to cycle and watch sailboats. Ms Tan is very close to 11-year-old Tammy Tan (in white) and eight-year-old Glenda Tan (in purple), whom she has helped to look after since they were born.



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When she was six years old, Ms Bianca Tan had a secret even she was unaware of. She could not read. Words move, "B" becomes "d", "u" becomes "n". She skips words and lines. She cannot track and focus on what is written. Sentences do not read like they make sense. Her pre-school drama teacher thought she was talented because she could recite tales from storybooks. The teacher soon discovered that she merely regurgitated content from memory. But Ms Tan's mother, Mrs Zita Tan, a former social worker who co-founded the pre-school Pebble Place Development Centre, recognised the symptoms. She asked for a psychological assessment for Ms Tan at the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS). In 1999, Ms Tan was diagnosed

with dyslexia. Despite being of normal intelligence, the difficulty she faces in reading and writing means she has learning disability. During literature lessons in secondary school, she would be five pages behind everyone else. Even now, at 23, she reads more slowly than her university classmates. The learning disorder affected her emotionally. "Because I didn't do well in school, I regressed," she said. Learning to read was an excruciating process, and her self-esteem took a huge beating. "If you can't read, you can't do anything." But she learnt how to compensate. For instance, she learns more readily by watching videos and documentaries than by reading. She also loves to do anything that is hands-on, be it cooking, baking, painting or art and craft. She is a firm believer in the proverb "it takes a village to raise a child". She considers herself fortunate to have had patient early childhood educators and mentors who worked hand-in-hand with her parents. That support network helped her overcome her feelings of insecurity.

She also acknowledges the amount of effort and money that her parents put in to help her to thrive. There were her teachers at Pebble Place when she was seven to eight years old. "Uncle Kel", her former sailing coach Kelvin Tan, who went out of his way to make sure she understood his briefings, patiently repeating his explanations until she got the colours of the buoys and knew left from right. There was Mrs Thing Siok Keng, her speech and language therapist for six years. And then there were the staff from DAS, who helped her with special classes and educational therapy from Primary 2 to Secondary 3. Inspired, Ms Tan decided at a young age to become an early childhood educator. The pre-school sector in Singapore has faced a manpower shortage in recent years and about 4,000 more pre-school educators are needed by 2020. Pre-school teachers earn an average of \$2,000 to \$3,000, based on data gathered by the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) last year.

The median salary for university graduates last year was \$3,300. Outspoken and extroverted, Ms Tan graduated from Temasek Polytechnic in 2014 with a diploma in learning differences from DAS. A recipient of the ECDA scholarship award, she is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Science in early childhood education, which is offered by Wheelock College in partnership with the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT). Since she was 14, the middle child has helped out at Pebble Place Development Centre in Paya Lebar. At the centre, she is Ms Bianca to her mother, whom she addresses as Mrs Zita. She has an older brother, 25, who has Asperger's syndrome, and a younger sister, 21, who is also dyslexic. Their father is a businessman. Like her mother, whose life and work is in early childhood education, Ms Tan believes in creating an inclusive environment for children with and without special needs. They believe in a child's holistic development: from a curious and creative mind towards learning, to gross and fine motor skills, strong

moral values, and confidence. They maintain that through experiential learning, children can develop leadership qualities, know how to solve problems, appreciate teamwork, learn respect and how to be verbally expressive. They also highlight the importance of collaborating with parents. Mrs Tan's classroom has no erasers because, as she said: "If you don't make mistakes, how do you learn?" To her, "mistakes have to be accepted and not erased". Echoing her mother's philosophy, Ms Tan feels that "your experiences in life are what shape you". Next year, she will head to Myanmar with her schoolmates from SIT to help set up a pre-school in Yangon. They are part of a 12-member group involved in Project Myanmar, an overseas service learning project that will help to set up classrooms and work on interior environment and design. Dyslexia led her onto the path of early childhood education, and she hopes to apply "everything learnt in polytechnic and university" to help others.

Ms Tan planning an English and literacy lesson for children with learning disabilities. The learning material is similar to that which was used to teach her when she was younger.

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