The kitchen corner allows little ones to explore various food cultures.

EXPOSING LITTLE ONES to different cultures is a daily affair at Etonhouse Pre-school at 223 @ Mountbatten, thanks to the centre's heritage learning corner. And it was this commitment that clinched the Innovation Award (Distinction) for the pre-school at the 2015 ECDA Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood Development.

"A couple of years ago, we decided that we did not want to limit discussions about heritage to festive periods. Instead, we wanted to include them in everyday living," says Ms Samantha Morier, the centre's vice-principal. It is her belief that the more you expose the children to such discussions regularly, the greater their appreciation and respect for Singapore's multi-ethnic heritage. This decision to keep heritage 'alive' all year round led to the centre's participation in Singapore's Little Treasures, an innovation guidance project launched by the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) and the National Heritage Board (NHB) in 2014. As part of the project, NHB collaborated with the educators

to curate a heritage corner in the centre. "We chose to keep the corner as a permanent fixture after Singapore's Little Treasures ended, so we could facilitate regular conversations with children about heritage," explains Ms Morier, 27.

The corner resembles a house and is filled with items that represent Singapore's various cultures. For example, the kitchen features an array of utensils, from a *murukku* (a traditional Indian snack) maker to chopsticks and a *batu tumbuk* (mortar and pestle). Children are also able to don ethnic costumes and play games of yesteryear at the corner. As it is located within the centre's play area, children can visit it during playtime. Besides promoting cultural awareness, the corner also plays a part in helping children improve various skills. "Traditional games such as *capteh* are great for boosting their physical development, while learning the

names of cultural items enhances appreciation of the language," says Ms Morier.

The corner is also utilised regularly during curriculum time as educators use many of its elements to support children's learning. For example, the corner's *rangoli*, geometric patterns created on the floor usually during Deepavali and other Indian festivals, is used to introduce the mathematical concept of symmetry to K1 learners.

The centre also makes an effort to involve and engage parents in the project. "Including parents strengthens the parent-centre partnership. They donated many of the ethnic costumes and have even conducted cooking classes for our students. Together, they whip up traditional treats such as *kueh bangkit* (coconut cookies)," says Ms Morier, adding that such activities provide a rich sensorial experience of the culture. ♥

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

Ms Morier encourages parents to continue discussing Singapore's heritage to reinforce appreciation and learning at home. To do this, they are asked to share memories of their own childhood and how things were like then. "Little moments like these are endearing and provide children with an enriching 'learning journey' experience," she says.

Let's Talk HERITAGE

For its efforts to celebrate Singapore's shared heritage, Etonhouse clinched an innovation award at the 2015 ECDA Awards.

Children trying their hand at *congkak*, a traditional game of Malay origin.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RAMAKRISHNA MISSION SARADA KINDERGARTEN

SHOW-AND-TELL, with a *Twist*

A project at Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Kindergarten boosts listening and speaking skills, nurtures bilingualism, and clinched an Innovation Award!

IT WAS DURING a routine meeting that educators at Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Kindergarten stumbled on the fact that the centre's show-and-tell sessions had become too structured and rigid. "Parents were drilling their children on what to say and they would simply repeat what they had learnt. We wanted to give the children freedom of speech and time to speak about something very personal to them," says Mrs Sulochanah Kanapathy, 46, a K2 teacher at the kindergarten.

Together, the educators devised My Space, a project which received an Innovation Award (Distinction) at the 2015 ECDA Awards for Excellence in

Early Childhood Development. Through My Space, each child is assigned an A4-sized space on a wall. Children are encouraged to put up photographs, drawings or newspaper clippings in this space and write a caption describing the item. During their free time, children can spend time at their space sharing stories with their friends. Mrs Kanapathy, the leader of the project, likens each space to a personal blog. "The children are free to update what they have put up as and when they like."

The project has developed children's listening and speaking skills more effectively than the traditional show-and-tell. Mrs Kanapathy attributes this

My Space helps children develop creativity, speaking and listening skills.

MAIN PHOTO BY TAN KAY HIAN

Children sharing their stories with Minister for Social and Family Development Mr Tan Chuan-Jin.

WE WANTED TO GIVE THE CHILDREN FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND TIME TO SPEAK ABOUT SOMETHING VERY PERSONAL TO THEM. // Mrs Kanapathy

to the informal nature of the project, which promotes peer interaction through the free flow of conversation and prevents unnecessary anxiety in the children. It also inculcates values such as mutual respect and courtesy. "They are reminded to listen when others are talking and to wait their turn," she says.

The project was introduced to the K2 children in 2013 and has since been extended to the other age groups. "We tailor the project to the children's developmental abilities — the captions are longer and more in-depth for the K2 children; K1 children are just required to write a line or two; captioning is excluded for those in nursery," says Mrs Kanapathy.

The project also helps to nurture bilingualism. Mrs Kanapathy recalls a K2 child who struggled to speak Tamil before My Space was introduced. "He would use the space during his mother tongue lessons and listened to his friends speak in Tamil," she says. This eventually improved the child's confidence in the language and later that year, he was cast in the school's Tamil drama production.

To ensure that learning continues at home, teachers encourage parents to set up a similar corner, an initiative that has received positive feedback. "Parents tell us that their children sit them down and talk to them very confidently and this has also strengthened parent-child bonding and relationships," she says. ♥

INNOVATING, YET AGAIN

This is the second consecutive year that Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Kindergarten has received the Innovation Award (Distinction) at the ECDA Awards. It won the award last year for its project, 'Self Regulation — A Great Choice'.

Mrs Ang-Oh (seated second from left) and Ms Tan (seated second from right), with other ECDA Fellows.

SINCE THEIR APPOINTMENT as ECDA Fellows in May 2015, the 14 pinnacle leaders have contributed to the sector through facilitating sharing sessions, mentoring early childhood (EC) leaders, developing and implementing EC resources for the sector.

Among them are Ms Shirley Tan, Principal of Church of the Holy Trinity Kindergarten, and Mrs Ang-Oh Chui Hwa, Principal of Far Eastern Kindergarten. Through their respective sector-level roles, they are each driving quality improvements and developing the fraternity of EC educators to provide quality pre-school experiences for young children.

Ms Tan, 53, is involved in the Leadership Series, an ongoing five-part course that equips centre leaders with relevant knowledge and skills to lead their pre-schools effectively. "Principals are leaders, not managers," she explains. "While the day-to-day administrative and operational tasks are important, it is equally important for principals to create centre-wide change and transformation."

In particular, Ms Tan co-facilitates 'Building a Culture to Support Learning', together with Ms Sum Chee Wah (Advisor/Pre-school Education), and Ms Pushpavalli Narayanasamy (ECDA Fellow). Through small group discussions, participants talked about the challenges faced while trying to inculcate values, such as respect, within their own centres. Ms Tan also gave insights and suggested strategies to resolve issues.

"Culture is tantamount to team spirit. Only with team spirit can you effect change in an organisation," she says.

"By identifying and defining specific values with their staff, centre leaders can generate 'buy-in' and build a culture that supports learning."

Mrs Ang-Oh, 52, is a facilitator of a Networked Learning Community (NLC), a professional development opportunity that encourages EC educators to engage in reflections and critical dialogues with the specific purpose of enhancing teaching and learning practice. She has guided eight centre leaders through the NLC on 'Curriculum Innovation' and advocated a Project Approach to curriculum design.

"The Project Approach is child-centred and inquiry-based, and allows educators to craft meaningful authentic experiences that cut across domain-specific learning," she says. NLC participants explored how key curriculum areas can be integrated through this approach, and brainstormed project ideas to be carried out in their own centres. The group will meet again in March 2016 to further distil and share observations from their implementation.

"I believe that one of my roles as an ECDA Fellow is to inspire fellow centre leaders and educators to be creative in engaging children when designing learning experiences," says Mrs Ang-Oh. "The NLC is an ideal platform for educators to embrace a change mindset and share good practices. More importantly, the NLC offers educators the opportunity to network, collaborate and co-construct a unique curriculum that is aligned to the Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) Framework." ❤

Inspiring LEADERS

Two ECDA Fellows take stock of their sectorial contributions thus far.

FIND OUT MORE!
To get to know our ECDA Fellows, visit www.ecda.gov.sg/Pages/ECDA-Fellows.aspx.

PHOTOS BY **MARK LEE**