

LiA Project: Teaching at Community Centres for Migrant Workers' Children and Children with Special Needs

Organisation: Stepping Stones, China

Ian Lam (Cheryl) Leong



For my Leadership in Action Project, I volunteered as a teacher with Stepping Stones China, delivering English, socio-emotional learning lessons to children and youth across Shanghai. I planned and taught interactive lessons to a class of about 40 students in grades 3–5 and another class of 20 students in grades 1–6, incorporating games, group work, and hands-on activities to make learning engaging and accessible. The children were migrant workers' children, who either attend under-resourced schools for migrant families in cities or remain “left behind” in rural areas with limited educational standards and little parental support. I also supported children with special needs, such as autism, who face additional barriers to accessing quality education and care.

English

- Used movies and songs to make learning more engaging, moving away from rote vocabulary memorisation common in Chinese schools.
- Encouraged learning through conversation to build practical communication skills.
- Designed interactive games, such as identifying whether AI-generated pictures were real or fake, and describing monsters verbally for peers to draw, to make language learning creative and fun.

Socio-Emotional Learning Skills

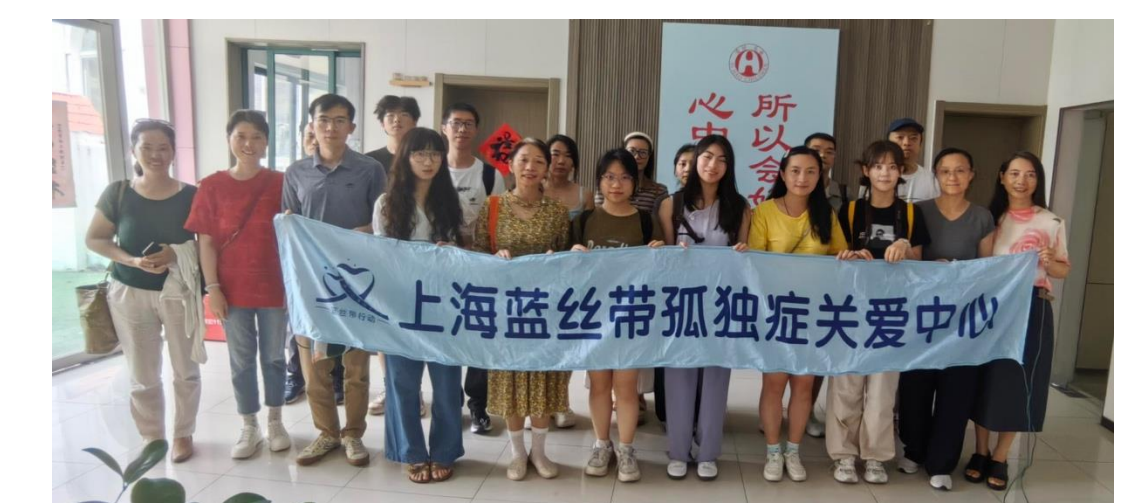
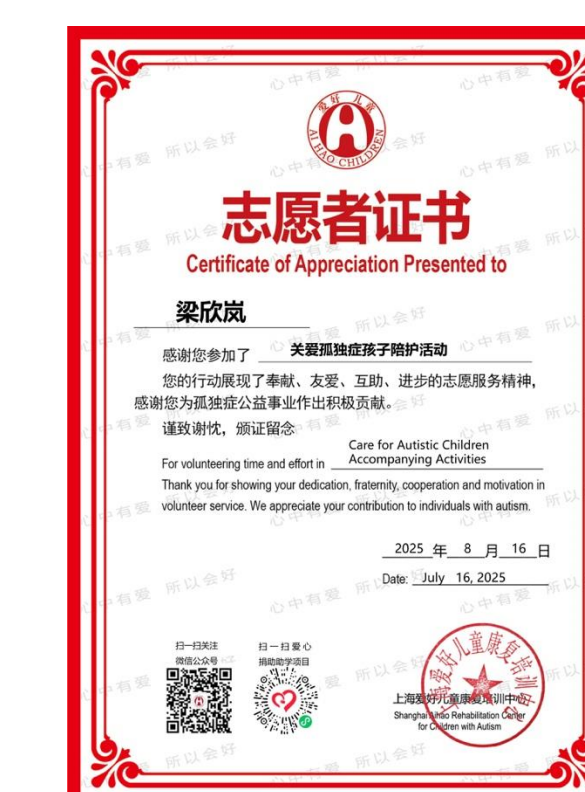
- Taught content not typically covered in mainstream Chinese education, such as conflict resolution, self-awareness, and emotional regulation
- Used movie clips (e.g., *Inside Out*) to make concepts fun, relatable and accessible.
- Simplified complex ideas, such as conceptualising conflict responses through three animal types.
- Encouraged role play and acting, allowing students to step into others' shoes and apply the skills to real-life scenarios.

Arts and Crafts

- Worked one-on-one with a non-verbal girl with autism, supporting her during a stool-decorating activity using mosaic tiles and marker pens.
- Practised patience and flexibility, adapting to her pace rather than forcing tasks: waiting, modelling, and gently encouraging when she was ready
- Built rapport through consistent interactions, such as establishing a “thumbs up” gesture as our shared language and creating trust through small routines (e.g., handing mosaic pieces, managing glue on her hands).
- Saw her gradually open up, interact more, and express trust



Challenges and Personal Growth



Challenge 1: Adapting to diverse ages: I initially found it challenging to engage both younger and older students simultaneously; I tried resolved this by pairing older students with younger ones to foster leadership and interaction.

Challenge 2: Student-to-teacher ratio: With around 60 children across two classes, it was difficult to give everyone individual attention. Thus, the co-teachers and I alternated main/assistant roles to ensure all children felt seen, included, and heard.

Challenge 3: Balancing individual vs. group needs: Learned the importance of navigating between supporting individual emotions and maintaining overall classroom structure and regulation

Overall, this project was impactful because it gave the children opportunities to learn, express themselves, and feel supported in ways they often don't experience in their everyday schooling. It was also deeply meaningful to me, as I was able to build connections with the students, see their confidence grow, and contribute in a small way to making education more inclusive and accessible.