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Headline: Teaching helped former civil servant to 'grow as a person'

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SINGAPORE — She harboured dreams of becoming a teacher in her university days, but Ms Marie Luo decided not to take the leap straight after completing her business degree at the Singapore Management University in 2011.

Instead, she joined the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) and became a senior assistant director overseeing productivity.

But the “nagging thirst” to work with children did not go away.

Much to her parents' initial chagrin, she decided to quit her job last April to take up an early childhood training course.

“They said: ‘Teaching is not as sexy as you think, it’s very tiring’; they were afraid for me switching to such a different sector,” said Ms Luo, 29.

“But after a while, they realised I know I’m doing and that this is something I’m passionate about, and were happy for me.”

During the course at the Singapore Polytechnic, she learned about childhood development and numeracy skills, as well as providing an inclusive education.

The course, fully sponsored by the Ministry of Education (MOE), also allowed her to learn under teachers with anchor pre-school operators.

She joined MOE Kindergarten at Punggol View in January and teaches a class of 20 Kindergarten Two children.

While the switch was initially tough, children are “actually not much different” from adult colleagues and others she previously dealt with.

“I had friends (in MTI) who were the centre of attention, loved to talk, had many ideas ... friends who strove for excellence. The children are the same,” she said. “Some of them are so talkative ... some are very meticulous. They must put their building blocks the right side up or put the same colours (together).”

Being a pre-school teacher allowed her to “grow both as a person and a teacher”, she said.

The best part of the job is watching the children develop through lessons and interactions with friends.

For instance, she had a student who cried when he could not get his way. She had a discussion with the boy, and the next day, he encountered an uncooperative schoolmate.

“I could see he tried very hard not to cry. He talked it out with his friend instead. Then he came over to me and told me: ‘Ms Marie, I didn’t cry, because crying doesn’t solve the problem,’” said Ms Luo.

The early childhood sector is growing and “very exciting”, and the pay cut she had to take is worth it, she said.

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The plan to set up a centralised institute to train early childhood teachers — announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his National Day Rally — “signals the importance in developing quality pre-school education”, she said. “We can pool better resources together, have better cross-sharing of ideas and collaborate.”

Ms Luo wants to further her qualifications and take a master’s degree in Early Childhood Education — but not before she ties the knot next year.

“I’m looking forward to motherhood. I want to have five children!” she said. “And I’m excited to apply what I’ve learned when the time comes.”

Being a pre-school educator is “ultimately a vocation”, she said. “It’s so fulfilling to be able to watch the children grow ... and play a crucial part in their development.”