



EARLY EDUCATORS

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"Me and Papa at the river and park."



"Wenhui with Mommy and Sister at the playground playing and eating apples."

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Front Cover: “My Love for Dad” by Rehanna Yasmin D/O Peer Mohamed and “My Beautiful Garden” by Lee Wen Hui, participants of the research project *Voices of Children: On Childhood and Early Education in Singapore*.

Dear Members,

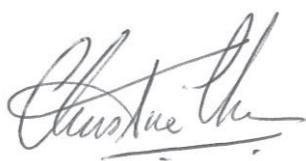
I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for supporting the Association in the work that we do for children and families in Singapore. We have been making workshops affordable through our community partnerships and I am heartened that the membership has been very responsive in registering for them. I am delighted to note that you are eager to seize the opportunities to keep growing and developing in the profession.

By the time you read this issue, more than half the year would have passed. Therefore, it is time to reflect on the work that we do and plan for the next half of the year. In the first article by Trisha Craig, we reflect on the meaning of childhood. Has childhood changed? Trisha highlighted the tension between the current pedagogical strategies in the Refreshed Pre-school Curriculum Framework and the desires of the parents. What then is our role in the lives of the modern day childhood? How are the children caught up with these changes? Do they have a voice?

Many children coming to FLAiR start the programme with very little words in the English Language. In Amy Phang's and Ruth Wong's articles, you will read about how ProFLAiRs support and facilitate the use of English so that children can have a voice not only in speaking but in writing as well. This ability to speak and write in English gives them a voice to express their likes, dislikes and their experiences as a child. To give children more "voice", the Association with the National Institute of Education embarked on a research project to investigate the "Voices" of children and the students from the Nanyang Technological University carried out an event to present the findings of the research. The findings of the report make an interesting read.

Other interesting read can be found in the book reviews. Nora Haron shared her reflections on "Teaching with Poverty in Mind" and Ruth Wong reviewed "Booksharing: Successful Interactions with Your Child and Books". The last write-up is "The Child's Plea" written by Linda Yan who was driven by her strong belief that RESPECT for children is listening to both their "inner" voices or needs and their "outer" voices or expressions of who they are. To nurture children with respect is to value them for who they are. Read and discover how the highlighted, emboldened letters reflect values to enrich our guiding principles and daily practice. Read and imagine your children's plea to have their voices heard.

Finally, the up-coming leadership forum in K.L., Malaysia, gives you another professional development opportunity to reflect on practice and an occasion to celebrate Teachers Day. Celebrate The Leader in You: The Hidden Potential. See you in Kuala Lumpur!



Christine Chen
President and Founder

Our Changing Conceptions of Childhood

Trisha Craig
Executive Director, Wheelock College Singapore

Social historians and sociologists have highlighted the constantly changing nature or even the invention of childhood. In Philippe Aries' classic work, *Centuries of Childhood*, he argued that modern conceptions of childhood as a distinct lifestage are essentially a creation of the Victorians. In that period, reform movements disturbed by the presence of child labour in the new industrial order led to reconceptualising childhood as a separate point in the life course, characterised as a time of innocence.

Other scholars, like Princeton sociologist Viviana Zelizer, have followed a similar line. She argues that as children's economic value declined over the 20th Century in the developed world, their sentimental value increased, leading parents to devote more financial and psychological resources to these 'economically useless but emotionally priceless' beings.

While such analyses are not without their critics, they highlight the fact that the way we conceptualise childhood, and by extension how we treat children and how we educate them, changes over time and does so in ways that are linked to other broad social and economic trends.

We do not need to go back to the beginnings of the industrial revolution or the dislocations of the world wars of the early and mid 20th Century to see changes in the way we think of childhood. They happen continuously. The work of Joseph Tobin and his colleagues on preschool in China, Japan and the US is instructive.

A few years ago, the authors of *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited* returned to the schools Tobin had examined in the mid-1980s and found evidence of shifts in practices in schools and what parents wanted and expected for their children. The description of what they found in China will perhaps resonate in some ways with those in other countries that have gone through rapid modernisation and economic development. Just when preschools have shifted their focus to a more play based curriculum (compared to two decades ago when the smallest children were expected to behave like pupils attending primary school who sit in rows and listen to the teacher), parents are exhorting schools to be more 'academic.'

Tobin et al. write about the frustrations preschool teachers and principals feel with parents in the new China:

"The most ubiquitous form of contemporary parental excess is the pressure being put on preschools by parents to provide more academic preparation. In China's new society the core concern is that one's (only) child must be educated and socialised well in preschool to get a fast start toward becoming economically successful as an adult and not "being left behind the starting line." This is a heavy mandate for preschools... Chinese parents' putting pressure on their children to excel academically is hardly a new cultural practice. What is new is that with the expanding provision of preschool, this academic pressure has started earlier and is expanding as an ambition for wider portions of society. With China's rapid and ongoing modernisation, increased wealth, and expanding access to preschool, more and more working-class

and rural parents are viewing education as a route to social mobility for their children and they are looking to their children's preschool teachers to provide a quick start, and complaining when they think this is not happening" (pp.38-39).

This clash between parents who insist on more 'academic' work, more 'enrichment' classes for their preschoolers and the teaching establishment who are trying to move towards a more developmentally appropriate play based curriculum will be familiar to teachers in Singapore who suffer from the same pressures.

Even the highest ranks of the government worry about the heavy demands being placed on children today. In his 2012 National Day speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong admonished parents to let their children have a childhood: "Pre-school means to learn through playing as well – you must not bring the primary one syllabus down to five and six year olds. No homework is not a bad thing,"

In a recent exercise, undergraduate students the Early Childhood Education and Leadership degree program at Wheelock College Singapore interviewed elder Singaporeans about childhood and read them PM Lee's quote to get their reactions. The generation of Singaporeans who were around at the country's birth and have lived through its dramatic transformation agreed with the Prime Minister. They compared their recollections of a more carefree and innocent time when as children they played outdoors for hours in Singapore's wet, green spaces to today's parents who micromanage their children's time with tuition classes.

These interviews form part of Wheelock's larger project, *Fifty Years of Childhood in Singapore*, that we are preparing to celebrate the country's semi-centennial anniversary. It is important to document how childhood has changed in the half century since Singapore's founding.

It is equally important to place those changes in the larger context of Singapore's remarkable growth and development and to understand the concerns driving today's parents. This is not an argument that parents should push their small children to ever more tuitions or pressure preschool teachers to load their charges up with worksheets. Rather, it is a call to better understand the tensions that exist between current pedagogical strategies and education reform on one hand and the desires of many parents on another.

Education in Singapore has played an important role not just in the welfare of the country but the well-being of individuals. The focus on meritocracy means that educational success has translated into economic success for many as Singapore has grown. Parents understand that a good education is one of the best investments they can make in their children in a very competitive system.

Yet the confluence of several factors suggests that the rewards of the system are likely to become even harder to attain. Singapore already has one of the most unequal income distributions among the world's richest countries and that has been growing, not shrinking over time. This has been accompanied by wage stagnation at the middle and lower ranks of the population (Bhaskaran et al., 2012). In addition, upward social mobility, propelled in the past by the rapidly developing economy, is likely to fall as Singapore settles into the lower growth state of more mature economies (Ho, 2010).

It is against this backdrop that the seemingly stubborn refusal of some Singaporean parents to 'let their children be children' must be viewed. The very real fear of falling behind in an extremely competitive race with high stakes, and the understanding that education is one of the factors that can shift the odds in a positive direction, is one of the