

WHERE CHILDREN ARE SEEN AND HEARD

All parents want to give their children a head start in life, and there is a proliferation of early childhood education centres offering child development programmes. Two centres share how they differentiate themselves from the pack. At Zoo-phonics, language development forms the foundation of all learning while teacher education is the driving force of successful children at Busy Bees Singapore.



PHOTOS: KEVIN CHING

WHERE TEACHERS ALSO LEARN

WHEN one considers pre-school education, it is natural to think that children are the ones getting all the attention in their development. Not at Busy Bees Singapore. The childcare services provider, which manages five pre-school brands here, believes that teacher education is the true driving force of successful children.

"At the end of the day, it's all about the teachers," says June Rusdon, chief executive officer of Busy Bees Asia. "They join us, they trust us, and they believe that we can make a difference in the children's lives and also their own professional lives in this field."

Being a teacher at Busy Bees Singapore is no straightforward task. The five brands under the provider – Small Wonder, Learning Vision, Pat's

Schoolhouse, Brighton Montessori and Odyssey The Global Preschool – caters to different market segments: mass market, corporate, premium market and the super premium market.

At super premium brand Odyssey The Global Preschool, teachers must have intimate knowledge of the Reggio Emilia approach which emphasises self-directed and experiential learning through projects. Ms Rusdon explains that due to the research-based nature of learning at the centre, the role of the teacher is to facilitate, rather than instruct. "It is not teachers who initiate; these are child-initiated activities," she says, adding that teachers must also ensure that the skills that need to be learnt by the children at a certain age are not compromised.



Small Wonder, on the other hand, is a mass market brand where teachers have to expertly handle a more demanding student-teacher ratio. The largest Small Wonder centre in Singapore is currently at a Mapletree industrial building at Serangoon North Avenue 5.

Ms Rusdon had been a stock broker for 10 years before deciding to start a family. Because she began reading intensively about early childhood, the idea of opening a pre-school centre to earn income while caring for her children came naturally. At the time, the government was encouraging more women to go back to work by offering subsidies to working mothers who enrol their children in day care centres. Void decks were being opened up to private day care operators as well, and Ms Rusdon successfully bid for a space in Bukit Batok.

The day after Ms Rusdon and her family distributed fliers around the estate, her mobile phone got jammed with phone calls. "I had the telecom people knocking on my door to check if anything was wrong because everybody was complaining that they couldn't get through to me!" she exclaims.

She was very encouraged by the response, and thought that this business would be an easy money-spinner. "But when I saw the quality of the teachers at the time, I was shocked. I was disturbed. They were lacking in training and professionalism, and they had a very low self-esteem. When you talk to them, they don't look you in the eye... So that was when I was determined to train as many teachers as possible."

Fuelled by her new goal, Ms Rusdon eventually set up a teacher's training college called Learning Capital in 1999, now known as the Asian International College under Busy Bees Asia. In its early days, the college offered full-time diplomas in early childhood education to apprentices, sponsored by the company. It has now branched out to offering more qualifications such as Bachelor of Arts (with Honours) in Early Childhood Education, as well as Master of Education.



◀ **NOT TOO BUSY TO LEARN**
Meritocracy and constant learning feature prominently at Busy Bees Singapore, says Ms Rusdon

Graduates of the college who work with Busy Bees are assigned a mentor while they learn the ropes at the pre-school centres. "This is the main driver of our growth," says Ms Rusdon. Busy Bees Singapore now employs 1,700 staff, of which 1,300 are teachers.

Meritocracy and constant learning feature prominently at Busy Bees Singapore. To ensure that their teachers are fully equipped with the latest skills in childhood education, they attend overseas conferences where they pick up the latest techniques in learning. Teachers conducting the curriculum are encouraged to give feedback to curriculum specialists, culminating in a curriculum evaluation and enhancement every year by the curriculum team.

Twice every year, 10 to 15 top performing teachers are sent on an exchange programme with the UK branches of Busy Bees to observe their approaches in teaching children and performing daily routine care.

New teachers are asked where they would like to see themselves in five years' time, which gives the company a sense of how they might groom them. For instance, a new teacher who says that she wants to embark on the path of becoming a principal will be trained in leadership as well as the necessary skills to meet the demands of parents for that market segment that she or he is in, says Ms Rusdon.

Developing potential and loyalty in employees is crucial in an industry with a high turnover rate. "I think in the last 28 years, people see us as the training ground," says Ms Rusdon. "We don't compromise in terms of training for the teachers, and we believe that that is the most important investment that we need to do for them. I believe if the teachers can see what we as an organisation has done for them, they will stay."

And although childcare is a business dominated by women, Ms Rusdon recognises the value of having male teachers around. "In 1998 or 1999, we hired the first male teacher," she says. "The reason why we did that is because we believe that the children in the centres need a male role model."

Today, that male teacher who was hired as a speech and drama teacher is still with the company, and the number of male teachers has grown to about 12. While there are some restrictions for males in the childcare business, such as limited roles involving routine care, Ms Rusdon believes that the mindset of childcare as being solely a woman's business will gradually change. ■



LANGUAGE AT THE FOREFRONT

WHEN it comes to early childhood education, husband and wife duo Renee Chong and Vincent Teoh reckon that they have it all figured out. "Language development forms the foundation of all learning. (It is) our belief that a student needs to be good at language first in order to discover other subjects of learning," says Mr Teoh, executive director of pre-school chain Zoo-Phonics Asia.

Zoo-phonics, which originated in the US during the 1980s, was brought to Singapore in 2004 – the first time that a Zoo-phonics school was set up in Asia. Its mission – to teach children how to read and write effectively through enrichment programmes – sounds deceptively simple, and maybe a little clichéd. But to anyone who takes the time to get to know the brand's cast of 26 unique animal characters, it becomes apparent that their approach is anything but straightforward.

"Zoo-phonics is a fun and kinaesthetic, whole-brain approach to learning phonics, reading and writing," explains Ms Chong, managing director of Zoo-Phonics. "The methodology adopts a cast of delightful and memorable animal characters... which helps to teach the letter sounds."

For instance, the letter j is represented by an animal called Jerry Jellyfish. On Zoo-phonics flashcards, Jerry Jellyfish is shaped like the alphabet, and children are taught a corresponding body movement and sound to aid memory retention. "When teaching different phonics sounds such as the long vowels and diagraphs, there are interesting stories about the animals behind these sounds," adds Ms Chong. "This makes learning to read using Zoo-phonics fun, easy and captivating."

Despite the programme currently being well-received by parents, Ms Chong and Mr Teoh faced a hurdle in the early days in trying to convince both parents and new teachers that very young children have a tremendous capacity for learning. "Children are in a language acquisition mode both before and after birth, and language development is crucial to their success," says Ms Chong, who was a Ministry of Education (MOE) qualified teacher and author of student assessment books.

But when Zoo-Phonics first arrived in Singapore, the prevailing myth in pre-schools was that simply teaching a child the alphabet will enable the child to read. This resulted in a lack of a structured language learning programme for children. "We had to educate parents and teachers that language development and learning how to read and write begins effectively with phonics knowledge."

The couple also saw a business opportunity in childcare centres – commonly regarded by parents at the time as "convenient drop-off places" for baby-sitting, with "nannies that take instruction". They started another pre-school brand called Safari House in 2011, offering full-day programmes that combine daily routine care with holistic child



development in the academics.

At the Safari House pre-schools, which are licensed as childcare centres, a strong emphasis is placed on bilingualism. While the core curriculum there is taught in English, many extra-curricular activities are conducted in Mandarin. This includes creative cookery, arts and craft, as well as outdoor games.

Through language immersion, “the children learn to converse in Chinese and use the language more

◀ SEEING POTENTIAL

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meaningfully”, says Mr Teoh, who was previously working in finance. The children read Chinese texts in the afternoon that impart moral values to them, such as *di zi gui*, based on the teachings of Confucius.

Over the years, both Mr Teoh and Ms Chong sensed the increased appetite of parents for more holistic developments for their children. Responding to this change, the couple decided to inject music into their Safari House pre-schools through a string ensemble programme. They experimented with having their students from Nursery 1 to Kindergarten 2 learn to read musical notes and play the violin. After a successful pilot programme, the move is now implemented in all Safari House pre-schools, beginning this year.

“We believe that musical experience from an early age enhances cognitive and reasoning development,” says Ms Chong. “We look forward to all the children from as young as four years performing some repertoire pieces for the student recitals in November.”

Today, there are 12 Safari House Pre-schools offering full-day pre-school programmes, and six Zoo-Phonics Schools which offer enrichment classes. When the couple started the business in 2004, they at first intended to expand through franchising.

But over time, they realised that the franchising model was not ideal if they wanted to keep pre-school education fees affordable for parents. While their focus was on affordability, quality education and the children’s

well-being, a potential franchisee might not have the same primary focus, says Mr Teoh.

Currently, all the local Zoo-phonics and Safari House schools are company-owned, managed and operated by the corporate head office located at Mapletree building The Strategy, in the International Business Park. Around 200 full-time staff are employed at the schools, overseeing over 3,000 pre-schoolers.

According to Ms Chong, several MOE primary schools have sought their expertise to conduct Zoo-phonics teacher training for their Primary 1 and Primary 2 teachers. Zoo-Phonics also provides consultancy services to primary schools, involving work such as planning the phonics curriculum framework, designing pre-tests and post-tests, and monitoring the progress of the phonics lessons.

The company also has plans to take the brand overseas. Says Mr Teoh: “Our core offering is about English language development for young children. In Asia, there are many countries where parents are very keen to have their children learn English.” Zoo-Phonics is starting by targeting the Asean countries to ensure its sustainability before going further to the bigger north Asian economies such as China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. ■

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