

Singapore's first dedicated Preschool Practicum Centre aims to improve the quality of training for preschool teachers and early childhood education

Lien Foundation partners St James' Church Kindergarten in a three-year project to train up to 300 preschool trainee teachers each year

Singapore, 12 August 2014

1. Cara Lee's first practicum experience as a preschool trainee teacher filled her with misgivings. She met her host teacher only weeks after the attachment started, and during most of the training period, she was asked to just sit around and watch. There was little hands-on experience or coaching. Her story is a common one echoed by many other trainee teachers in early childhood education (ECE). Fortunately, Cara's experience took a turn for the better in her practicum in the later years of her course. She was given the chance to teach and also assigned a mentor who guided her with feedback on her performance. That has made a big difference, and today, Cara is a Mentor Supervisor, overseeing trainee teachers and host teachers at St James' Church Kindergarten.
2. She is part of the effort by the **Lien Foundation and St James' Church Kindergarten** (SJCK) to create Singapore's first-ever purpose-designed preschool practicum centre called the **St James' Church Kindergarten Preschool Practicum Centre** (PPC). Located within SJCK's Harding campus, its chief mission is to raise the level of training for preschool teachers in Singapore and empowers those in training with relevant skill sets for a rewarding career in early childhood education.

Quality training to produce quality teachers

3. Presently, preschool trainee teachers in Singapore need to complete 200 to 500 hours of practicum to graduate from their diploma course, and this constitutes approximately 25 per cent of total course time. However, many of them receive limited or little mentoring during their attachment. "The quality of an educational

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system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. If we want to raise the standard of early childhood education in Singapore, it's crucial to ensure that our preschool teachers are meaningfully engaged and mentored by experienced practitioners at seminal points of their training," said Mr. Lee Poh Wah, CEO, Lien Foundation "The highly qualified and motivated teachers and supervisors at the practicum centre not only bridge classroom theories with practice, they are also role models who will demonstrate the key values, professionalism, and skill sets that new teachers will aspire to emulate."

Why St James' Church Kindergarten

4. SJCK at Harding is the largest single campus preschool in Singapore in terms of the student population. This allows SJCK to train up to 76 trainee teachers at any one time, across the different preschool levels. Mr. Richard Chung, Director of St James' Church Kindergarten said, "Having such a sizable training cohort enables us to define the practicum centre as a model that could be replicated by other preschools, and perhaps even at national level. Best practices in practicum training could be shared with and adopted by other players in the early childhood sector. This goes towards raising the standards of early childhood teaching and education in Singapore."

Experienced teachers mentoring novice teachers

5. The PPC provides a structured training programme for preschool trainee teachers undergoing the practicum component of their diploma, degree or masters degree courses. Designed in consultation with early childhood training institutions, the practicum helps trainees develop capabilities in areas like classroom management, lesson delivery, observation and documentation, school management, curriculum development, professional development, personal development and team building (see details in annex). Preschool trainee teachers receive close guidance under the mentorship of host teachers and full-time Mentor Supervisors. These experienced preschool teachers pass on their knowledge and skills using a multipronged approach of observation, coaching, guided reflection and discussion, and evaluation.

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Key goals behind Singapore's first dedicated preschool teaching practicum centre

6. Started in April this year, the PPC is able to train up to 300 preschool trainee teachers each year. The key objectives of the PPC are to:
 - Deliver quality training in ECE - transform educational theories from the lecture rooms to practical learning on the field of the classrooms.
 - Empower preschool trainee teachers with relevant skill sets and develop their self-confidence so that they are equipped to work in the sector after graduation.
 - Spur teachers' passion and commitment towards a life-long career in the ECE sector through a positive and meaningful practicum engagement.
 - Produce a model and set a benchmark for practicum training in Singapore.
 - Create a new avenue for teaching staff at SJCK to advance and develop professionally e.g. to become mentor teachers or mentor supervisors.

Providing trainees with a good start to the ECE journey

7. To date, 15 trainees from SEED Institute, Ngee Ann Polytechnic and Singapore Polytechnic have successfully completed the programme. One of them is Ms. Siti Suhailah bte Saleh, a final year full-time diploma student from SEED Institute who observed, "My practical training in St. James' was an eye opener. My supervisors and host teachers there had post-conferences with me regularly. They were very focused on helping us and were always at-hand to answer our questions. I learnt a lot from their guidance and feedback. They coached me on different ways to engage and teach the children. I even got to experience rice planting with the kids."
8. The aim to build up the next generation of early childhood educators by giving them a strong foundation was reiterated by Ms. Cara Lee. She said, "The real-world experience we give our trainees provide early exposure, that when coupled with guidance, allow for tremendous hands-on learning. This sets the novices on a firm footing, so that when the time comes, they will have already developed the suitable dispositions and skills to become effective full-fledged teachers."

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Two-way learning

9. The learning does not stop with the trainees. In fact, the practicum programme contributes to the professional growth of the teachers at SJCK. Host teacher Mrs. Chua Bee Lain noted, "It was interesting to see how my two student teachers tried to translate the theories they learnt from lectures into action for the classroom. As I guided them on the fundamental principles of early childhood education, I also became more aware of the need to remain relevant and responsive to the changes in the early childhood landscape."

10. Dr. Kok Siat Yeow, Deputy Director, Programmes, SEED Institute underscored the importance of the practicum experience. She said, "We have found that our students benefit most when their practicum experience is one that is well guided and structured for learning and feedback. This not only deepens their understanding of what we have taught them, it also enhances their appreciation of the demands of the profession and better prepares them at the start of their career." This preparation plays a vital part in the growth and retention of teachers in the early childhood education sector.

Developing and retaining talent in the ECE sector

11. "Professionalism develops when the students identify themselves with good models of early childhood teaching during their practicum attachment," said Mrs. Jacqueline Chung, Senior Principal, SJCK "Conversely, if the students are met with a lack of professionalism repeatedly or have several negative encounters, they could be discouraged from furthering a career in early childhood education." Currently, the annual attrition rate for Singapore's ECE sector is about 15 to 20 per cent,¹ higher than the average annual attrition rate of 15.6 per cent² found in Singapore companies.

¹ "A master plan to develop early childhood educators", Ashley Chia, TODAY, 21 November 2013, <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/master-plan-develop-early-childhood-educators>

² Singapore employees looking for the exit as economic growth returns, 13 August 2013, http://www.haygroup.com/downloads/sg/Singapore_Employee%20Retention%20press%20release%202013_FINAL.pdf

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12. This manpower challenge continues to be a top concern shared by many leaders in the ECE sector.³ It will be an ongoing issue, for Singapore needs an additional 2,000 preschool teachers for 200 new childcare centres that the government has planned for in the next few years.

Developing best practices for the industry

13. "As Singapore seeks to grow the number of preschools in double quick time, it is all the more important that the government considers further support to preschool centres that take in students on practicum. Structured processes, dedicated mentor supervisors, and a collegial culture are important parts of the practicum process that needs to be encouraged, with an eventual goal to build vibrant learning communities that is the hallmark of a high-quality preschool teacher corps," said Mr. Lee.
14. For instance, the presence of a robust practicum provided on a national level by the NIE (National Institute of Education) has clear advantages. Its teacher-training programme in primary and secondary schools attaches trainees to cooperating teachers (CTs) and empower them to co-teach or even take over their classes, and get involved in Co-Curricular Activities. During the practicum, a Senior Teacher forms the bridge between the trainees and their CTs, while the NIE faculty supervisor provides another level of emotional and professional support for the student teachers. The MOE (Ministry of Education) reported that the annual resignation rate for teachers has remained low at around three per cent over 2009-2013.⁴

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About the Lien Foundation

www.lienfoundation.org

The Lien Foundation is a Singapore philanthropic house noted for its model of radical philanthropy. It breaks new ground by investing in innovative solutions, convening strategic partnerships and catalysing action on social and environmental challenges. The Foundation seeks to foster exemplary early childhood education, excellence in eldercare and effective environmental sustainability in water and sanitation.

³ "Vital Voices for Vital Years", Dr Lynn Ang, a study commissioned by the Lien Foundation, 2012.

⁴ "Teachers not leaving due to workload," My Paper, 22 October 2013

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In the area of early childhood education, the Foundation aims to create a better playing field by strengthening capacity in this area and opening up opportunities for disadvantaged preschoolers. In June 2012, the Lien Foundation released a global benchmark study called "Starting Well" that ranked 45 countries on their provision of preschool education. To advocate greater access to quality early childhood education, the Foundation commissioned a study, "Vital Voices for Vital Years" that examined leaders' views on improving Singapore's preschool sector. The use of I.T forms a key strategy in the Foundation's efforts to increase efficiencies and enhance professionalism in the preschool sector. The Foundation has championed a community-based model of care where specialists go into mainstream preschools to help children with learning difficulties. Its success has inspired a scaled-up national version in Singapore.

About St James' Church Kindergarten

Established in 1977, St. James' Church Kindergarten has two campuses with a total of 1,200 children from the ages of 3 - 6 years. SJCK provides an environment that offers high quality and holistic early education to develop children into well-rounded individuals. SJCK emphasises character development and desires that all children develop and demonstrate godly character expressed as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

The culture at St. James' Church Kindergarten is one where children, teachers and families relate to each other in an environment of mutual respect. SJCK believes that everyone thrives in a positive and nurturing atmosphere of support, love and encouragement so that they feel safe and secure to express themselves.

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ANNEX

Lien Foundation St James' Church Kindergarten Preschool Practicum Centre (PPC)

A. Quick facts on the PPC

Training capacity - Number of preschool trainee teachers per year	300 students
Number of trainee teachers completed training <i>As at 12 Aug 2014</i>	15
Number of mentor supervisors at PPC	2
Number of host teachers at PPC	20
Current partner institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEED Institute • Ngee Ann Polytechnic • Singapore Polytechnic
Other potential partner institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advent Links – SAUDC Education Centre • Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore) – AECES • First Learning and Training Centre • Institute of Technical Education • KLC School of Education • Nanyang Institute of Management • SIM University • St. Andrew's Centre for Early Childhood Education • Temasek Polytechnic

B. Key elements for field practicum at the PPC

- **Classroom Management**
 - Shadow teaching staff and opportunities to apply theory to practice
 - What they learn: classroom management skills, children's engagement skills, behaviour management
- **Lesson Delivery**
 - Opportunities to teach and co-teach. This will be followed up with timely debriefs
 - What they learn: classroom teaching, outdoor teaching, individual instruction
- **Observation and Documentation**
 - Guided observation and documentation of children's learning processes and progress
 - Guided reflection on observations and discussions on how to help children with learning difficulties
- **School Management**
 - Exposure to the full operation of a school. Direction for consideration of higher education in ECE.
 - What they learn: management systems and practices, teacher-parent support system, family and community support system, overall centre operations
- **Curriculum development**
 - Opportunity to customise components of the curriculum to raise quality of learning for children
 - Opportunity to make use of physical environment as part of lesson delivery and implementation
 - What they learn: curriculum development and implementation, addressing children's developmental challenges, early childhood intervention programmes and practices, early childhood character development and programmes
- **Professional development**
 - Post-conference discussions and workshops focusing on actual role and functions of a teacher in the classroom
 - What they learn: teacher's quality teaching practices, teacher's professional and personal challenges

- **Mentorship**
 - Dynamic engagement with mentor supervisors and host teachers. Mentor Supervisors provide feedback and guidance for lesson planning and implementation at least three times a week
 - Mentor Supervisors observe lessons about three times throughout the practicum duration

- **Personal development**
 - Self-reflection and mindset transformation to help clarify professional vision, goals and passion
 - Mentor Supervisors and Principal motivate and inspire student teachers and help them to develop positive dispositions needed for the field of early childhood education

- **Team building**
 - Immersed in a culture of sharing. Building of positive interpersonal relationships with current teachers

- **Learning journeys**
 - Work with training institutions to organise learning journeys for entire cohorts

C. Practicum Requirements of ECE Courses Offered

Table C.1: Minimum Requirements of PQAC-Accredited Early Childhood Teacher Training Courses

Course	Total Curriculum Hours (for entire course, including practicum)	No. of Practicum Hours (Supervised teaching practice)	Percentage of practicum hours to total curriculum hours
Certificate in Early Childhood Care and Education	800	240	30%
Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education–Teaching	1,200	300	25%
Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education–Leadership	850	200	23%
Specialist Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education	1,600	500	31%

Source: Accreditation Standards For Early Childhood Teacher Training Courses (Revised Oct 2008), http://app.msf.gov.sg/Portals/0/Files/pqac_accreditation_standards.pdf

Table C.2: WDA-Accredited / ECDA-Recognised Early Childhood Teacher Training Courses

Course	Total Curriculum Hours (for entire course, including practicum)	No. of Practicum Hours (Supervised teaching practice)	Percentage of practicum hours to total curriculum hours
WSQ Professional Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education (Childcare) – SEED Institute¹	940	240	25%
WSQ Professional Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education (Childcare) – KLC International Institute²	700	200	28%

1 – Source: <http://www.seedinstitute.edu.sg/academic-programmes/i-want-to-be-an-early-childhood-professional/diplomas/wsq-professional-diploma-in-early-childhood-care-n-education-pdecce-childcare>

2 – Source: <http://www.klc.edu.sg/academics.aspx?cid=1&id=40>

D. Criteria for practicum host centres & mentors

1. Centres must be ECDA-licensed child care centres or ECDA-registered kindergartens
2. Supervisors/Principals of these centres must have at least 3 years of supervisory experience
3. Senior Teachers may serve as mentors – they must have at least 3 years of ECCE teaching experience

Source: Accreditation Standards For Early Childhood Teacher Training Courses (Revised Oct 2008) on the ECDA website
http://app.msf.gov.sg/Portals/0/Files/pqac_accreditation_standards.pdf