

OPENING ADDRESS BY GUEST OF HONOUR, MS. INDRANEE RAJAH, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE, MINISTRY OF LAW AND MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, AT THE KINDERGARTEN LEARNING FORUM ON TUESDAY 20 NOVEMBER 2012, AT REPUBLIC POLYTECHNIC

Leaders and teachers from kindergartens and child care centres,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning.

Introduction

1. It is a pleasure to be here at the 2012 Kindergarten Learning Forum. Having just joined the MOE family, I am excited to be part of this significant event in the pre-school calendar. The Kindergarten Learning Forum is a professional development event for kindergarten teachers, recognising outstanding teachers and centres in their efforts to enrich our children's learning experiences through best practices and innovation projects. The influence of a teacher over a child's life is immeasurable. *[SMS may wish to consider sharing personal anecdotes, e.g. any childhood experience of how pre-school teachers have impacted SMS's life or the life of others that SMS knows].* As such,

teachers must have opportunities and be given the space to continually upgrade and enhance their knowledge and skills. The Kindergarten Learning Forum provides such opportunities. It is now in its fourth year and I understand that it is an event which many of you in the pre-school sector look forward to. The sumptuous spread of concurrent sessions and exhibits has been a draw to many participants, presenting a range of professional development opportunities and offering many relevant take-aways for early childhood educators.

Laying the Foundations through Pre-school Years

2. For many of us here, we share the same belief that children's development in the early years is crucial in itself. A child's early years in pre-school is the time when our children experience the joy and thrill of inquiring, exploring, and discovering the world around them. We are the helping hands, encouraging them and gently drawing them on in this journey of learning. Together, we help to lay a strong foundation for children to become life-long learners in pre-school education. Research clearly shows the positive impact of high-quality pre-school programmes on both the short- and long-term outcomes for children. Some of these outcomes are that children are able to persevere in the face of adversity and become motivated to learn. These qualities would help our children to thrive in the 21st century.

Engaging Children in Learning through Purposeful Play

3. One important teaching and learning strategy in pre-school education is the concept of 'play'. Many early childhood educators will speak passionately about 'play' and its benefits for the development of happy and healthy children. Play is essential because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional development and well-being of children. It helps children build the skills necessary for critical thinking, imagination and creativity. We often hear that play is the main way children learn and develop ideas about the world. Through play, children explore their world, discover how to get along with others, test their skills, try out new ideas, evaluate what they are learning and feel competent about their ability to learn.

4. Engaging children in learning through purposeful play has been a key principle of learning that MOE firmly believes in. MOE seeks to guide pre-schools in designing and implementing a high-quality early childhood programme that is based on strengthening the relationship between learning and play. Children learn the most from play when they have knowledgeable and skilful teachers who have a good understanding of how play contributes to learning. Although many activities in pre-schools are labelled 'play', not all play experiences can be considered purposeful. What is often referred to as play may just be a

period of fun time given to children as a reward for the completion of academic tasks. Young children love to do things that are fun and pre-school teachers often relish their jobs because of the joy in sharing that enthusiasm. However, doing fun things with children is not enough. We know that children are born ready to learn – they are curious, active and competent learners who can learn almost anything given the right support and right environment. Having good intentions in the activities carried out for the children is no longer sufficient. Purposeful play is not just any play. Besides being enjoyable, it allows children to make meaning out of their experiences. Teachers have an important task to deepen play experiences to ensure that they are enjoyable and beneficial for all children. Purposeful play needs teacher facilitation and guidance. It requires teachers to thoughtfully plan for the play experiences, select resources and materials, organise the environment and engage in quality adult-child interactions to scaffold and sustain the learning of children. As early childhood educators, we have to be intentional in all that we do, including planning for and facilitating children's play.

Enhancing Centre and Teacher Quality

5. To provide our children with a high-quality pre-school programme, the Ministry of Education is committed to enhancing the quality of pre-school education through raising teacher, programme and centre quality. One of the ways to raise quality is through building the professional capacity of our pre-school teachers. Besides the Kindergarten Learning Forum, pre-school teachers in both kindergartens and child care centres have benefitted from many different professional development opportunities this year such as the Kindergarten Conference held in June, and lectures, workshops as well as seminars that targeted specific areas such as curriculum and pedagogy, teacher mentoring, curriculum leadership, innovation and quality assurance. In addition, scholarships, teaching awards and bursaries continue to be available to support the professional development of existing teachers and the entry of qualified individuals into the sector. These are just part of the ongoing efforts to provide and enhance the quality of pre-school education which the Prime Minister announced in his National Day Rally speech this year.

Recognising Excellence in Kindergartens and Teachers

6. MOE will continue with our efforts to enhance the quality of pre-school education. Central to these efforts is recognising excellent teaching practices in the sector, so as to promote sound and innovative

practices among pre-school centres. Today, I am pleased to present the MOE-AECES Awards for Kindergartens as it honours kindergartens and teachers who have made outstanding contributions towards the education of children. The efforts of PCF (PAP Community Foundation) Whampoa Blk 112 and 11 other centres to create, organise and sustain the Professional Learning Committee for Chinese to raise the quality of Mother Tongue Language teaching and learning is highly commendable and certainly deserving of the Outstanding Kindergarten Innovation Award. Such commitment to enhance the professional capacity of fellow Chinese Language teachers beyond one's centre will reap long term benefits in enriching our children's learning experiences in the language.

7. The late Mark Van Doren, an American poet and a professor of English at the Columbia University, once said "the art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery". This year's recipient of the Outstanding Learning Centres Distinction Award lives out this saying. Living Sanctuary Kindergarten believes in awakening the young scientist within each child. Children explore, discover and investigate the materials and objects under the purposeful planning of their teachers. With the aid of the teachers, the children are even able to hypothesise and make predictions from their observations and recordings, taking that essential step towards being willing to explore and to take risks in learning. Even

as centres, such as Living Sanctuary Kindergarten, create a nurturing and conducive learning environment for children to flourish in, teachers are still the key to providing our children with an enriching learning experience. Ms. Lin Hsing Fen, the recipient of the Outstanding Kindergarten Teacher Distinction Award, is one example of how a teacher can lead and inspire her professional colleagues in PCF Pioneer Blk 662B through her innovative and engaging teaching practice as well as her willingness to partner with parents. This year's MOE-AECES award recipients and finalists could not have been able to achieve what they set out to do without the support and partnership with their stakeholders. This certainly shows that the provision of quality pre-school education is a collective endeavour: one that involves the government, pre-school operators, teachers, parents and community partners.

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8. To enhance centre quality, the Singapore Pre-school Accreditation Framework or SPARK, has been implemented to provide recognition and support for both kindergarten and childcare centre leaders in their efforts to improve teaching and learning, administration and management processes to enhance the holistic development of young children. As of today, 167 pre-schools have been SPARK-certified. To be SPARK-certified is to receive a mark of quality in the provision of pre-

school education, and such information enables parents to make informed choices about kindergartens and childcare centres for their children. I would strongly encourage all pre-school centres to apply for SPARK assessment.

To recognise centres that have attained SPARK certification in the second half of 2012, and to celebrate this milestone achievement, I understand that a separate SPARK certificate presentation ceremony will be held later this afternoon. I would like to congratulate these centres who have achieved the standards for SPARK Certification, and I hope to see more centres becoming SPARK-certified to underscore their commitment to provide quality pre-school education.

Refreshing the Kindergarten Curriculum Framework

9. MOE's effort to improve quality of pre-school education is amplified by greater government involvement as announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his National Day Rally speech. As you would know, an Implementation Committee for Enhancing Pre-school Education (ICEPE) has been formed by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social and Family Development. The Committee will continue government's efforts in accelerating quality improvements in the pre-school sector by strengthening teacher training and curriculum development, setting up

government pilot centres to catalyse and develop best practices, improving quality and affordability for lower and middle income families, and setting up a new statutory board to improve policy coordination and regulation.

One key area that the Implementation Committee is working on is to enhance programme quality and strengthen its delivery across the sector through developing a comprehensive kindergarten curriculum comprising an updated version of the Kindergarten Curriculum Framework, a teachers' guide, and teaching and learning resources to support teachers in nurturing and developing children's knowledge, skills and dispositions. The Kindergarten Curriculum Framework that was launched in 2003 served as a guide to pre-schools on what constitutes quality early years education. To keep abreast with current educational developments and new research findings in Early Childhood Education and Care, the Ministry of Education embarked on a journey to refresh the Kindergarten Curriculum Framework to update the scope and relevance of the principles that guide teaching and learning practices. I know many of you have provided input to updating the Kindergarten Curriculum Framework. I would like to thank those who were involved and who shared your views with us. This is an important piece of work to address the interface between pre-school and primary education. We

will address this interface from both ends – pre-school and primary school, to smoothen the transition for our pupils. We are finalising the details and look forward to sharing with you. Our goal for pre-school education remains clear – to help our children cultivate a love and positive disposition for learning.

Conclusion

10. I would like to end my speech with some thoughts on providing “A Strong Start for Every Child”. This touches the very heart of what pre-school education is, that children from all walks of life will have a strong start in life and this goes beyond laying the foundation in numeracy and literacy skills to include a positive attitude towards learning as well as being able to relate to others and having sound, moral values. I would like to thank all of you for helping our children learn in the best way that they can, to experience the joy of learning, and enjoy their childhood. Do take the time to visit the exhibition booths and participate actively in the various concurrent sessions. With that, I wish all of you a fruitful day ahead in this Forum.

11. Thank you.