

EMBRACING A DIVERSE MINDSET

WHAT IT TAKES TO CREATE AN INCLUSIVE SPACE FOR ALL CHILDREN TO REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL.



they grew up in the same household, my children are vastly different. One is an easygoing, gentle giant who needs to be groomed to form more of his own opinions. The other is a feisty, opinionated little fighter who needs to be encouraged to consider the perspectives of others. Helping every child to shine needs team effort," said Ms Ang, who highlighted the importance of collaborations between teachers, parents and the community.



In conjunction with ECC 2021, an inaugural **Virtual Exhibition** was held from 16 October to 16 November. It featured 15 booths by community partners such as the Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore), National Institute of Early Childhood Development, SportSG and Singapore Kindness Movement. These partners provided educators and parents with useful ideas to help children learn about diversity, as well as resources and information to support their holistic development.

Keynote speaker Dr Sirene Lim from the Singapore University of Social Sciences provided tips on how educators can move towards an inclusive classroom (page 3). Offering a paediatrician's perspective, the second keynote speaker, Dr Chong Shang Chee from National University Hospital, elaborated on how partnerships between educators, parents and health professionals can promote the best outcomes for a child (page 4). Both speakers offered more insights during a Q&A session (page 5).

It is important to recognise the diverse needs of children and establish inclusive practices to accommodate varied development so that no child gets left behind. The partnership of preschool operators, educators, parents and community agencies is key to creating an inclusive environment.

The Early Childhood Conference (ECC) 2021 provided a kaleidoscope of strategies for educators. This year's conference, themed 'Embracing Diversity: Every Child Shines, Growing Stronger Together', was held online with some 4,000 preschool educators tuning in to Facebook Live on 16 October for the 90-minute event. Almost 1,700 educators also took part in over 30 interactive virtual workshops (pages 5 and 6) on 14 and 15 October.

Kicking off the conference, Minister for Social and Family Development Mr Masagos Zulkifli affirmed that being an early childhood educator is a "noble and good profession". He encouraged educators to continue to build their competencies and skills (page 10).

Ms Jamie Ang, Chief Executive of ECDA and mother of two, shared her own parenting experience. "Even though



"I hope that even more preschools and children will join this meaningful movement and continue to make Singapore a caring and inclusive society."

PRESIDENT HALIMAH YACOB

'START SMALL DREAM BIG' (SSDB) 2021 FINALE

- ✓ Highest participation rate since SSDB started in 2015
- ✓ More than **71,000** children from **1,050** preschools collectively dedicated **2.1 million hours** to community service projects and raised **\$200,000** for charity



BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

"For the preschool sector to become more inclusive, it begins with our attitudes and mindsets — the way we see people, how we talk about them, how we describe them to others, how we treat them as equals," said keynote speaker Dr Sirene Lim.

The sector is becoming increasingly diverse, and the right mindset informs how educators promote inclusivity in preschools. Dr Lim shared insights and strategies for planning an inclusive curriculum in her presentation, 'Reaching Every Child: Responsive Preschool Practices'.

A BETTER CURRICULUM

Pay attention to what children are saying to plan a responsive curriculum that supports their thinking, learning and moral reasoning. To put inclusive goals into action, Dr Lim advised educators to think **BETTER**.

- ➔ **Background.** Gather information from observing the child and understanding his/her family structure, home language and lifestyle.
- ➔ **Every day.** Incorporate the learning of inclusive values (e.g. fairness, respect, positive self-identity, empathy) during mealtimes, activities, routine care and transitions every day. Engineer

"Inclusion can only work well if it is a whole-school culture — not just for one classroom or for a few children."



DR SIRENE LIM, Associate Professor, Head (Bachelor of Early Childhood Education with Minor Programme) & Vice Dean, S R Nathan School of Human Development, Singapore University of Social Sciences

teachable moments through intentional variation of a daily routine, regular play activity or transition, so that children learn to respond to slightly different situations or circumstances.

- ➔ **Don't be a Tourist.** While celebrating the differences that make someone, a group or a culture unique, be careful not to reduce them to just those characteristics or stereotypes.
- ➔ **Experiences.** Introduce a range of experiences, both child-led and teacher-led. Child-led play allows educators to observe how children think and respond, enabling educators to correct or support self-regulation or executive function in more effective ways.

GOALS FOR CENTRE LEADERS

How centre leaders can foster an inclusive mindset in teachers and build an inclusive preschool culture.

- ➔ Get to know **each teacher's background** to understand his/her perspectives and beliefs. Encourage collaboration and discussion. Model respect.
- ➔ Create **individual learning goals** for each teacher. Every teacher should feel safe enough to carry out peer observations and reflections to improve together.
- ➔ Encourage teachers to use **bias-free views and language** during staff discussions. Use words and descriptors that are respectful.
- ➔ Build a **collaborative culture** by getting teachers to share with one another the different ways they try to engage with different families. This information can help the centre cater to each child more responsively and in a more inclusive way.



- ➔ **Relationships.** Establish good relationships with the child's family. Anticipate sensitive issues, share what is taught in preschool, and ask questions about their expectations and interactions with their child.

Dr Lim stressed that inclusive education goes beyond working with children with disabilities. The concept of inclusion needs to be a "whole-school culture", embraced by everyone from the centre head to even the kitchen staff. Every child and every teacher are seen and valued as capable learners, even if they have different interests, prior experiences and perspectives.



TEAM EFFORT

In her presentation, 'Partnership with Parents and Professionals: A Paediatrician's Perspective'

Dr Chong Shang Chee explored the importance and benefits of educators collaborating with parents, health professionals and community partners to support diverse classrooms.

PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS

"Child development can only happen if there are positive relationships around the child," said Dr Chong, referencing the Brazelton Touchpoints framework, a family-centred approach. "When you partner well with parents, you gain their trust and are able to help them understand the child's developmental needs." She also explained how the ABCDE framework (see sidebar) can strengthen the quality of home-preschool partnerships.

Case Study: Alex, 3, was a noisy and spirited preschooler who occasionally bit and pushed his classmates. His mother was worried that his teachers would not be able to understand Alex and sought help from a paediatrician. By completing a questionnaire provided by the paediatrician, Alex's teachers could communicate more effectively to his mother and paediatrician their concerns about his development and behaviour, and work out an intervention plan together. They could also use the ABCDE framework to build a strong partnership with Alex's parents and other professionals to better support him.

PARTNERSHIP WITH HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Educators can leverage developmental support and learning support programmes, where allied health professionals (e.g. psychologists and therapists) come into the classroom to help children with developmental and learning needs. Working with health professionals can provide additional insights into the child's needs, motivations and challenges, as well as appropriate strategies to deal with them.

Case Study: Ally, 5, who had a complex family background, was hyperactive and inattentive in preschool. After much encouragement from

“ We may come with different agendas and expectations, but partnerships involve a shared purpose. Focus on that purpose because partnerships can be powerful in changing outcomes for children. ”



DR CHONG SHANG CHEE.

Head & Senior Consultant, Child Development Unit, Khoo Teck Puat – National University Children's Medical Institute, National University Hospital; Assistant Professor, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore

educators, Ally's mother brought her to a paediatrician, who assessed Ally to have language delays and literacy difficulties. In response, Ally's teachers invited allied health professionals to the classroom to better understand Ally's behaviour and propose intervention activities to support her. This partnership could be expanded further to include other professionals such as a Learning Support Educator or social worker.

PARTNERSHIP WITH COMMUNITY AGENCIES

Educators can help disadvantaged and vulnerable children by collaborating with community partners. Through interdisciplinary health-social-education partnerships, such as KidSTART, different parties can co-learn and co-design service models of care to foster positive outcomes for children and their families.

KNOW YOUR ABCDE

How to establish positive partnerships with parents.

- **Assumptions** — Listen to parents' concerns without judgement. Recognise that they have strengths too and have something critical to share in their child's development.
- **Build Relationships** — Concerns may differ, but educators must find a mutual point where they can meet the parents, and when the parents are ready to do so.
- **Communication** — Practise reflective listening. Think about the emotions behind the parents' words and surface their deeper concerns.
- **Diversity and Development** — Be aware of differences in children's strengths, abilities, temperaments as well as the cultural practices and systems around the child.
- **Extra Mile** — Practise small acts of reaching out.



YOU ASKED FOR IT

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS DR LIM AND DR CHONG WERE JOINED BY ECDA FELLOW MS NARAYANASAMY KANNIGADEVI IN A Q&A SESSION.

HOW TO MANAGE A CLASSROOM OF CHILDREN WITH VARIED NEEDS

Dr Lim stressed the need for "intentional planning", which requires educators to get to know every child over time and pay attention to their background, past experiences, temperaments and so on. An understanding of each child will make a difference in the way educators plan for the child, be it in the choice of picture books used or the way a classroom space is organised.

HOW TO BALANCE THE PERSPECTIVES OF EDUCATORS, FAMILIES AND HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Dr Chong said it is important for clinicians and educators to place the child and family at the centre

of the discussion and understand where they are at. Educators and clinicians can better support the family by asking them, "Could you do this *with* me and *through* you?". This empowers the family and paves the way for more effective partnerships.



HOW TO ENGAGE PARENTS RELUCTANT TO SEEK SUPPORT FOR A CHILD WITH LEARNING NEEDS

The key is in the approach, said Ms Kannigadevi. If educators have concerns about a child, they should encourage parents to seek early intervention. At the same time, educators should assure parents that they will journey with them. She stressed, "It is important to show parents you are genuinely concerned for the child and are going to be there."



From left: The event emcees with keynote speakers Dr Chong Shang Chee (centre) and Dr Sirene Lim, and Ms Narayanasamy Kannigadevi, Asst Director (Capability Support) and Special Needs Mentor, Presbyterian Community Services

WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS

Embracing Diversity Through Space Design

In this workshop, ECDA Fellow and lead presenter Dr Geraldine Teo-Zuzarte from Pre-School By-The-Park encouraged participants to broaden their view of diversity to include the uniqueness of *all* children, not just those with additional needs.

She stressed the importance of classroom design in influencing children's learning, behaviours and interactions. To quote Jim Greenman, an educator and advocate for intentional classroom design and the notion of space as place, "Children need



a childhood with places to call their own." When planning these places, educators need to take into consideration the learning styles and preferences, interests and developmental stages of the children who inhabit the space.

Participants focused on various elements of the physical environment under the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework. UDL provides a useful guide on designing inclusive environments that cater to the needs of all children. It is undergirded by three principles:

- 1. THINKING ABOUT HOW CHILDREN CAN BEST UNDERSTAND INFORMATION OR CONTENT FROM THE WAY IT IS PRESENTED.** Having different materials at the writing corner, such as picture cues of Chinese characters, Chinese paint brushes, ink and paper, and books with Chinese characters,



gives children opportunities to understand Chinese character strokes.

- 2. THINKING ABOUT HOW CHILDREN CAN EXPRESS WHAT THEY KNOW.** Providing open-ended materials like clay, paper and pencils, papers of different textures, etc. lets them recreate patterns (e.g. on a leaf).

- 3. THINKING ABOUT HOW TO REINFORCE AND MOTIVATE CHILDREN.** Combining two learning areas such as the discovery area and loose parts area creates opportunities for children to be curious, motivating them to explore and extend their thinking.

Extracted from: Mistrett, S.G. (2017). *Universal Design for Learning: A Checklist for Early Childhood Environments.*



Dr Geraldine Teo-Zuzarte

Creating Support For Teachers/ Network Of Support: For Children With Developmental Needs

In this workshop, presenters Alisa Mahad, Selvi d/o Sinniah and Lydia Ong, all from the PAP Community Foundation (PCF), introduced participants to the Circle of Support (CoS), a peer support network for teachers working with children with additional needs. It is a platform where they can come together, share their experiences and discuss approaches.

Some key takeaways from the CoS network on how to build a better understanding of the child:

- 1. KNOWING A CHILD** — What are his likes and dislikes? Identify the child's strengths (e.g. motor skills, communication skills, self-help skills, academic skills).
- 2. PURPOSE OF BEHAVIOUR** — Every behaviour sends a message about what the child needs. Is he overwhelmed? Is he in pain? Be patient and

encouraging. It takes time to replace challenging actions with more appropriate behaviours.

- 3. STRATEGIES** — Set limits and establish consistent routines. Use clear and specific visuals to communicate instructions. Model stress management by staying calm.
- 4. USING THE SKILLS** — Build on the child's skills. Continue to know the child better by gathering and consolidating information. What is his family life like? Which developmental milestones has he achieved? How much progress has he made in reducing or replacing challenging behaviours?

Guided by peer mentors, educators can reflect on their practices, exchange

ideas, and be empowered with relevant strategies and emotional support. CoS helps educators to better understand their journey, alleviate their anxiety and appreciate diverse learning needs. Armed with knowledge and resources, they can then serve as mentors and form their own CoS at the centre, group or district level.



Alisa Mahad



Selvi d/o Sinniah



Lydia Ong

Introduction To The Relational-Invitational Approach: The Science And Art Of Engaging Adults For Positive Behaviour Change

When an educator has concerns about a child's behaviour or developmental needs, raising this sensitive issue to the parents can be a challenge. In this workshop, Dorcas Yap and Cheryl Ng from KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) offered strategies to successfully engage parents and families.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONAL-INVITATIONAL APPROACH?

It is a family-centred, strengths-based approach to adult capacity-building, which views the role of the practitioner as a coach. It is rooted in a strong, egalitarian relationship between educator and parent, where both parties collaborate to identify problems and carry out an action plan, with the shared goal of better outcomes for the child.

WHAT IS ESSENTIAL FOR GOOD ENGAGEMENT?

Here are some tips to facilitate effective engagement and minimise misunderstandings and anxiety.

- Focus on the **CHILD'S STRENGTHS AND INTERESTS**.
- Use a **WARM, CALM VOICE**.
- **REFLECT PARENTS' FEELINGS**. Say things like "It's hard for you" or "You seem surprised to hear this".
- **CHECK STRATEGIES**. Ask parents, "How do you manage him?" or "Who does he listen to at home?".
- **CONVEY PARTNERSHIP**. Use affirming language such as "Let's work on improving his behaviour" or "I will ... you will ...".

- **LISTEN INTENTLY** to what parents are saying. Pay attention to their thoughts and concerns. Empathetic listening earns trust and respect. It also diffuses conflict and helps educators better understand the situation and form solutions.

Mrs Bavani Mathi, Principal of Little Footprints Preschool @ Sengkang 205, was an attendee at the workshop. "Sometimes, when educators question parents, we tend to jump to conclusions and voice our opinions without truly listening," she admitted. "The workshop taught us how to apply different levels of listening to better understand parents' concerns. I also learned tips on effective engagement, such as being sensitive to parents' feelings and forming deeper partnerships by identifying and working towards the next step."



Dorcas Yap



Cheryl Ng