

IN A COUNTRY where English is the first language, Mother Tongue Language (MTL) educators in Singapore tend to face an uphill battle garnering children's interest. It is a challenge Ms Zheng Min, a winner of the ECDA Outstanding Early Childhood Teacher Award 2014, knows all too well in her 12 years as a Mandarin teacher in the early childhood sector. Since 2012, she has been with Kinderland Preschool @ Republic Polytechnic where she teaches Nursery to K2 children.

"It's common for children not to know any Mandarin when they enter the Nursery level," says Ms Zheng, 37, who believes this may be due to lack of exposure at home. "Most parents speak

English at home to their children because they think it is a more important language to learn." However, Ms Zheng is not discouraged and makes every effort to cultivate an appreciation for Mandarin among children at her centre.

"I want to instil a love for Mandarin in children, and it will certainly help if they enjoy learning the language in class," she explains. Ms Zheng does this by incorporating indoor and outdoor play into her lessons. For example, when teaching inventions, she asks her K2 children to talk in Mandarin about their favourite toys and who invented them, during show-and-tell sessions. Ms Zheng also takes the pre-schoolers on nature walks to provide rich hands-on opportunities for them to improve their Chinese vocabulary.

"Something as simple as seeing twigs on the ground can lead to discussions on how they can be used to start a fire or a conversation about the shapes of leaves."

Ms Zheng also believes that parent involvement is crucial for MTL learning. "Children will easily forget what they have learned at school if they do not practise the language at home," she says. As part of the classroom's 'Inventions' theme, the K2 children were asked to give a presentation in Mandarin on famous inventors, based on research they conducted at home with their parents.

Janelle Ho's enthusiasm for MTL can be traced to her pre-school years at Kinderland. The eight-year-old is now studying Higher Chinese in primary school. Her mother Ms Jolene Chiam, a lecturer, says, "I remember Janelle showing me the Chinese books which Ms Zheng gave her, and singing Chinese songs she learned at pre-school." She also received regular updates on Janelle's progress from Ms Zheng, in addition to feedback at parent-teacher meetings.

"Ms Zheng genuinely cares about children and I believe they can feel it. They feel comfortable communicating in Mandarin with her," says Ms Chiam. Indeed, she is confident that Ms Zheng will have the same positive influence on her son Jared, three, when he starts Nursery in 2016.

A firm believer of continuing professional development, Ms Zheng hopes to begin her Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education next year. "As an ECDA award winner, I have a responsibility to upgrade my skills and uphold the standards of the early childhood profession." ♥

The WINNING formula

Ms Zheng Min's love for Mandarin is as evident as her love for children.

FORGING THE CENTRE-PARENT PARTNERSHIP

MTL learning does not have to end at school as there are various ways for parents to carry on the good work of teachers at home. Your child can have the best of both worlds if you speak in English while your spouse speaks in Mandarin, or vice versa. Reading Chinese storybooks to your child is also helpful, even if it's only for five to 10 minutes a day. Once your child is able to recognise Chinese characters, you can then ask your child to read to you. More importantly, make it fun!



ZHENG MIN
37, Teacher,
Kinderland Preschool
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Polytechnic

The Child's CHOICE



Educators at Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Kindergarten empower children to make the right behavioural choices through its innovative 'Self-Regulation - Great Choices' project.

AT RAMAKRISHNA MISSION Sarada Kindergarten, children are not simply told what to do. They are encouraged to make good choices under the guidance of the pre-school centre's educators. Through the project 'Self-Regulation - Great Choices', children from Nursery to K2 levels are guided to self-regulate their actions. The project was first implemented in 2011 and has since been progressively refreshed as the educators continue to innovate. The pre-school centre clinched an ECDA Early Childhood Innovation Award in September last year.

"Self-regulation means the ability to control one's behaviour — to withstand impulses and maintain focus, even if there are other more seemingly enticing alternatives available," explains Principal Ms Pushpa Narayanasamy.

Educators' glowing comments help the children feel good about their choices.



"We are hopeful that in learning how to self-regulate in pre-school, the children will be in good stead when faced with challenges and temptations later in their lives. They will also be able to respond appropriately in social and educational environments."

The project is carried out through multiple approaches. For example, children as young as those in Nursery set three to four important class rules they all agree upon. These rules are then displayed in the classroom and referred to regularly. Those who exhibit the recommended positive behaviours will have their photographs taken and displayed. "Over time, other children start to follow suit as they too want their behaviours recognised and acknowledged," says Ms Pushpa.

The concept of 'The Note' is practised at K1 level. Educators acknowledge children's positive behaviour by presenting them with notes that bear varying messages such as "You're my sunshine" and "You're a

When notes acknowledging good behaviour are displayed in class, they send a positive message to other children, who also want their behaviours recognised.

sweetheart". These notes are displayed in class before the children take them home to show their parents. Other strategies for the K1 and K2 children include the "Little Sticker Book" and the "Wish Board". The educator pastes a sticker with a message in a child's sticker book to reinforce the positive behaviour displayed. In the "Wish Board", children are encouraged to display the activities they wish to do during their classroom free time. When a child displays a good act, he or she will receive a yellow sticker. Three stickers collected means his or her wish will be granted.

"Ever since we put the 'Self-Regulation - Great Choices' project into practice, disruptive behaviours both in the classrooms and the centre have reduced, while effective engagement of the children has increased," says Ms Pushpa. "We have also found that self-regulation fosters compassion and empathy for others." ♥

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// Pushpa Narayanasamy