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Subject: (Embargoed) Speech by Dr Aline Wong, 2 Jun 2000, 2.00pm

Singapore Government

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**SPEECH BY DR ALINE WONG, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR
EDUCATION, AND CHAIRMAN, BOARD OF TRUSTEES, NTUC
CHILDCARE CO-OPERATIVE LTD, FOR THE RTRC ASIA-
WHELOCK COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY 2000, ON
FRIDAY, 2 JUNE 2000, 2.00 PM AT GOODWOOD PARK HOTEL**

National Archives of Singapore

Professor Joan Bergstrom, Director of Centre for International Education and
Leadership, Wheelock College,
Mr Lim Geok Hwee, Director, RTRC Asia, CEO, NTUC Childcare
Co-operative,
Graduating Class of 2000,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a pleasure for me to join you once again on this important occasion
as we celebrate the commencement of 26 graduates for the Diploma in Early

Childhood Care and Education.

Importance of Early Childhood Education

2 In March this year, I announced in Parliament the 8 desired outcomes for children attending pre-school. This was in response to the recent focus on pre-school education and how my ministry planned to address this issue. Among the desired outcomes is this particular outcome which I wish to highlight today: that children be curious about the world around them and be able to explore. This is the crux of all learning. In the new learning environment, curiosity is to be strongly encouraged. Unlike the old school days when ‘good’ students were not expected or even allowed to question what the teachers said, we want to actively promote children’s curiosity in today’s schools. We want them to ask questions to find out about the world they live in. According to a popular story about Isaac Newton, and this is a story all of us knew from primary school days, an apple dropped on his head when he was resting under an apple tree. That started him thinking and he asked the question why the apple dropped down and not fly up. That curiosity led to what came to be known as Newton’s Law of Gravity.

3 What, then, can we do to promote children’s curiosity, so that they will think and question without fear of their peers laughing at them? The answer must lie in the skilful teacher. It is the teacher who can draw out children’s sense of curiosity and set them thinking about the environment which they live in. If we want to bring out the thinking child, our teachers must believe that every child has capabilities and a natural curiosity about the world around them. The teachers must be able to draw out that curiosity, ask the right questions and create the right environment for learning. The cognitive development of the child can be stimulated through curiosity, discovery, experimentation, questioning and observation. It is in this context that teacher training is crucial to our children’s mental development.

4 The Ministry of Education is looking into improving the training of pre-school teachers to ensure that minimum standards are met. Teacher training programmes should incorporate the learning outcomes for pre-school education and train teachers to bring out the love of learning in our children. Societal pressures have dictated that academic success spells the progress of an individual. But developmental research has shown that there is more to success than this and we have to begin to nurture the other areas of development at the earliest stages possible. The five areas that are vital to the overall development of a child are moral, cognitive, social, emotional and physical development.

The guidelines set by my ministry for pre-schools in Singapore will reflect a healthy balance of these five areas in the education of young children. Rather than simply preparing children for Primary 1, teachers will prepare them for life long learning to enhance their success in life. I hope that teachers like you will plan programmes that develop children' s sense of curiosity and wonder of the world. Equally important is the need to work with parents who must understand the value of age-appropriate learning activities rather than focus on academic achievements or cramming the child with all kinds of learning so as to gain a so-called "headstart" over other children.

5 I am pleased that the 26 graduates today chose to take pre-school teaching as their career. I commend each and every one of you for it. I am heartened to note RTRC Asia' s contribution to the training of teachers. I am told that last year, RTRC Asia trained a total of 861 teachers in the fundamental and intermediate certificate courses. In addition, 128 students are currently undergoing the Diploma programmes conducted by RTRC Asia-Wheelock College and RTRC Asia-Ngee Ann Polytechnic. I am hopeful that with high quality training, networking and joint efforts of these institutions, there will be a larger pool of qualified early childhood personnel to meet the growing demand for teachers and leaders in the childcare and kindergarten service industry in Singapore. As our society becomes more aware of the importance of early childhood education, the demand for quality teachers rises. Through high quality training programmes, I am confident that we will produce well-respected professionals in this field.

6 Currently Singapore has a variety of childcare and pre-schools operators for parents to choose from. This promotes healthy competition and creates an arena for creative innovation. However, the underlying and unifying thread should be the quality of the early childhood teachers. You will part ways after this ceremony, returning to your respective roles as teachers or pre-school administrators. Take away with you the lessons and skills learnt in the classroom. This is the time for you to actively implement the knowledge that you have gained. Nurturing children' s creativity and harnessing the natural curiosity of the child should be your priority in your individual roles. Parents will recognise the quality of the care and education provided, and the positive manner in which you carry out your duties will have a great influence on how parents view early childhood education, and this in turn will help in the education of parents.

Conclusion

7 Finally, I offer my congratulations to the graduates gathered here today and look forward to your pursuing a lifelong interest and continual education in this important area. With the training you have received, I am certain you will be competent teachers and leaders who will make a difference to the lives of children and their families.

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