



ENRICHING JOURNEYS

A STUDY TRIP TO NEW ZEALAND GAVE ECDA FELLOWS MUCH TO REFLECT ABOUT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SCENE BACK HOME.



Dialogues with Wellington-based government agencies helped ECDA Fellows gain fresh insights on education policy

To understand more about New Zealand's early childhood (EC) landscape and how its curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, works in practice, the ECDA Fellows went on a week-long study trip to Wellington, New Zealand, in May 2023. *Te Whāriki* (which means "woven mat" in Māori) weaves together foundational principles and strands into a framework for holistic learning and development. It guides educators in designing a localised curriculum that is responsive to their own settings and the diverse needs of children and families.

RETHINKING SCHOOL READINESS

The Fellows visited government agencies supporting EC care and education, training institutes for EC educators, and several top preschools. Their itinerary also included New Zealand's national museum, which has exhibits curated for preschoolers.

"New Zealand's emphasis on preparing school for children, rather than preparing children for school, presents an insightful perspective," shares ECDA Fellow Ms Shirley Tan, Executive Director, Catholic Preschool Education (Singapore) Ltd. By taking this view on board, she believes educators in Singapore can better

calibrate and enhance their teaching and learning approaches.

Here are some key practices Ms Tan observed.

- **Respect the uniqueness of each child.** Instead of using a pre-set checklist, New Zealand educators document their observations through 'Learning Stories' to assess children's progress. These are written narratives that create a comprehensive learning and developmental profile of each child. The preschools also make it a point to know each child's family background via a pre-registration

questionnaire. "It's how educators understand the child's family life, customs and traditions, and why the child behaves in certain ways," says Ms Tan.

- **Scaffold the children's learning.** New Zealand educators use scaffolding techniques to help children learn and acquire new skills. For example, Ms Tan observed an assistant teacher guiding a three-year-old boy to pick up scissor-handling skills. She used gentle prompts ("Can I help you with this?"), role-modelling ("This is how you cut") and encouragement ("That's good!"). Through her warm and friendly tone, the child was eager to practise this new skill.



- **Build open and authentic relationships.** New Zealand educators regularly engage parents in informal discussions about their children by sharing the Learning Stories. Accreditation reports, preschool policies and procedures, and meeting minutes are also readily accessible to parents. Parents therefore become close partners with educators in supporting their children's learning and development.

BACK TO BASICS

After the study trip, Ms Tan set about reviewing the curricular and pedagogical practices at the seven preschools under her care. One area of improvement was for centre leaders to spend more time in the classroom to deepen their understanding of how children learn and hone their curriculum-planning skills.

Ms Tan points out, "As leaders, we have to keep fine-tuning and strengthening our knowledge and skills. Only then can we effectively guide and mentor our teachers, and strengthen their teaching and learning foundations." ●

Visiting local preschools to observe professional practices and network with New Zealand counterparts

RISKS OF PLAYING IT SAFE

Three ECDA Fellows — Dr Jacqueline Chung, Ms Stella Pereira and Ms Hephzi Tee — presented a workshop at this year's Early Childhood Celebrations & Conference, titled 'Daring Discoverers: Supporting Risky Play in Early Childhood'. It was inspired by their study trip, where children as young as three were allowed to handle woodworking tools in Wellington preschools. Dr Chung explains more.

- ➔ Risky play is any **play that is thrilling and exciting** and involves some risk or uncertainty. Examples include playing with real tools or on uneven surfaces.
- ➔ Risky play teaches children to **cope with a healthy degree of fear, stress and uncertainty**. They learn to 'read' environments that are less predictable and hone their decision-making and problem-solving skills. It builds resilience as children become more willing to step out of their comfort zone, face challenges, and deal with setbacks.
- ➔ **Healthy risky play** is any situation where adults and children (through the support of adults) are aware of known and potential hazards in the play space and recognise the risk of physical injury. Children learn to negotiate and make decisions during play, while adults supervise and encourage them to take chances beyond what they would normally do. Such activities include stacking blocks or tyres and climbing over them, jumping from one box to another, balancing on rocks over water, or fencing with sticks.
- ➔ **Unhealthy risky play** occurs when there is a lack of risk assessment or supervision by the adult, exposing children to danger and injury. It is irresponsible to let children do as they wish in play spaces without proper assessment, preparation and guidance.

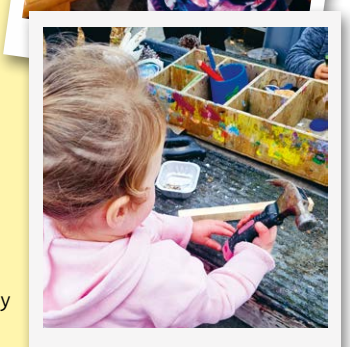
TO FACILITATE RISKY PLAY:

- Set boundaries while guiding children through progressive levels of risk, according to their different experiences and abilities.
- Encourage children to identify risks and discuss how to manage these together.
- Supervise children from a distance rather than hovering over them.
- Instead of forbidding children to do an activity, prompt them to think about it by asking questions such as "Does it feel steady?" or "Can you balance?"

TO ALLAY PARENTS' CONCERNS:

- Highlight the benefits of risky play and how a lack of exposure to it can affect children adversely as they grow older.
- Explain your risk assessment strategies to reassure parents that you have thought through the potential dangers.
- Share positive articles, photos, videos and testimonials from other parents and children.

Dr Jacqueline Chung is Academic Director at Anglican Preschool Services. Ms Stella Pereira is Cluster Director at The Little Skool-House International. Ms Hephzi Tee is Principal of Hebron Christian Preschool.



Woodworking projects promote healthy risky play in the early years

