Psychologist Scarlet Leong savours her "Oh, now I see!" moments with families

TRANSCRIPT

Scarlet Leong, Senior Specialist Psychologist, Dyslexia Association of Singapore

Scarlet Leong

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Andy McLean 00:54

Hello and welcome to Moments In Mind, a podcast from Pearson Clinical Assessment.

My name is Andy McLean. I'm a podcast producer based in Australia, and in this series, we share extraordinary stories of professionals who are making a difference in people's mental wellbeing every single day.

In each episode, a special guest reveals moments that have changed their life and changed the lives of the people who they support. And in today's episode, you'll hear my conversation with the fabulous Scarlet Leong, a senior specialist psychologist at the Dyslexia Association of Singapore.

Besides her clinical expertise, I think what struck me most about Scarlet was her deep compassion and empathy. You can really see why children and families warm to her so much. She is really good at seeing beyond the way a person might be presenting themselves to figure out the way that each individual learns best. As Scarlet says, it's not just about dealing with someone's challenges, but it's also about helping them to build upon their strengths.

And I guess the other thing that I really loved about Scarlet's approach is her dedication to scientific inquiry. She actually reminded me a bit of a warm and kind-hearted police detective, the way she goes in search of clues to find out what really makes people tick. That's enough preamble from me. Let's jump in and hear the conversation.

Andy McLean

Hi Scarlet. Welcome to Moments In Mind.

Scarlet Leong 02:17

Hello, Andy, thank you so much for the kind welcome.

Andy McLean 02:21

Well, today we're going to talk in depth about your amazing work at the Dyslexia Association of Singapore. But first, let's find out a little bit about you and your background. What's the first moment in your life that you can remember?

Scarlet Leong 02:34
Sure, thank you for the question. Actually, it's the first time that I've been asked this.
So I think my earliest memory goes back to when I was in kindergarten, and I remember just sitting on a floor with my classmates, all of us. We were just in our classroom, listening to our teacher, and she was a very kind lady. So I can still picture how she pretty much looked like and her presence. But I'm not sure whether or not she was reading to us or leading us in a song… But all I remember was that I felt safe and calm and adequately curious in that setting. Yeah, it's such a simple moment, but I guess it has really stayed with me over the years.

Andy McLean 03:14
Oh, that's so interesting that you remember that so vividly, because later in this discussion, I'd actually like with talk about how and why making children feel comfortable and safe and engaged is so important today in your work at the Dyslexia Association of Singapore. But before we get to that, though, can I just ask what led you to pursue your career in psychology?

Scarlet Leong 03:37
I think as a teenager, I was always rather instinctively drawn to people's stories. For instance, their feelings, their motivations, and also experiences that shaped how they thought and behaved. I also liked observing things around me and sometimes also writing reflections about them.
And I guess looking back these features or these personality traits kind of predisposed me to a career that was very in line with psychology, even though I was I had no idea about it then.
But the real tipping point came when I was in junior college. I remember this quite vividly. I found out that someone I knew within my circle was struggling with depression, but I wasn't in direct contact with this person at the time, and I certainly wasn't in any position to help either, but I remember just feeling a very strong burden, almost like a conviction.
And I think that kind of then sparked something in me—became the impetus for me to find out more about, you know, mental health, psychology. It's very powerful for me because then psychology opened this door whereby, "Oh, you know what? By understanding and supporting someone, we are able to help the person feel better and lead a more positive life". I thought that was very powerful.
Yeah, and then along the way, I also discovered how much I enjoy working with children. So I think that discovery guided me to educational psychology, which is my main practice today. And it's amazing. I am very thankful for the job that I have: I could combine not only my interests, but also what my personality is very in line with. And also a genuine passion to understand people deeply and supporting children meaningfully. I think that is really my privilege in the role I play.

Andy McLean 05:24
Well, in a moment, we'll talk about that role that you play today as a psychologist at the Dyslexia Association of Singapore. But first, for any listeners who aren't familiar with exactly what "dyslexia" is, can you give us a quick definition?

Scarlet Leong 05:38
Yes, at its core, dyslexia is a brain-based condition that affects two things: reading and spelling. Of course, there are characteristic features of dyslexia. For instance, issues with phonological awareness or in simple words, our awareness of sounds in the oral language. There's also issues with verbal memory, and processing speed.
And what we know of dyslexia is that it's not about intelligence. In fact, this is primarily something that we have to rule out before ascertaining dyslexia. And but you know, individuals with dyslexia, they struggle with things like decoding words, recognising sight words, and spelling consistently.
And why does this happen? It's because the brain processes written language in a less efficient manner. So this is despite good teaching, adequate exposure and effort. Someone with dyslexia just finds reading and spelling so unusually hard.

Andy McLean 06:34
Well, that's really helpful to clarify that, Scarlet, thank you. Because there can be a lot of confusion and stigma surrounding dyslexia can't there…

Scarlet Leong 06:41
Definitely, especially coming from a society locally in Singapore that values productivity and meritocracy. When a child struggles in learning in school—especially from such a young age—it's not uncommon to find people still attributing these behaviours to “a lack of effort or motivation”, or just labeling it as pure “laziness”.
That is very unfortunate, because these children like what you mentioned, they are very misunderstood. They go through life thinking like, “Why am I like this? I'm putting in so much effort, but the results are not showing me that, you know, that my efforts are bringing me somewhere”.
And for children who are even more aware of these mistakes and failures this then brings so much frustration. It affects them socially, emotionally, a lot, and we see that very often in our setting as well.
And as a result of these misconceptions of their behaviour, teachers, parents, adults around them respond by, in fact, placing even higher expectations on them, like, “Why are you not studying even more? You know, if you know you're not good at this, keep doing it until you're you're good at it.”
So of course, after a while, they find that these efforts are futile. And when there is a right opportunity, some of them get referred to an educational psychologist to evaluate their learning.
Otherwise, there will be children who will continue to go through their education journey without finding these things out, experiencing repeated failures, feeling all the disappointments from the adults around them. Yeah, they know, and they can feel it, and it affects them so deeply, which really doesn't do good to their overall socio-emotional wellbeing.

Andy McLean 08:24
Let's talk a little bit about the Dyslexia Association of Singapore, also known as DAS. Broadly speaking. How does your organisation help people who learn differently?

Scarlet Leong 08:36
We provide assessments as well as specialised interventions.
So we serve clients from preschool age all the way to adulthood. And very broadly—we have a huge range of services, but if I were to just put it simply across lifespan:

- We first provide early literacy intervention for preschoolers who have been flagged up for literacy delays or learning issues
- And then when they are of school going age, our main literacy program then serves them throughout primary, secondary school.
- But we also know that during this period where academic demands just continue to increase, they struggle with more than just literacy, there's math, there's other language learning, there's science, and there's so many things that is going on for them. So we also provide these, what we call educational services.
- But children with dyslexia, it's not just all about difficulties. They have strengths as well, and most of the time, these are very creative ones. So we also have talent building programs like Speech and Drama, visual arts
- And like what we talked about earlier: the socio-emotional issues that come along with dyslexia. So at the DAS, I've been very privileged to have been part of this process where we are expanding our services to provide socio-emotional related interventions for children dyslexia. Yeah, this is still in the pipeline, so we are still in the infancy stage with a lot of these services, but I'm so happy that we are now offering such services.
- And then, of course, we have programs for tertiary students as well.
- So conventionally, our services have been primarily for those with dyslexia. But under our new initiative in the recent years, also known as the ILD initiative (ILD stands for I Learn Differently) we have now expanded our services to anyone who needs them without a formal diagnosis, without formal evaluation—although those things are very valuable, it has its role in place, definitely—but I think the primary aim of this is so that we want to be able to support as many people as possible, provide intervention, and then once they're in our doors, let's talk about "How can we support you? If an assessment is what you need, sure, here are our assessment services. But if intervention is your priority, let's talk about support first then. Wherever you are, we can start where you are, and we'll provide the service that will best benefit you."

And that's what we hope as an organisation.

Andy McLean 11:06
Well, you mentioned the emotional and social aspects of dyslexia, and you talked about IQ and learning aptitude earlier on as well. Tell me about how those standardised assessments help you in those areas.

Scarlet Leong 11:20
The role that assessments play would be essentially finding out how a child learns so that we are able to make the best recommendation in terms of support and intervention. So I often liken this to a GPS metaphor. It's "a GPS for learning." It helps us to chart out this learning terrain, and that helps us to then provide recommendations for parents and teachers to work with them in their learning—be it in their classroom or at their home, and then hopefully through the assessment process, it brings them more clarity, more answers, helping them to understand their child better.

Andy McLean 12:00
And those assessments must lead to some real moments of clarity for parents—and indeed for children themselves. I'm guessing those are real moments of discovery for them. Tell me a little bit about that.

Scarlet Leong 12:11
The theme that I see is that in these amazing moments, the theme is really about the “Oh, now I see!” Those moments. And that moment is when a parent or a teacher finally understands how and why a child behaves in a certain way. You know like, “Every time I give him a book, he's like that. Every time I put the homework in front of him, he runs away. But in games and activities, he's there, he's engaging, he's participating.”
So this, “Oh, now I see!” moment is that insight that comes from the depth of information we gather during an assessment. So because of how much information we gather in an assessment, we are able to provide answers most of the time. We are able to provide answers for these behaviours.
We can then provide not only answers. For instance, we can attribute these behaviours to a certain plausible reason, and then we are also able to then make recommendations on how parents and teachers can work with a child, and then that changes how they respond and support their child.
And then that will help to encourage and that will also be the impetus for the child to behave differently, because, “Oh, okay, now I'm given a passage that is more tailored to my reading level. It's not so difficult anymore. I don't have to run away when I see a passage, I can identify… okay, not all of them, but some words. So I will try.”
So it's just bridging that gap for them, and which is why I talked about earlier the advocacy role that we play as educational psychologists. And I can vividly remember one parent who came out from the feedback session with me, and immediately she went over to hug her child, you know, and in that embrace I saw a lot of emotions. There was guilt, regret, hope—but a lot of belief and love. Yeah, I guess that's the power of the “Oh, now I see!” moment.

Andy McLean 14:10
And as a clinician, what are those “Oh, now I see!” moments like for you to be a part of?

Scarlet Leong 14:17
Yeah, I think it's back to the privilege of being able to be in this role. You know, it's not like I am any different as an individual. It's just because of my training and where my passions brought me to. I'm able to play this role in this particular child's life for this family at this point in time. You know, it could be any other professional, really, in that position, it's just something that I don't take for granted. And it's something that keeps me going, even though sometimes this role can be quite demanding and taxing. Like with every career, right?

Andy McLean 14:55
Yeah, those light bulb moments are what can keep you going during the more difficult times, aren't they? Thank you for being so open about that, Scarlet. It's very important.
Now. Let's pause for a short break, and when we return, we'll discuss a real-life example of the amazing work you do with children. Your work sometimes reminds me of being like a police investigator, the way you go hunting for clues to provide answers! It's amazing stuff.
So, we'll be right back after this break.

A message from Pearson 15:32
For more than 100 years, Pearson Clinical Assessment has tested and refined products and services that give educators and clinicians trusted tools to make a profound difference in the lives of adults and

children. Scarlet and her colleagues at the Dyslexia Association of Singapore use a whole suite of Pearson tools, including—but not limited to—the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children. To find out about these, just google “Pearson Clinical Assessment” and check out the Pearson website.

Andy McLean 16:15
Welcome back to the podcast!
So Scarlet, I mentioned before the break that I liken your work a little bit to that of a kindly police detective, can you perhaps share an example of your investigative skills in action?

Scarlet Leong 16:29
Yeah, it's really hard to pick one, really!
But I can recall one assessment that I did and this was more meaningful because it's during my first few years as an associate psychologist. It was when I was assigned to see this “Primary Three” girl who has been home schooled since “Primary one”. (Homeschooling is not common in Singapore, although it's not unheard of. There are, it’s just not common.)
And so her mum brings her in. Her mum monitors her learning very closely, so she's very sensitive to this girl's reading and spelling. So some presenting concerns were, you know:

- This girl can read, but she tends to skip lines when reading passages
- So she needs to reread in order to understand what she's reading.
- So and then another part will be she can segment words—so she can use sounds to break words down to help her in her reading—but she just prefers to guess at words based on how they look like. So then this would cause a lot of word substitutions. So a word could be “might”, but she will read it as “may”. You know, because they both start with “M”. And these kind of things
- And then spelling is an issue, because she makes a lot of sequencing errors. The accuracy is not there.

So that's on the learning front. Behaviourally, what I was seeing was that, or what, rather, what parents were saying were that she was fidgety, and interestingly, she was highly sensitive to sounds like the vacuum cleaner. She cannot be near a vacuum cleaner at home. And in public, she puts on headphones to drown out sounds. She needs complete silence to work.
But socially, she is very lovely, very affectionate. She loves to mingle with people, and she's a very sociable girl.

Andy McLean 18:25
And so as you went searching for clues that would have involved a battery of assessments, I would expect. Can you tell me a little bit about some of those and what the approach was?

Scarlet Leong 18:35
So with every routine dyslexia assessment, we conduct a battery of tests that cover IQ, achievement and, very importantly, phonological processing, which is just how we process sounds.
So because this happened several years ago, before we have our locally normed intelligence test, the Singapore Ability Skills (the SAS). And you this was even before the new version of the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test, the WIAT-4.

So part of the battery that I used included the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (the WISC, for short), and the WIAT-3.
So what we found from the assessment was that this child had reasonable learning potential. That was what the IQ test showed us. This child has a potential to learn [with] no more than average difficulty as compared to peers her age.
But we found that there were some gaps in her phonological processing. Even then, she *could* spell and read at average levels, if not *above* average.
So this is where the work really begins. What I saw during the assessment was that behaviourally, this girl was fidgety, yes, but she was also quite sensory seeking. So what I saw was that she'd be touching things within her reach. She'd be just feeling them out. She'd not be being mischievous or anything. She would just feel them out. She'd be playing for hair. She'd be touching her clothes. And for a long period of time she was actually then chewing her straw that came from a drink that she had from a break, until she was asked to put away during the reading task, of course.

Andy McLean 20:07
So you had the standardised assessment results. That was one piece of the puzzle. You had your own behavioural observations. That's another piece of the puzzle. What else did you consider in the process?

Scarlet Leong 20:20
And then what I also often look at is the *qualitative nature* of errors that the child has during the assessment. So *how* are the errors actually made?
So yeah, standardised scores tell us that you know the number—the performance of this child "is meeting age expectations".
Yes, but how did the child get there? The score alone does not tell us that. And this is a discipline that is trained by all the supervisors that I had the privilege of learning from and working with.
So then when I look at *the pattern* of errors, I saw that a lot of them were visual in nature, which is very in line with the presenting concerns. At the word level and the passage, she was omitting, adding suffixes, skipping words, and she was also skipping lines. There were a lot of tracking issues as well.
So all in all, we didn't diagnose this girl with dyslexia, because obviously she can read and spell, but she's still making these errors. So then what we consolidated with was that she presented with sensory processing issues which could have been hindering her learning and academic skills.
And then this would also explain her other notable behaviors, like sensitivity to loud sounds, her fidgetiness and all the visual perceptual issues that she was also presenting with. And then, of course, with this conclusion, this helped us to make appropriate recommendations for her and the family.
So in summary, really, for this child, what I've learned as a very young practitioner then was that scores alone—yes—they provide an objective way of measuring performance, but it's really just one piece of the puzzle. Yeah, scores bring a lot of clarity to the situation for myself as a practitioner, as for the family, but we need to use other sources of information.
And as a practitioner, that's where our role really lies in how we can add value to the process. It's really how we amalgamate all the information together and then help parents to make sense of this. To interpret it, and then make the appropriate recommendations for how the child can benefit from particular interventions or areas of support.

Andy McLean 22:30
And I believe that you conduct some of your assessments via iPad using Pearson's Q-interactive platform. Why is that kind of digital approach useful?

Scarlet Leong 22:41
I can imagine from a child's perspective, you find it a little bit more engaging.
And as a practitioner, if it's something that can add value to the assessment process for engagement or for participation, then it's also something worth a try.

Andy McLean 22:56
Yeah, absolutely, because kids do spend so much of their time in the digital world now that they're actually really comfortable with that kind of format.

Scarlet Leong 23:06
Yes, yes, yes. We often joke among ourselves that we have a small expertise called "Roblox", and we have another specialty called "Minecraft"!
So that helps us to get going. You know, it's part of our survival skills when we work with children!

Andy McLean 23:22
Yeah, I can imagine that a good working knowledge of Minecraft and Roblox would come in pretty handy when you're working with children, right?

Scarlet Leong 23:28
Yeah, definitely! In fact, that is what we do for all of our children. Definitely, I think that is what really makes the assessment process a very interesting one.
You talk about investigative work, right? But the main difference is that we are able to gather information, all of this information, in a way that the child *does not feel so judged*, or in a way that the child feels, "Oh, no, I'm not doing this right?" So we create a safe space for the child to perform up to his or her level of ability.

Andy McLean 24:04
Yeah. Well, that makes perfect sense. It goes right back to where we started the conversation, doesn't it? Putting children in a safe, familiar, and comfortable environment is how you bring out the best in them. In fact, it's amazing to think that your earliest memory is, in a way, still informing the work that you do to this very day.
Now, Scarlet, time has whizzed by, and we have to wrap up today's chat. But before we do, I've got one last question for you. In the years to come, when you finished working at the Dyslexia Association of Singapore and you're looking back, what do you think you'll remember most?

Scarlet Leong 24:41
I think on the whole, I would be very proud of what the Dyslexia Association of Singapore stands for. So I'll be very proud of how much we have expanded our services since I joined in 2017 from just primarily focusing all services to children with dyslexia—to now [where] we are expanding all our services to support all learners with varying levels of needs.

And I would like to know that this work has helped to build a more inclusive educational landscape in Singapore. I think that would be very nice to know. And then I think I'll also be glad to know that I played a small part in that journey.
And also professionally, I played a small part, hopefully, in mentoring and inspiring the next generation of psychologists coming into the field.

Andy McLean 25:33
Oh, that's lovely. Well, Scarlet, thank you so much for sharing your experiences with me today. I've so enjoyed our discussion.

Scarlet Leong 25:39
Oh, thank you for the invitation.

Andy McLean 25:49
Thanks for listening to this episode of Moments In Mind, a podcast by Pearson Clinical Assessment. To find out more about the Pearson tools that Scarlet and her colleagues use—such as the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children. —just google “Pearson Clinical Assessment” and check out the Pearson website.

And to find out more about the Dyslexia Association of Singapore, visit das.org.sg

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In the meantime, thanks so much for listening to this episode, and goodbye for now.

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