

AS A CHILD, Ms Nur A'qilah Binte Abu Saiere seldom visited museums, but she grew up surrounded by art as several of her extended family members draw and paint. Through her job giving weekly art classes for five year-olds at local studio Art Loft, her passion for museum education developed.

"The studio also conducts school workshops at the Singapore Art Museum, so I started leading pre-school workshops as well. I am now at the museum about two days a week," says the 21 year-old.

Called 'Little Artists', the workshop comprises a guided tour of the museum's galleries as well as a hands-on activity where pre-schoolers use a wide range of art materials to create their own 'masterpieces'. Ms Nur A'qilah's first-hand involvement in the workshops made her aware of the benefits

of museum education for young children.

She explains, "Museums offer multiple means of expression as children learn to observe, predict, compare and classify [different objects or phenomena]. By asking them open-ended questions relating to the exhibits for instance, 'What message do you think the artist is trying to convey?' you engage them in problem solving and critical thinking. In addition, the discussions allow for social interaction and language development."

An Advocate

In June 2014, Ms Nur A'qilah — who has always wanted to be a teacher — graduated from Wheelock College with a Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Education, under a scholarship from the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA). She focused on museums for a final-semester module, 'Policy, Advocacy and Leadership in Early Childhood Education'.

"The module required my school mates and I to form small groups and choose an

Turning Museums into Classrooms

ECDA scholar Nur A'qilah Binte Abu Saiere is a firm believer of arts and museum education for the young.

NUR A'QILAH BINTE ABU SAIERE
21, Pre-school teacher,
Preschool for Multiple
Intelligences
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Photo by Wilson Pang

“More can and should be done to encourage parents to bring their children to the museums.”

Nur A'qilah

outset. First, that museums in Singapore are under-utilised and second, that Singaporeans are unaware of the impact museums can have on the growth and learning of young children."

To ascertain if these assumptions were accurate, the group carried out a survey in February 2014 aimed at pre-school teachers, parents and university students. The survey was made available on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, and attracted 138 responses in total.

The results were rather surprising. Those who said they would bring their children to the museum believe it will be an enriching experience in which kids would learn about Singapore's history and heritage, be exposed to other cultures, and develop their creativity and inquisitiveness.

Singaporeans are generally aware that museums hold a wealth of knowledge and help broaden the horizons of young children. Thus, Ms Nur A'qilah is adamant that more can and should be done to encourage parents to bring their children to the museums, which she considers to be

advocacy cause that interested us. My group mates and I chose to advance the cause of museums in Singapore," she says.

"We made a couple of assumptions at the

"gems of the community".

"Museum attendance figures have risen considerably since the museums started offering free admission for Singapore citizens and permanent residents in May last year, but [the next step] is to make them more child-centric," she suggests. "Having more exhibitions designed for kids will help."

Ms Nur A'qilah also participated in a museum-related project during this year's Wheelock World Service Weekend — an annual event in which Wheelock College students, faculty and alumni perform volunteer activities to improve the lives of children and families. Held over one weekend in April 2014, the project saw her bring members of the public on a free guided tour of the National Museum of Singapore's permanent galleries.

A Lifelong Passion

Since July 2014, Ms Nur A'qilah has been working full-time as a pre-school teacher at Preschool for Multiple Intelligences International.

"I may have to cut back on my attachment with Art Loft, but I will never stop advocating for museums," she says. "I hope to organise museum visits for my own students, and would also like to pursue a master's degree in museum education within the next three to five years." ♥

MUSEUMS AND SINGAPORE

These were the questions posted for the survey. Go ahead and 'survey' yourself!



1. What is the first word that comes to your mind when you hear "museum"?
2. When was the last time you visited a local museum?
3. If you have visited a local museum before, which museum(s) did you visit?
4. Do you enjoy visiting museums? If yes, why? If no, why?
5. Who do you visit museums with?
6. If you have a child, would you bring him/her to the museum? If yes, why? If no, why?

92%
said they enjoyed visiting museums

96%
said that they would bring their children to the museum

20%
had visited a local museum within the last three months

