

HARDWARE AND HEARTWARE

DEVELOPING EDUCATORS AND QUALITY PROGRAMMES TO MEET THE DIVERSE NEEDS OF CHILDREN IS WHAT SETS THIS AWARD-WINNING PRESCHOOL APART.



The centre's mud kitchen promotes active learning through sensory play

With a team of 93 staff and a campus for 520 children, the biggest challenge facing

My First Skool at 51 Fernvale Link is meeting the needs of a diverse group of families and educators. To achieve this, the preschool — which won the 2022 ECDA Outstanding Centre for Teaching & Learning Award — has put in place systems, structures and processes to support and sustain good practices, says Executive Principal Ms Gillian Neo.

TRANSLATING DATA INTO ACTION

For a start, the centre uses a variety of methods to gather information on children's well-being and developmental needs, as well as teachers' workloads. These include daily classroom walkthroughs and observations, children's assessment checklists, termly curriculum reviews, monthly lesson evaluations and focus group discussions with teachers. Parent feedback is also obtained through surveys and regular casual conversations.

The insights and reflections from these are used to plan, implement and modify the centre's programmes and activities. "During our plan-do-review meetings, we generate

“I enjoyed jumping and splashing in the mud at Chestnut Nature Park. At school, we also have a mud kitchen where we can play with different pots and cups, and fill them with sand or mud.

YIAP RUI QING, 5

new ideas, facilitation strategies and teaching styles to develop differentiated instruction and materials to meet children's needs," elaborates Ms Neo. "We also monitor trends and developments in early childhood to keep the programmes and curriculum up to date."

TEACHERS ARE LEARNERS TOO

Ms Neo shares two key areas to enhance the professional development of teachers.

Peer learning. "A learning community is forged when centre leaders and teachers meet regularly to share ideas, celebrate successes and brainstorm ways to overcome challenges," says Ms Neo. Periodic reviews and group evaluations help teachers build on their pedagogical

competencies. "Teachers feel more motivated when they have support and inspiration from their peers," she adds.

Shared leadership. Teachers are encouraged to join different interest groups and committees. Examples include Nurture Kids Ambassadors (to develop children's gross motor skills), Community in Bloom (to instil a love for gardening) and STEAM (to promote Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics concepts). Committee members meet regularly to research ideas and plan staff workshops, with guidance from centre leaders. "Teachers gain a deeper understanding of child development, and better mastery of domain knowledge and teaching strategies," says Ms Neo.

ENLISTING THE COMMUNITY

Community partnerships create active learning opportunities for both teachers and children beyond the classroom. For instance, the Community in Bloom team, with input from NParks, set up an outdoor preschool garden to nurture children's love for nature. The STEAM committee organises visits to KidsSTOP where children can tinker with different materials and tech tools. Recently, the K2 class interviewed trainee dentists from Nanyang Polytechnic as part of their inquiry project.

Above all, Ms Neo believes strong relationships with all stakeholders underpin the centre's achievements. She shares, "Processes and systems are the hardware, but close relationships and camaraderie which make the software are the critical enablers for us to do much more for our children." ●



Regular meetings help build a lifelong learning culture among educators

MORE THAN WORDS

AWARD-WINNING EARLY YEARS EDUCATOR NIE BING CULTIVATES CHILDREN'S INTEREST IN MANDARIN THROUGH HER ENTHUSIASM AND LOVE FOR THE LANGUAGE.



To extend children's learning of Mandarin at home, Mdm Nie (far right) shares activity ideas with parents

On a drizzly day, you might find Mdm Nie Bing along the preschool corridor singing and moving along to a Mandarin tune, "It's Raining", with her nursery class at The Ascension Kindergarten. Mdm Nie, winner of the 2022 Outstanding Early Years Educator Award, is adept at finding such incidental opportunities to support children's learning.

CHILDREN AS CAPTAINS

An advocate of child-initiated learning, Mdm Nie encourages her class of four-year-olds to take charge of their own learning. For instance, she lets them pick their favourite storybooks to read from, rather than choose for them. Asking the right questions is key to engaging and empowering children,



Role-playing with props brings stories — and language — to life

“Nie laoshi reminds us that children need to be immersed in the Chinese language rather than just learn it in the classroom. She gives us practical tips such as making time to converse with our son in Mandarin and read Chinese-language storybooks to him regularly.”

MR THAM MUN HONG, father of Joel Tham, 4

she adds. During storytelling, she asks questions that help the children relate to the characters or story, and encourages them to share their thoughts and experiences.

"Language learning is not a solitary experience," says Mdm Nie, who uses more than just storybooks to keep children interested. Other strategies include teaching them nursery rhymes and songs, exposing them to cultural activities like calligraphy, role-playing, and bringing the class outdoors for sensory play. She also updates parents regularly on what the children are learning and plans activities for children to do at home with their parents, such as making

a salad together and learning the Chinese names of vegetables.

These diverse experiences support children's curiosity and create opportunities to use the Chinese language in different situations and settings. "Look out for the little things that catch children's attention. We can use the language to share their enthusiasm and eagerness to explore," says Mdm Nie. "Children at this age look to people around them as examples and take their cues from them."

CONTINUING LEARNING

The pandemic did not curb Mdm Nie's desire to broaden her professional knowledge. Together with educators from other countries, she signed up for a two-month virtual training course conducted by a preschool in China. It covered topics relating to physical development in the young, curriculum development, the arts and classroom environments.

Mdm Nie has since applied teaching strategies such as exaggerating body movements and using more expressive intonations during storytelling sessions to better engage the children. "Educators must keep abreast of child development theories, issues and trends, so that we can inform our practice and provide appropriate support to parents," she explains. ●



Find out more about Mdm Nie's winning qualities at youtu.be/f50pvavUAYs or scan here.



Small Wonder (Tampines) integrates different learning domains into the curriculum by designing activities such as an inquiry-based project involving plants

WONDER-FILLED JOURNEY

THE QUEST FOR QUALITY SPARKS A NEW OUTLOOK IN EDUCATORS AND ENRICHES LEARNING FOR CHILDREN.

Attaining certification is only the beginning of the journey, says Ms Tan Wei Sian, Principal of Small Wonder (Tampines), which earned a SPARK (Commendation) Certification in 2022 for its strong teaching and learning practices and well-designed curriculum. She likens it to a marathon. "We need to pace ourselves, approach the process as an ongoing effort and embrace it as part of our daily mission."

ON THE SAME PAGE

Priority is given to training, mentoring and continuing support for the teachers. "Just like how each child is unique, every teacher is different," says Ms Tan. Instead of a one-size-fits-all, top-down approach, she meets with teachers individually or in small groups to identify areas for improvement. Curriculum meetings and reviews, classroom observations, and one-to-one coaching and professional training sessions are arranged to provide teachers with further support.

Ms Tan also nurtures a culture of professional learning and collaboration. "It is important for teachers to engage in conversations to innovate, experiment and evaluate new ways of teaching and learning. We learn from and with each other," she says. With the whole team on board, everyone takes ownership of the self-appraisal, goal-setting and review processes which are crucial to improving practices.

RICHER CURRICULUM

One area earmarked for improvement is to intentionally integrate different learning domains into the curriculum. For instance, children can use their phonological knowledge (sounds of words) to label parts of plants while learning to identify the similarities and differences between plants. In the process, they discover the world around them, develop language and literacy skills, practise fine motor skills, and nurture a positive learning disposition.

The centre also engages parents and seeks their feedback on its

programmes and services, including field visits and take-home kits. Ms Tan elaborates, "Parents' feedback informs us how we have been doing in supporting their children's learning and development. We also customise parent workshops, based on their input, and invite them as volunteers or resource speakers."

As a parent, Ms Murshida Binte Mohamed Kadir appreciates this close partnership. "The teachers carry out monthly check-ins, progress updates via phone calls, and regular polls to garner parents' feedback on upcoming activities and initiatives. It makes us feel heard and involved," says Ms Murshida, whose daughter Syifa' Binte Ahamad Sadik is in the K1 class. ●

LIGHT THE SPARK

Principal Tan Wei Sian offers tips for preschools on preparing for SPARK assessment.

- **Adopt the right mindset**
SPARK Certification should not be an end goal, but a checkpoint in the ongoing journey for quality improvement. Think what could be done better.
- **Be honest about strengths and weaknesses**
This will help the centre to critically reflect and develop targeted plans and strategies.
- **Make it a team effort**
Work together to identify the centre's needs and priorities, set goals, and review plans.
- **Reach out for support**
Take advantage of ECDA's resources to support principals and teachers in their SPARK journey (e.g., Quality Rating Scale workshops).



MORE SPARK! SPARK-certified centres, such as Small Wonder (Tampines), are recognised for their continued efforts in providing quality preschool education. See www.ecda.gov.sg/SPARKinfo for more information on the SPARK framework.