Taking charge of state's outstanding school has made Serina Sauni a force to be reckoned with when it comes to education.

It has been quite a norm to identify individual's profession by their outward appearance. But for Serina Sauni, 56, she definitely has more to offer than just her good looks.

The petite lady can be aptly described as a "cili padi" (fiery little chilli) for despite her small frame, she is donning a personality that is larger-than-life as she has created waves among those in the state's education circle.

A teacher by profession, Serina's success story began when she took charge of SM Sains Miri as its principal and brought it to become one of the nation's "High Achieving Schools", recording excellent public examination passing rates since 2010.

Her "Midas' touch" as an educationist has not gone unnoticed. She was recently among the four top state civil servants being awarded the "Pingat Perkhidmatan Cemerlang" (PPC) by Acting Head of State Datuk Amar Mohamad Asfia Awang Nassar.

Serina is also active in giving public talks on education and grooming. A blogger who attended one of her recent talks said: "She is one of the best principals I've known. I've listened to her talking about the same topic three times but none bored me. She had us entertained even though her sessions were as long as three hours!

"One particular term that struck me was what she called as muka bantal or "pillow face" in English — which meant those who never take the trouble to dress up for work. Imagine such torture that the student had to go through upon seeing teachers with muka bantal the whole day! According to her, students have to be interested in you as a teacher first, before they become interested in the subject that you're teaching. She said teachers should all bawl their students with colourful outfits and perhaps 'hot' hairdos."

The Star recently had a rare chance to meet this upbeat educationist and have her share her story.

Question: Please tell us a bit about yourself.
Answer: I have been an educationist for 32 years holding various posts from a teacher to an assistant education officer for Miri and Bintulu, a Bintulu education officer right to becoming principals of at least six schools. I hail from Bintulu but I was born in Miri. I had graduated with Bachelor of Science in Education (Hons) from Universiti Malaya and a post-graduate certificate in school leadership and management from King’s College London. In 2010, I became the “First Grade Jusa C Principal” in Sarawak — the highest attainable grade for a principal in education.

What are the accolades that you have received so far?
Apart from the latest PPC Award conferred by the Head of State, I had received Anugerah Perkhidmatan Cemerlang, Pingat Ahli Mangku Negara (AMN) in 2008 and Anugerah Cemerlang, Pingat Ahli Mangku Kemerdekaan (AMK) in 2007. In 2008, I was conferred by the Head of State, I had received Anugerah Perkhidmatan Negara (AMN) in 2008 and Anugerah Cemerlang, Pingat Ahli Mangku Kemerdekaan (AMK) in 2007. In 2008, I was conferred by the Head of State.

In your opinion, what is the essence that makes up an excellent educationist?
First of all, one has to be very sincere because we are developing a child into becoming an all-round responsible adult. We have to develop high IQ (Intelligence Quotient), EQ (Emotional Quotient) and SQ (Social Quotient) — all of which is universal values. We are preparing our children for the future — to become global citizens living in a world without boundary. We must equip them with high SQ so that they can be good citizens of the world who will also ensure that there is peace for all.

I would also like to emphasise this critical aspect that every teacher should imbibe in their psyche — that every child has his or her own potential be it in academics, in curriculum like sports or in skills. It is important for a teacher to recognise this and help develop it to the fullest. Not every child is equal in academic achievement. Only then can a child contribute meaningfully to nation-building.

Does physical representation of a teacher helps in getting attention of students to be attentive in class?
In a way, yes. But it has to be more than just a pleasant appearance. A combination of good health, pleasant personalities, good manners and attitude goes a long way in grooming a teacher to become an excellent educationist. I am walking my own talk and as you can see, it works.

Then again, physical appearance is not enough. A teacher must also equip herself with various teaching methods that are student-centric and can successfully engage the students. Teachers also need to be ahead of their students. They have to read a lot and be IT-savvy. They need to surf the net for the latest information to be incorporated into their teaching; otherwise their students will become bored.

In your opinion, what are the criteria of a high-achieving student who will be able to contribute meaningfully to nation-building?
A student who has, all the IQ, EQ, SQ and on top of that, equipped with good soft skills like communication, IT-literacy alongside pleasant personality and good attitude. A student can be brilliant but without SQ and soft skills, one cannot be categorised as a successful individual. Likewise, if they have high IQ but no SQ, they could destroy the world.

In your opinion, which of these will ensure a successful individual: high IQ, high EQ?
All the above and more. They must have SQ and excellent communication skills as well.

So how do you manage to make SM Sains Miri to be among the country’s best schools and the only one in Sarawak?
By applying all the above. Our method is simple but effective, we make sure that each and every student in this school excel to their optimum. We will assess their strengths and weaknesses, and we will coach them individually to address their weaker points. It is important that each of these students are developed in a wholesome manner; physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. We stressed equal importance between academic and co-curriculum activities. Students who are active in sports will have high confidence and healthy. It will also help curb disciplinary problems — after a long day of play and studies, they will be too tired to be up to any mischief.

Apart from the students, what other areas do you emphasise?
I will ensure that my teachers are at their top forms because I believe excellent teachers will produce excellent students. When I first came here, we have only two teachers being awarded as “Outstanding Teachers”. Now we have 11.

To achieve this, I have formulated a strategy in which I have injected some corporate style of management into the school. Apart from that, we also have programmes that involved teachers and students like the adoption of primary schools, the “Ambassador Programme” where we train 40 of our students to become the school’s ambassadors, our “School Social Responsibility” (SSR) project to instill a global caring attitude among students and lastly, active participation in physical exercises and sports.

What else do you do?
Students of SM Sains Miri are active players in cricket, rugby and hockey as well as in the uniformed side such as the the Fire Brigade (Bomba). Our Bomba Cadets have been the winners for seven consecutive years in Miri.

We also have four sessions held every year called “Sesi Bersama Pengetua” (A Session with the Principal) where I meet each and every student to assess their performance and to find out their problems.

We also teach four foreign languages namely French, English, Arabic and Japanese to students. As a result of this unique education methods, we had attracted schools from Brunei and Peninsular Malaysia, whose representatives have come to visit us to learn about our “secret education recipe”.

With the spotlight on you and your success, how does it make you feel?
I find this exhilarating because we can both learn from each other’s experiences. I am a very happy person especially when seeing that my students have excelled not only academically but also very holistically. I am assured that they will make good future leaders. I have four more years to go before I retire, but I am satisfied.
Excellence: Serina (second from right) celebrating with SM Sains Miri top scorers Eve Maria Eeyah Unyat (fourth from left) and Joseph Hii (third from left) alongside parents of both students.