



ALL ABROAD VIRTUALLY!



A VIRTUAL STUDY TRIP TO THREE COUNTRIES GAVE EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS MUCH TO REFLECT ON IN THEIR PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL GROWTH.

COVID-19 may have put a halt to physical travel last year, but educators were still able to network and learn from their overseas counterparts via a virtual study trip. Early childhood (EC) leaders on the Professional Development Programme for Leaders, or PDP(L), spent a week last November and December making virtual visits to three preschools: Little Sprouts in the US, Double Love Preschool in Taiwan, and Bambi Step by Step Kindergarten in Romania.

ECDA, together with the Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore) (AECES), conducted the entire one-week trip online. President of AECES, Dr Christine Chen, was gratified by the scope of the programme: "In a day, we were able to visit two countries in the West, which could never be done physically. Our partners were so accommodating that time differences did not pose a barrier."

INSPIRATIONS AND INSIGHTS

Ms Koh Hui Siu, Cluster Principal at Star Learners Group, was pleased with how the virtual trip facilitated 'visits' to different preschools abroad. The PDP(L) participants had the opportunity to observe children in various activities via videos. They also got to interact with the teachers and engage in in-depth discussions with centre leaders of the preschools they 'visited'. "Listening to their experiences and perspectives opened up a world of new ideas and possibilities as I reflected upon our own local teaching practices."

She was especially struck by the child-centred approach in Bambi Step by Step Kindergarten. "Teachers allow children to establish the day's programme by arranging activity cards in time order on a board. Children feel empowered as they take ownership of their learning and learn to be responsible for their choices," says Ms Koh. Besides taking a virtual 'walk' through the centre via an immersive video experience, the participants had dialogues with the centre leader about

the learning corners, practices and their leadership philosophy.

Another participant, Ms Arin Choo, Principal of Cherie Hearts DiscoveryLand, noted that the teachers at Little Sprouts make available their lesson plans to parents to help them extend their children's learning at home. Parents are also invited to contribute towards what they would like their children to learn, with the centres providing guidance. "It is important for the home and preschool to build a trusting relationship and have strong connections in the interest of the child," adds Ms Choo.

The 'trip' also emphasised the need to balance personal and professional development. "We realised that we tend to prioritise our team's needs before our own, which may lead to burnout. I want to encourage centre leaders to be mindful and intentional in carving out time for themselves to recharge. Something as simple as having an hour of undisturbed lunch can do wonders for our sense of wellbeing," says Ms Koh.

KNOW THIS

Dr Christine Chen identified three key learnings from the virtual study trip.

> **Inclusive education does not only mean including children with additional needs. It means creating a culture of inclusiveness where similarities and differences are embraced and celebrated in both the centre's programme and curriculum.**

> **Family involvement and engagement is a strength. It is important in developing children's abilities and aptitudes, and supporting them to reach their maximum potential.**

> **To be effective leaders, centre leaders should attend to self-care and their own professional growth, as well as their teachers' development.**



LEARNING MTL IS FUN



ECDA SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT MS LI YUNDI PURSUES HER PASSION IN CHINESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION TO DEVELOP CHILDREN'S LOVE FOR THE LANGUAGE.



Ms Li wants to make Chinese language learning fun and exciting for children

Teaching children to speak and write in Mandarin is one thing, getting them to appreciate and love the language is quite another. This is what Ms Li Yundi, Principal of Kids & Kins Child Care Centre, is passionate about.

To support this goal, Ms Li, 31, embarked on a part-time Bachelor of Early Childhood and Chinese Language Education programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) at the beginning of 2020. She was awarded the ECDA Scholarship to support her pursuit. "With the new knowledge and skills, I hope to make learning the Chinese language more fun and exciting for

children," says the bilingual educator. "The better they are in their mother tongue language (MTL), the more connected they are to their heritage and culture."

LEARN AND PASS IT ON

Pursuing this degree has improved her own proficiency in the language and could potentially benefit the teachers at her centre. "Collectively, we can create a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Chinese language and culture among preschoolers," says Ms Li. Recently, she revised the centre's curriculum to balance writing with oral communication. "Getting children to speak Mandarin outside of lessons — say, during mealtimes

STEP UP

The ECDA Scholarships are offered to outstanding in-service EC educators who wish to further their studies in EC education and take on larger roles in the sector. The ECDA Training Awards are offered to students to support their aspirations to join the EC sector. For more information, visit www.ecda.gov.sg/Pages/ecda-scholarships-and-training-awards.aspx. Catch the ECDA Scholarships and Training Awards Presentation Ceremony held on 28 October 2020 at go.gov.sg/ceremony2020.



HONOUR ROLL

More than 400 aspiring EC educators received the ECDA Training Award (TA) in 2020. Thirteen TA recipients were presented the ECDA TA Commendation Award for exemplary performance in their studies. Nine outstanding in-service EC educators, including Ms Li, received the ECDA Scholarship to further their studies in EC education.

and outdoor play — will make language learning more fun than if they were to just write Chinese characters in class, and help them grow to love using it," she adds.

Having worked at the same centre throughout her eight years in the early childhood (EC) sector, Ms Li welcomed the opportunity to widen her network through her course. "It was enlightening to exchange ideas and practices on effective learning strategies with other educators who share a similar interest in the Chinese language."

GET AN EARLY START

The course has motivated her to explore innovative teaching approaches, such as combining catchy melodies and movements with Tang poetry, and focusing on Chinese idioms that children can relate to in their daily lives. For example, children learn to say "福如东海, 寿比南山" (translated as "May your fortune be as boundless as the Eastern Sea and your life as long as the Southern Mountain"), a proverb commonly used to wish older relatives a happy birthday. "Learning a language introduces children to customs and positive values. It is never too early to set the groundwork for language learning," highlights Ms Li.

RAISING THE BAR

THE GROWING NUMBER OF PRESCHOOLS WHICH ACHIEVED SPARK CERTIFICATION SIGNALS A CONTINUED COMMITMENT TO QUALITY.



DID YOU KNOW?

There are now 985 SPARK-certified preschools, or more than half the sector. To see the list of SPARK recipients, go to www.ecda.gov.sg/sparkinfo/Pages/Home.aspx.



C OVID-19 has not stopped the early childhood (EC) sector's quest for Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework (SPARK) certification, which recognises the quality of a preschool and its programmes.

"In the months of April to August in 2020, assessments were suspended to allow preschools to focus on implementing safe management measures to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of children and staff," observed Ms Sun Xueling, Minister of State for Social and Family Development and Education. "I am glad that when SPARK assessments

resumed from September, centres were ready to get back on their quality improvement journey."

Ms Sun was speaking at the first-ever virtual SPARK Certificate Presentation Ceremony on 18 November 2020. The ceremony celebrated the achievements of 106 preschools as they received or renewed their SPARK certification.

DRIVING QUALITY

The latest Ceremony was the first to honour awardees who had used the new Quality Rating Scale (QRS) for ages 0–6. It provides a more comprehensive assessment of preschools by encouraging them to enhance quality at all levels.

The benefits of the QRS (0–6) were shared by Ms Pauline Neo, Principal of PCF Sparkletots Preschool @ Eunos Blk 134. The centre had previously attained SPARK Certification (Commendation) using the QRS for ages 4–6. Guided by the newly-enhanced QRS, Ms Neo encouraged her centre's educators to reflect on and rethink their roles and responsibilities.



Ms Sun Xueling, Minister of State for Social and Family Development and Education

"I knew we needed a mindset change if we were to implement respectful, responsive and reciprocal interactions with our infants and toddlers," she explained. Educators at the centre were initially apprehensive about letting children play with art materials, with many remarking that it would get too "messy". However, they warmed up to the idea after Ms Neo explained the benefits of art, such as allowing children to explore their senses and make creative decisions.

As children spent more time on art, Ms Neo noticed that the relationship between educator and child grew closer. "Educators talked to the children about what they were doing, looked for non-verbal responses, waited [for children to speak] and praised the children. The child was the focus," she said. Such efforts helped the centre clinch its second consecutive SPARK Certification (Commendation), this time, using the QRS (0–6).

Besides growing quality centres, ECDA is also committed to developing the expertise and careers of EC professionals, shared Ms Jamie Ang, the agency's Chief Executive. Staff can look forward to a refreshed Skills Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education, as well as a Continuing Professional Development Roadmap, to better support their training and career progression. "We look forward to better supporting you in your growth and development, so that we can give every child a good start in life," assured Ms Ang. ●