

The Chinese

If you thought expansion outside the UK was only a pipe dream, think again. Majella McElwee tells readers how she and her partner Kay Patel set up their nursery in China



Left to right, Kay Patel, Majella McElwee, Angel Chen & Nicky Dong

A world of opportunities

Post Brexit, it is clear that life outside the EU will be very different for all of us in early years, while the challenges for UK nurseries are stacking up, what with underfunding, council tax increases, staff shortages and whatever other surprises our next government throws up for the sector.

Suddenly, expanding overseas doesn't look quite as intimidating as it used to.

Certainly, it is no longer just the Busy Bees and the Bright Horizons that have a global reach. Increasingly, smaller nursery businesses are looking to expand by opening up overseas – not in Europe, but further afield where British nurseries and, particularly, the EYFS have an almost mythic quality in their appeal to countries where childcare and early education are in their infancy.

Take Kala Patel, the MD of the award-

winning Kiddycare group based in Leicester and London, who has been doing consultancy work in Dubai, following the move there by a parent. She used Kala's tried and tested expertise to help her set up and run a nursery along EYFS lines. Kala's consultancy has blossomed from that small starting point.

Then there's Evolution Childcare, headed by Sue Jones, which has expanded into Bahrain with Kids Academy Bahrain, again run along the highly rated EYFS lines. To date, they have two nurseries, one in Saar and the other in Adliya. Could this be you?

Or perhaps, you might want to look at opportunities in China, which is the world's second largest economy. By April this year, despite warnings of imminent slumps, it had still achieved a gross domestic profit (GDP) growth

rate of 6.9 per cent, something that European countries cannot even dream of.

Beyond your wildest dreams to open up a nursery there? Perhaps not. Read about the journey of Kay Patel and Majella McElwee from Greater London to one of the fastest growing cities in China, where they are now preparing to open their latest nursery – thanks to the power of networking.

Sue Churchill
Editor

A personal view...

Kay Patel and I, Majella McElwee, set up our training organisation, Auralern Ltd, back in 2004, and have been running it as partners since then. We are both qualified to teach and assess early years qualifications at Certificate and Diploma Levels. In 2010, drawing on our experience of the sector, we opened our first Happy Tree Nursery in West Drayton. Subsequently, we opened two more settings, one in Croydon and the other in Northwood Hills, which opened just this year.

We also wanted to expand out of the UK, but had put that on hold as we did not have any contacts for putting it into practice. However,

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connection



The new nursery in China

last year I was approached by a friend who told me that her daughter-in-law, Nicky, a young Chinese professional who was on a visit to England from China, wanted to set up nurseries in Shenzhen, a modern, very wealthy city in south-eastern China, which links Hong Kong to China's mainland. What an opportunity – and what amazing timing!

Nicky's main reason for starting a nursery, as we learned later, was that, as a young Chinese mother herself, she couldn't find anywhere in the city where parents could leave their children to benefit from full daycare and education. Significantly, she had been to London enough times to see that we have a thriving childcare sector – and she wanted to replicate that in China.

Changing attitudes in China

Traditionally in China, grandparents have always looked after their grandchildren, and have been loving elders to them, but now young professional Chinese parents, especially those who have worked outside China, want something different for their children. They are no longer happy to have their parents or employed 'aunties' care for their babies and pre-school children.

In other words, there is a movement away from the traditional way of looking after young children. These young, in the main, wealthy professionals want their children to be fully engaged in learning and development from early on in their lives.

Nicky had been talking to various nursery businesses in London, but wasn't having much luck. Then, my friend told her that she knew that

Kay and I had set up three successful nurseries, and she asked if she wanted to speak to me about it.

Getting started

So, in May last year, I met up with Nicky and her husband Danny in London. We talked about Happy Tree and how we had set it up. Nicky was very interested in the way British nurseries are run, and was particularly taken by the governing principles of the Early EYFS. As a result, she asked us to think about working with her and her investor in China.

In September 2016, Nicky sent us a proposal that she was going to put forward to Chinese officials in Shenzhen. We all worked on it, tweaking it as necessary. She was waiting to finalise a lease for a commercial unit in the development where she lives, Mangrove Bay Citic, a very modern, predominantly residential part of the city.

Months went by waiting for the lease, and finally in December last year, it came through. On 3 January this year – seven months after our initial talks – Kay and I went to Shenzhen to meet, negotiate and agree a business partnership for the nursery.

Hello, China

We arrived in a sunny Hong Kong with all the paperwork ready for getting into Shenzhen, which is acknowledged as China's first special economic zone. All we had to do was to go through the immigration control using a five-day visa. Excitement was certainly building.

Those five days were very busy for Kay and me. Nicky had planned a schedule which included visits to two other nurseries, one of which purported to be a Montessori nursery while the other claimed to follow the EYFS principles.... As well as these visits, which ►

► demonstrated the real need for a genuine English nursery, we also saw the proposed nursery site and met the various builders and contractors. We spoke to local parents about their needs and observed how three-year olds and younger children were looked after in the development.

We met with the investor and Nicky to explore how we wanted the relationship to move forward and discussed the formalities of a partnership contract. We then talked to an independent lawyer and eventually on Saturday 7 January this year at five o'clock in the evening, we had a formal signing ceremony.

The number seven symbolises togetherness in Chinese culture, and is clearly a highly significant number for a nursery. It is certainly very important to our partners, and the original intention was that the nursery would open on 7 July 2017 at exactly 17.17 hours. The opening has been postponed, but we are sure the same level of attention will be made to numerology.

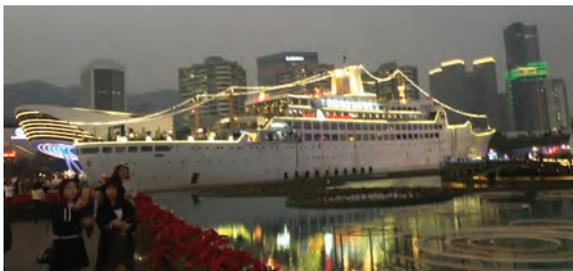
Cultural differences

The city is young, thriving, energetic and expanding daily, but Kay and I did experience a large cultural difference. Everybody we encountered was very polite and respectful, but also very forthright at times.

It was obvious to all around us in the development that we were foreigners, and we were discretely stared at wherever we went.

The food was very different and interesting, I was at times reminded of the HSBC adverts, especially around the protocols of eating out!

I am not usually adventurous, but in fear of causing offence to our hosts, I tried all the dishes that were



A city with a number of ports, Shenzhen offers much to residents and tourists alike

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put in front of us. Some of these I will not try again, fish gills and chicken feet to be precise.

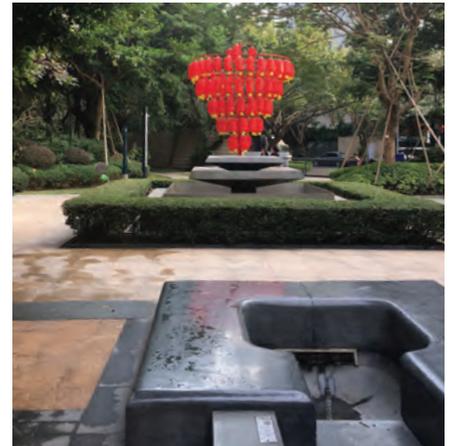
This was not the only cultural difference. Nicky had prepared us for the differences in caring for young children, and this was supported by what we saw. Indeed, Kay and I observed throughout our stay that, although young children were cared for in a physical way, there was no real engagement between them and the adults with them: they played aimlessly and there was very little encouragement to learn through play. In fact, I have my doubts that the children we saw even knew how to play, and, as for messy play, I think that we will have a challenge in that area.

We were quite amused by the general reaction to indoor and outdoor play especially water and sand play: we got some horrified looks from our partners and some parents when we explained how these help a child's development. So, it is up to us to engage with, and adapt our ways to, the predominant culture, while at the same time focusing on what we know works very well for children and their development.

It is also clear that, generally, Chinese parents prefer structure, discipline and academic learning. So, again there will be some challenges in terms of encouraging and achieving creativity, and emotional and social development, in particular, through play.

Our plans

With very little regulation in China, we intend to work to the EYFS framework requirements, and operate as if Ofsted were still our regulators. All our staff will be first aid trained and all will



A beautifully landscaped city

function as if we were in the UK. We will be carrying out DBS checks, and pay due diligence to regular supervision of staff.

At the moment, the nursery is being constructed along the lines we have specified. Meanwhile, we are busy putting together our orders, ready to be shipped to China, and we are also interviewing in much the same way as we would in the UK, checking for the necessary skills and underpinning knowledge. Kay intends to return to Shenzhen in the late summer, and I will be there a little later. All being well, we intend to have the nursery fully operational by the end of the year. ■

To read more about the commercial implications of expanding to China, Singapore and the UEA, read Courteney Donaldson's article, drawing on her experience of touring the area, in the property column on p48. Ed

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