

# Contents Page

Page 3	From the Editor
Page 6	The Education System in Finland: A Success Story Other Countries Can Emulate – Hani Morgan
Page 13	What Makes an Effective Mentor: Mentors’ and Mentees’ Perspectives – Gladys Alice Tan Swee Hiang, Ruth Chong and Lily Foo
Page 25	Use of a Mentoring Guidebook to Develop Children’s Portfolios: A Preliminary Study – Ke Yinshi
Page 35	Family Involvement in Mathematical Games Can Help To Enhance Children’s Numeracy Skills – Wong Lee Na
Page 48	Blue Horses and Morning Glory: Enhancing Children’s Learning Through Picture Books and Art-Making – Sua Swee Lee and Nurul Izzah
Page 55	Children as Creators: An Urgent Need to Re-imagine and Re-define Play in Singapore – Sumitra Pasupathy, Jennifer Loh and Sirene Lim
Page 63	Postbox and Restaurant – Mira Naharto
Page 66	Engaging Parents Purposefully to Support Children’s Learning – Yap Soon Lan
Page 71	Book Review: Reading Magic by Mem Fox – Joy Tim
Page 73	Book Review: A Collection of Children’s Books – Jubaidah Satiman
Page 76	幼儿园的辅导-殊途同归、不放弃每个孩子 – 張孝筠
Page 79	台湾早期疗育的发展现况 – 林敏慧
Page 83	台湾游学体会之-老师应是幼教专家 – 孙英剑



### *From the Editor*

Did you like the chameleon on the front cover? Chameleons are a distinctive and highly specialized species, they come in a range of colours and many species have the ability to change their colours.

When I reflected on these qualities, it struck me that YOU, our preschool practitioners, are **DISTINCTIVE**, you are **HIGHLY SPECIALIZED**, you are not a one-size-fits-all and you have an innate quality of being most highly adaptable. These qualities are so clear in this issue of *Early Educators*. Take a look at all the articles in here – we have action research, reflective pieces, classroom practices, book reviews and contributions from overseas professors. We thank all our contributors and we also applaud our early childhood practitioners. It has been an exciting journey; the early childhood education scene in Singapore has seen many changes and advances. There is more in the offing and our journal has had the privilege of documenting your work in the last 20 years.

Let us keep forging ahead. For the next issue, *Early Educators* December 2015, it will be a special one. The theme is “Language, Literacy and Bilingual Learners” and you are invited you to contribute. Here is a guide:

#### **Invitation to Contribute to the *Early Educators* December 2015 issue**

#### **Special Issue on “Language, Literacy and Bilingual Learners”**

#### Applying the iTEACH Principles

All early childhood practitioners are invited to submit original articles and book reviews which reflect the variety and extent of both research and practice in early childhood care and education.

This is an invitation for all of us to grow as a local professional community of practitioners who are also readers, writers, explorers, and thinkers.

#### **Original Articles**

Submissions should appeal to an audience of fellow practitioners, student teachers, and other professionals who work with children and families in Singapore. Most issues are multi-theme in nature and we will attempt to balance articles that are related to theory and research with articles of a practical nature relating to programming, curriculum, and classroom practice or documentations of child learning.

### **Length and Format**

We welcome original manuscripts of between 1500 to 2500 words. 3-5 keywords should be included before the main text. Use Calibri font size 11, 1.15 line spacing.

Word your title carefully so that it matches the main ideas in your manuscript. It is sometimes helpful to craft the title only after you have written most of the manuscript.

We encourage the use of carefully selected photographs to support readers' understanding of the text.

Footnotes should not be used. Endnotes need to be located in the text by numbers.

Referencing and citation style should be consistent with the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th Edition). Include a "References" list at the end, these are works that you have cited in the main text. Referencing is compulsory because it shows that we are a profession relying on bodies of specialised knowledge, and more importantly, citing another person's scholarship is to acknowledge the source of our ideas and inspiration. The reference list shall be in an alphabetical order.

Citations appear in the main text and look like this: Yelland & Masters (2009) with author's name followed by year in brackets. If a direct quote is used, the page number will need to be added, for example Yelland & Masters (2009, p.246).

Plagiarism is unprofessional. This is when we borrow ideas from a known source and we either do not cite the author(s) and/or we copy sentences wholesale making the readers think they are originally ours. Given the relatively short length of our articles, we advise you to use direct quotes carefully and to keep them to a minimum of not more than 40 words.

Here is a useful link that explains more about paraphrasing, with examples: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/619/1/>

Do include a brief biographical sketch (4-5 sentences) including the author(s) full name, professional affiliation, and other relevant information.

### **Book Reviews**

As we are a growing and learning profession, we would like to encourage busy practitioners to make time to read and to share what they have learned with the community. We invite paired book reviews of between 1000 to 1800 words. While we expect most contributions to be written in the English language, we welcome book reviews in Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. The reason for writing these reviews in pairs is to encourage discussion and learning before you write the book review.

Here are some general guidelines to make your book review useful to others:

- Include book's title, author/editor(s), year, place/publisher and ISBN
- Summarise the book's general goal and argument what you think is useful to your practice or thinking
- Explain and discuss one or two of the book's ideas in greater depth
- Connect theory and practice
- If you have tried out the book's ideas, share your experience
- If two of you have slightly different understandings of some of the ideas, present these too

#### **Acceptance and publication**

The editors will acknowledge receipt and will review all manuscripts received. We will also send your manuscripts to fellow practitioners for blind review. This enhances our learning process as a community. The final publication decision rests with the editor, and will be communicated. It is likely that your work will require revision, we will send you comments and expect the revised manuscript to be re-submitted by a mutually agreed period.

**Deadlines:** Submissions for the December issue are due by end-September.

**Manuscripts should be submitted as email attachments in MS Word format to:**

Alicia Chan – [alicia@aeces.org](mailto:alicia@aeces.org)

We have many great classroom practitioners out there, doing wonderful work with young children. Let me encourage you to share your work by putting it down in writing. We look forward to receiving them soon!

Ruth Wong  
Chief Editor

## The Education System in Finland: A Success Story Other Countries Can Emulate

Hani Morgan

In the new millennium, Finland has gained a reputation for having one of the best education systems in the world. Many factors, including a well-educated teaching force, contribute to Finland's success, but some aspects of the country's educational policies and practices may be surprising to those living elsewhere. For example, although students score very highly on international tests, such as the PISA, Finland has very few external accountability measures, and teachers spend less time in classrooms than in many other countries.

The ways Finland has reformed its education system have significant implications for reformers in other countries, especially those facing the same problems Finland had before its remarkable success. To achieve its status as one of the highest ranking countries in education, Finland did not create charter schools, get rid of bad teachers, increase competition or ban teacher unions (Sahlberg, 2011a). This article explores the current research on Finland's education system and focuses on the features that transformed the country into one of the highest-performing nations in international testing.

### International Testing

Every few years, international tests help educators to evaluate how well school systems in different nations are performing. To measure 15-year-olds' skills in mathematics, science, and reading, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) administers the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) every three years. The International

Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) provides several similar tests, including the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which is given every four years to evaluate 4th- and 8th-grade students on their mathematics and science skills, and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which 4th-grade students take every five years to measure their reading skills.

Students in Finland tend to do very well on these tests (Tirri & Kuusisto, 2013). In 2009, for example, the PISA results showed that Finland ranked third in reading, fifth in math, and second in science (Stewart, 2012). These international tests are more demanding than some tests individual countries administer, because they measure more than just what students can recall and require students to apply information and defend their answers (Darling-Hammond, 2010a).

### The Educational System in Finland

In 1972, Finland implemented *peruskoulu*, a new education system that was designed to improve many of the problems its old system created. In the older system, children were separated into two streams, one with an academic orientation and the other with a practical focus, and students needed to decide which option to take by the age of 11 (Sarjala, 2013). Under this system, many inequalities existed; some schools provided students with many more resources and learning opportunities than other schools. The old system was also based on the belief that talent in society is unevenly distributed and

therefore, some students have more potential to be educated than others (Sahlberg, 2012).

When *peruskoulu*—a nine-year compulsory system—superseded the two-track system in the 1970s, many detrimental practices and beliefs ended and progress continued thereafter. Today, over 99% of the students finish *peruskoulu*. They generally receive the same content the first six years, but are free to choose a few subjects during their last three years (Sarjala, 2013). After completing *peruskoulu*, 95% of students pursue noncompulsory upper-secondary education and have the option to choose between general or vocational education. Vocational upper-secondary education prepares students between the ages of 16 and 19 for numerous occupations and requires at least 6 months of on-the-job learning in a real work setting. Students are not committed to either form of upper-secondary education, but can switch from general to vocational or vice versa. After students finish upper-secondary education, they can take a national exam to enter a university.

School reform created several conditions that helped Finland become a strong academic performing country (Sahlberg, 2012), including mandatory school counseling and guidance. School counseling was designed to help students make the appropriate choices regarding continuing to upper-secondary school. The three choices students have when making this transition are: 1) continuing in vocational upper-secondary education, 2) starting general upper-secondary education, or 3) finding a job. The counseling program in Finland contributes to the country's high graduation rates and helps students make connections between schooling and employment.

Another important condition that school reform created was the need for a new type of teacher. In the old system, different types of schools prepared students in different ways.

When reformers created *peruskoulu*, all students started to attend one type of school; thus, teachers needed to have more expertise because they would be teaching a wider variety of students. Teachers under the new system needed to learn how to differentiate instruction and to offer alternative teaching methods. In order for teachers to be prepared, teacher education had to be reformed. These expectations led to a rigorous teacher education program that contributes strongly to Finland's success in education.

### Outstanding Teacher Preparation

One of the reasons students in Finland do very well on international tests, when compared with pupils in other countries, has to do with the way teachers are chosen; Finland only selects the best. Although thousands of applicants hope to be admitted to a university program for teacher education at the primary level, only 700 are accepted (Sahlberg, 2013). Students are selected based on a two-stage process (Tucker, 2012). The first stage requires a high score on college entrance exams, a strong grade point average, and a high level of extracurricular activities. If applicants satisfy these requirements, they proceed to the second stage, which requires a passing score on a written exam on teaching, a demonstration of effective communication skills, and a satisfactory performance in an interview in which they answer various questions, including why they wish to become teachers.

If chosen, they are eligible to complete an intensive program sponsored by the government. Students in the teacher education program represent the top 10 percent of Finland's high school graduates and need to finish a 5-year master's degree to complete the program (Hancock, 2011). Their university training prepares them to be

researchers and practitioners and includes a significant portion of clinical practice at a model school, where they learn how to deliver research-based instruction and mentor beginners (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011). During their practical training in schools, which comprises 15 to 25% of the program, students observe expert teachers teach, practice teaching lessons to students, and receive evaluations from teacher education faculty and supervising teachers (Sahlberg, 2011b).

Unlike other countries, Finland does not allow alternative approaches for teachers, such as online programs or Teach for America. Primary school teachers have to major in education with a minor in another subject, and secondary teachers need to major in the field they will teach with a minor in a different subject (Sahlberg, 2013). Because teachers are so well prepared, they enjoy more autonomy to teach the way they feel students will most benefit.

This freedom makes the teaching profession in Finland enjoyable, thus making it one of the most satisfying jobs in the country. In addition, the teaching profession is highly respected, to the degree that young students hoping to enter this field often perceive it as more important than medicine or law (Sahlberg, 2011a).

### **A Superior Learning Environment for All**

Standardized tests are not used in Finland to rank students or schools, and teachers often use an authentic approach for student feedback by using narrative form to provide students with descriptions of their learning progress (Darling-Hammond, 2011/12). Finland also utilizes open-ended assessments during the 2nd and 9th grades, but does not use them to track or punish students. The goal of such evaluations is purely to support learning.

Educators in Finland do not believe that frequent testing and stronger accountability will increase student learning, but could create opportunities for biased teaching, which may raise test scores with little learning (Sahlberg, 2012). Because Finland does not emphasize standardized testing, there is no competition among schools and thus no unnecessary stress on students and teachers. The low level of accountability and testing allows teachers to guide students to discover their own ways of accomplishing curricular goals without fear; for most students, this type of environment encourages creativity and excellence.

Another factor leading to a superior learning environment in Finnish schools is adequate time for collaboration among teachers. Such opportunities help teachers share knowledge of individual students, plan together, and learn from each other. In Finnish schools, teachers meet weekly to plan and develop curriculum, and they also make important decisions regarding syllabi, textbooks, assessments, course offerings, budgets, and professional development (Wei, Andree, & Darling-Hammond, 2009). Schools also share and learn from each other through a flexible and organized system that permits best practices to be universal (Sahlberg, 2012).

It may be surprising for educators in other countries to learn that teachers in Finland spend less time teaching than those in other countries. A middle school teacher, for example, averages only 600 hours annually in Finland, whereas a teacher at a similar level in the United States averages 1,080 hours annually (Sahlberg, 2012). Thus teachers have the time to enhance the quality of their instruction in several ways. Teachers spend their time outside the classroom planning how to improve teaching methods, interacting with the community, and working on curriculum and assessment.

Another characteristic contributing to

Finland's success in international testing is its commitment to equity; all students receive high-quality teaching regardless of their socioeconomic background. This was not the case in the early 1970s, when there was an achievement gap between students of different socioeconomic backgrounds. By the 1980s, after reforming the school system, abolishing tracking, and dismantling the mandated testing system that blocked many students from equal access to knowledge, more opportunities were created that contributed to the rise of Finland's rankings (Darling-Hammond, 2010b). In a survey done by OECD in 2000, Finland was found to have the lowest performance variation between schools on the skills the PISA test measures, and this trend continued in 2003 and even became stronger in 2006 and 2009 (Sahlberg, 2012).

Finland also uses exemplary teaching methods for students with special needs. Special education instructors earn a little more than regular class teachers, and early intervention is considered essential. If classroom teachers suspect a student requires additional support, they can request the services of a special education teacher (Takala, Pirttimaa & Törmänen, 2009). To implement special education, schools use the least restrictive environment, which means that students experience an environment that is most like the regular classroom and interact with other students, while, in certain cases, a separate class for students with special needs may be necessary (Jahnukainen, 2011). In the early years of schooling, strong emphasis is placed on identifying and providing support for all children who have needs in reading, writing, and math. As a result, schools in Finland have a larger number of students with special needs at the primary level than many other countries. This emphasis on providing children with support and special education continues as the children grow older; many

students are placed in some form of special education program before they complete compulsory schooling. In 2009-2010, for example, approximately one-third of the students enrolled in the nine-year compulsory school program participated in a special education program in which they were either with others in the regular classroom or in a separate classroom. By the time children are 16, as many as half of the students in the compulsory system have been placed in special education at some point during their years of schooling (Sahlberg, 2012). The strong emphasis on providing many students, rather than a few, with effective special education not only helps children improve academically, it also reduces the stigma often associated with these types of programs. If many students receive it, they do not stand out from the rest of the students.

### **Low Grade Repetition**

One of the reasons students in Finland tend to experience a stimulating environment results from practices that avoid grade repetition. Repeating a grade is detrimental to students and schools for several reasons. First, it is embarrassing and often turns students into reluctant learners. Second, it is inefficient because pupils are usually not weak in all subjects; thus, repeating only the subjects they are weak in is a much better approach that allows them to make more progress. Repeating a grade also prevents students from experiencing a stimulating environment and costs the school more.

After *peruskoulu* was implemented, the new system significantly lowered grade repetition rates. Today, Finland has very few students who experience grade repetition; by the age of 16, less than 2% of students who have finished the compulsory school system have repeated a grade (Väljjarvi & Sahlberg, 2008). This outcome results from the strong support

students receive in the specific subjects that cause difficulty (Sarjala, 2013).

The problems associated with grade repetition have been completely eliminated at the upper-secondary school level because, at these schools, there are no grade levels, and both general and vocational schools use modular curriculum units that allow students to take courses at their own pace (Sahlberg, 2012).

This approach permits students to create their own schedules and to only repeat the courses they fail. Some students complete these final years of schooling in two years, while others may take four years (Sarjala, 2013).

### **A Model for Others**

Because Finland's education system includes many exemplary policies and practices that enable students to do their best work, reformers from other countries would be warranted in borrowing various components of Finland's school system to improve their own. However, mimicking Finland's reform movement can be difficult. First, part of the rationale that led Finland to reform is determined by Finland's social values. These values include a devotion to equity and cooperation (Sarjala, 2013). Today, these values are reflected in the school system's ideology, which is based on the belief that all students deserve a good education and are all capable of learning. Countries that are more individualistic and lack these social values will likely face difficulties in achieving Finland's success in education.

Furthermore, reformers need to consider that borrowing one aspect of Finland's system without considering the others will likely not make much of a difference. Finland's system works well as a result of the various components that complement each other; isolating only one of its parts for

implementation will most likely prove futile. Unfortunately, many countries use haphazard intervention methods when they reform, which are antithetical to Finland's holistic and systematic approach (Sahlberg, 2012).

For those reformers who are interested in using many or all the characteristics of Finland's educational practices to improve their country's system, the following summary list of components may be useful:

- Highly qualified teachers for all students
- Strong support for student needs
- Free teacher education program
- Equal opportunities for all students
- Lack of external standardized tests
- Innovative teaching strategies
- Few external accountability practices
- A culture of trust for teachers
- Strong early intervention programs
- Social support for children and families
- Freedom for teachers to apply national standards in different ways
- Strong support and cooperation among parents, teachers, principals, government officials, and teacher unions.

### **Possibilities for Improvement**

Even the best education systems in the world can improve. In Finland, concerns have been raised primarily in two areas: teacher induction and in-service education. Some schools provide extensive support for new staff, while other schools provide none (Sahlberg, 2011b). Personnel responsible for induction also vary from school to school. In some cases, the principal is responsible, while in other cases, a senior teacher assumes this role. In-service education varies from school to school. While some municipalities provide in-service opportunities, others do not and leave it up to members of the school to determine the type of professional

development that is needed, a condition allowing for more opportunities for professional development for some teachers and fewer for others (Sahlberg, 2011b).

### Conclusion

Finland's education system has outperformed most countries in international testing for various reasons, including an outstanding commitment to satisfying the needs of all students, a student-centered approach for teaching, and a highly trained teaching workforce that is selected from the best students in the country. While these characteristics have undoubtedly contributed greatly to Finland's success in education, other notable factors play a role as well. Part of this success relates to Finland's social values, which emphasize equality, cooperation, and a strong commitment to providing strong welfare programs for all its citizens. For example, Finland offers early childhood care, health services, and measures that identify learning problems prior to the start of schooling (Sahlberg, 2012). Finland's education system reflects its superior welfare system and offers free hot meals and other welfare services free of charge (Sarjala, 2013).

Although it is important to consider the many positive components of the entire country when evaluating the success of its education system, educators and policymakers from around the world can learn from the exemplary practices of Finland's school system and model these practices to improve their own. Finland's success in international testing is relatively recent; in 1990, its system was similar to those of many countries that are having problems today in providing a stimulating environment for all students. Finland's strong performance occurred only after specific reforms were made. Therefore, policymakers in countries with poor or average results in international

testing should be hopeful that they can achieve improvements.

### References

- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010a). Restoring our schools. *Nation*, 290(23), 14-20.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010b). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our nation's future*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2011/12). Soaring systems. *Education Review*, 24(1), 24-33.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Rothman, R. (2011). Lessons learned from Finland, Ontario, and Singapore. In L. Darling-Hammond & R. Rothman (Eds.), *Teacher and leader effectiveness in high-performing education systems* (pp. 1-13). Stanford, CA: The Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Hancock, L. (2011). *Why are Finland's schools successful?* Retrieved from [www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/Why-Are-Finlands-SchoolsSuccessful.html](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/Why-Are-Finlands-SchoolsSuccessful.html)
- Jahnukainen, M. (2011). Different strategies, different outcomes? The history and trends of the inclusive and special education in Alberta (Canada) and in Finland. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 55(5), 489-502.
- Sahlberg, P. (2011a). *Finnish lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* New York, NY: Teachers College Press
- Sahlberg, P. (2011b). Lessons from Finland. *American Educator*, 35(2), 34-38.
- Sahlberg, P. (2012). A model lesson: Finland shows us what equal opportunity looks like. *American Educator*, 36(1), 20-27.
- Sahlberg, P. (2013). Teachers as leaders in Finland. *Educational Leadership*, 71(2), 36-40.

- Sarjala, J. (2013). Equality and cooperation: Finland's path to excellence. *American Educator*, 37(1), 32-36.
- Stewart, V. (2012). *A world-class education: Learning from international models of excellence and innovation*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Takala, M., Pirttimaa, R., & Törmänen, M. (2009). Inclusive special education: The role of special education teachers in Finland. *British Journal of Special Education*, 36(3), 162-173.
- Tirri, K., & Kuusisto, E. (2013). How Finland serves gifted and talented pupils. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 36(1), 84-96.
- Tucker, M. (2012). Teacher quality: What's wrong with U.S. strategy? *Educational Leadership*, 69(4), 42-46.
- Väljjarvi, J., & Sahlberg, P. (2008). Should "failing" students repeat a grade? Retrospective response from Finland. *Journal of Educational Change*, 9(4), 385-389.
- Wei, R. C., Andree, A., Darling-Hammond, L. (2009). How nations invest in teachers. *Educational Leadership*, 66(5), 28-3

Reproduced with permission from *Childhood Education*, November/December 2014/457, published by the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI)

# What Makes an Effective Mentor: Mentors' and Mentees' Perspectives from the FLAiR Programme

Gladys Alice Tan Swee Hiang  
PCF Sparkletots Preschool @ Bedok Block 13 (CC)

Ruth Chong  
PCF Sparkletots Preschool @ Bishan North Block 257 (CC)

Lily Foo  
Queenstown Lutheran Church Kindergarten

*Recipients of the Early Childhood Research Fund (ECRF)*

## Introduction

FLAiR is an early intervention literacy programme initiated by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and coordinated by the Association for Early Childhood Educators Singapore (AECES). ProFLAiRs are literacy teachers who carry out the Focused Language Assistance in Reading Programme (FLAiR) in early childhood settings and the FLAiR Advocates visit ProFLAiRs on the job to provide coaching and mentoring. The participants in this qualitative study included ProFLAiRs (the mentees) and FLAiR Advocates (the mentors).

The purpose of this research is to investigate the perspectives of mentors and mentees on the effectiveness, benefits and challenges of mentoring. With the findings, we will be able to share some strategies with early childhood educators and policy makers on how to effectively mentor teachers regardless of their years of experiences. At the same time, we hope to provide insights for veteran teachers to be more effective mentors so that mentoring will become a joy rather than a chore.

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews from a sample of convenience

taken from a pool of ProFLAiRs and FLAiR Advocates (referred to as Advocates). In order to establish validity in this research, triangulation of subjects (both the views and opinions of mentors and mentees were weighed) and triangulation of methods (interviews and review of documents) were used and an audit trail would be kept in store. To achieve the purpose of this study, the following research questions were developed.

## Research Questions

1. What makes an effective mentor?
  - How does the mentor build a trusting relationship with the mentee?
  - What skills and dispositions are needed for effective mentoring?
  - What forms of mentoring are effective?
  - What are the characteristics of an effective mentor?
2. How is mentoring effective?
  - What is the mentor's and mentee's perspective on effective mentoring?

- What are the roles and responsibilities of the mentor and mentee?
3. What are the benefits and challenges of mentoring?
- What are the benefits for mentors and mentees?
  - What are some of the challenges faced?

### **Literature Review**

A mentor is an older, more experienced person who is committed to helping a younger, less experienced person become prepared for all aspects of life. Through mentoring, a mentee will learn and grow on the job. Mentoring is also helping the novice teachers to speed up their learning of their new job or skill and reduce the stress of transition through modeling and socializing the novice teachers with the veteran teachers (Podsden & Denmark, 2000).

A mentor is not a supervisor but a guide, a tutor, a coach or a counselor (Bellm, Whitebook & Hnatiuk, 1997). Anderson & Shannon defined mentoring as a nurturing process in which a skilled or more experienced person teaches, sponsors, encourages, and counsels less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional and/or personal development (cited by lancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009).

### **The Essential Qualities of a Good Mentor**

A good mentor is highly committed to help the mentees in finding success and gratification in their new roles (Rowley, 1999). A good mentor is committed to her profession. She is active, open, thoughtful, sensitive and responsive to the ideas and needs of others. The mentor should adopt empathetic listening as it creates positive

environment of acceptance and calmness. Trust is also vital for the continual relationship. When the mentor is able to communicate effectively with the mentee, this will promote open communication and trust (Cohen, 1999). A mentor is also someone who is respected and trusted by the peers and is a team player, with an ability to work co-operatively with others including parents.

The mentor is able to give constructive feedback without being judgmental. Also, the mentor needs to be knowledgeable and be willing to share her knowledge and provide guidance to the mentee. Contributions of the mentor should be given objectively to facilitate the growth and professional development of the mentees, and to generate a sense of purpose and excitement about learning.

To be an effective mentor, one has to be a lifelong learner, with a mindset of continual curiosity and be reflective in the professional practice. Thus good communication skills, emotional stability, initiative, intelligence and loyalty are other important traits of a good mentor (Johnson & Ridley, 2008).

### **The Benefits of Mentoring**

Mentoring helps in the retention of experienced, skilled teachers by giving recognition to their contribution, skills and financial incentives. Opportunities are given to mentors to develop their skills in communication, leadership and adult education. Furthermore, it allows teachers to gain new knowledge and improve in their practices. (Bellm, Whitebook & Hnatiuk, 1997).

Mentoring enhances motivation, increases self-esteem and competence. This may lead both mentor and mentee to set higher professional goals for themselves (Haack, 2006). Mentoring also helps the mentees face their new challenges through reflective

activities and professional conversations with the mentors (Holloway, 2001).

Mentoring leads to self-satisfaction for the mentor. It helps in the development of coaching and leadership skills. For the mentees, there will be shorter learning curve for acquiring new skills and knowledge. This will enhance career satisfaction due to the improved job performance.

Participating in a mentorship allows mentors and mentees to impact the future of the early childhood education where best practices are shared and explored. The mutual understanding, respect and trust involved lead to the satisfying experience and relationship. (Johnson & Ridley, 2008). Mentoring allows collegiality and enables the less experienced mentees to feel safe to make mistakes (Dantonio, 2001). According to Chen (2008), "The development of the mentor-mentee relationship and the conditions will evolve into a learning relationship."

### **The Challenges of Mentoring**

The mentoring relationship is dynamic in nature. It is different for each mentor and mentee. Though the benefits of the mentoring relationship are tremendous and beneficial to both mentors and mentees, there are however, challenges in the mentoring relationship.

The first challenge would be mentor-mentee matching or pairing. Pre-arranged pairing may be problematic due to incompatibilities in responsibilities, life stages, personalities & work experiences. Pre-arranged pairing of individuals does not always work: the pairing of individuals for such a close relationship requires expertise. In view of such a challenge, it is suggested that a group meeting prior to the mentoring should allow for a more natural pairing (Pavia et al., 2003).

Another challenge is the need to understand the concerns of the mentees and

their level of maturity in terms of the ability or skills of coping with the stresses and demands of work. Some mentees may not have the experience to know how to prioritize the demands of their workload which could become burdensome and a source of stress. However, there are mentees who may have developed the ability or skills to handle their stress level before beginning their training, others acquire coping strategies during training, and yet others who may remain limited in their ability to handle stress. Mentors should understand and assess the mentees abilities and monitor those who are vulnerable to the effects of chronic stress. (Gallagher et al, 2011).

Developing trust in a mentoring relationship is yet another challenge facing mentors and mentees. The success of a mentoring relationship lies largely in a trust relationship that is developed over time. This trust that develops between mentors and mentees would inadvertently remove barriers of fear, awkwardness, communication and shyness. Mentees who are shy, may be reluctant to approach the mentors, let alone engage them in conversation or ask for advice when needed. It is important for both the mentor and the mentee to be pro-active in building the trust-relationship as it sets the tone for open discussion. Building and maintaining a strong trusting relationship between mentor and mentee is a key component to effective mentoring (Murali, et al. 2005).

### **Methodology**

#### **Method**

This research is qualitative in nature and data were collected through face-to-face interviews and review of document which included the Advocates' written feedback to ProFLAiRs and the ProFLAiRs' feedback on the Advocates. The researchers interviewed five mentors and seven mentees after permission

had been sought from MOE to study the mentoring relationship of the ProFLAiRs (mentees) and Advocates (mentors). The participants were also assured that their responses were kept anonymous and confidential. Research records would be kept in a locked file, and only the researchers would have access to the records through AECES.

### **Demographics of Participants**

In total, twelve participants were interviewed in this research. There were one male and eleven female participants. They were in the age bracket of 30 years old and above. All the participants were active ProFLAiRs and Advocates. There were five Advocates (mentors) and seven ProFLAiRs (mentees). The mentors have an average mentoring experience with the FLAiR programme of one year and six months to eight years, whereas the mentees have had between three to six years of teaching experience. In order to protect the identity of the participants, the mentors and mentees were named alphabetically.

Ethical considerations were considered when participants were invited to take part in this research. All the participants were assured that they would remain anonymous and responses would be kept confidential.

### **Triangulation**

To ensure the findings were valid, literature review, personal interviews and document reviews of the ProFLAiRs and Advocates were used. Interview questions for mentors and mentees are in Appendix A and B respectively.

### **Findings and Discussions**

The characteristics of an effective mentor, the benefits of mentoring and the challenges faced were identified from the analysis of the interviews and review of documents.

### **Characteristics of An Effective Mentor: Mentors' Perspectives**

What makes an effective mentor is the willingness to share. As one mentor remarked, *"I accepted the role of the Advocate as I could share my expertise, my experiences, and the skills that I have with other teachers. Hopefully, what I share will help them to be even better teachers."* Mentors also take pride in their work as professionals who were there to help the mentees meet the challenges and problems they faced in their practice.

An effective mentor believes in the potential of the mentees, one mentor affirmatively expressed *"... what ProFLAiRs will benefit from is actually TO BELIEVE. Fundamentally, to believe in the child ... to believe in himself ... having the ProFLAiR get the idea that my Advocate actually believes in me, even though my work is not as great as other ProFLAiRs."* The word "believe" is a powerful and motivating word.

Effective mentors enjoy their work and enjoy working with people. Since mentors work mostly with mentees, they should value their mentees as a person and not take mentoring as just a job. Mentors respect, support and provide guidance to mentees in their learning journey of self and knowledge discovery. They build good rapport and relationships with the mentees. As a matter of fact, it was affirmed that *"the key thing is relationship."* Mentors should know the mentees' expectations, have an open mind, accept their differences, recognize their strengths and weaknesses and be able to draw the strengths of the mentees and help them grow in their development as professional teachers. Modeling is essential where the mentees could hear, see and observe for themselves what the mentors do. Good mentors model the correct and positive ways of doing things.

Another characteristic of effective mentors is that they spend time with the mentees and take an interest in their lives. They know their background, what they do, whether they have a family with their own children, their interests and other concerns. They walk alongside with their mentees and share their hopes and burdens, and encourage them when they are faced with problems. Mentors do not judge their mentees but care for them, is patient with them and most of all, lend them a listening ear. In other words, like what one mentor empathetically commented, *“I need to empathize and understand them so that they in turn understand the children and their needs and empathize with the children.”*

Finally, effective mentors believe in their own professional development, such as attending courses, conferences and trainings; they are life-long learners and are constantly upgrading themselves. They stay relevant in the field, and last but not least, they also take care of their physical and mental health. As one mentor aptly described *“I just do the work and I realize that I wasn’t taking care of myself ... whether physically, mentally whatever ... my first criteria when I get a diary is clock in all my exercise classes.”*

In summary, a highly effective mentor enters into the mentoring relationship with the disposition of being open, positive, non-judgmental and demonstrates a sincere interest in the mentee’s development. These are essential ingredients to a trusting relationship.

### **Characteristics of An Effective Mentor:**

#### **Mentees’ Perspectives**

The characteristics of an effective mentor are described by the mentees as a list of requirements and expectations. An effective mentor should have experience in teaching so that she could guide and give helpful advice to the mentees on how to plan and teach the children. This was supported by what one

mentee shared; *“mentor has given very helpful advice on how to plan and teach the children better”*. In the review of document one mentee wrote *“Advocates were able to give me insights into my blind spot and giving new perspective and suggestions on how I can improve.”* The mentor should be knowledgeable, experienced and possess the ability to offer practical tips to the mentees.

Next, the mentor should be able to build on what the mentees already know and add value. Mentors should know how to draw out the mentees’ life’s experiences and prior knowledge to help them apply them in their work. Mentors should provide practical suggestions that are specific. Mentors should also be supportive and encourage learning so that the mentees can improve. The mentor should be willing to build rapport with the mentees and to know them well. From a mentee’s written feedback, she wrote that she was *“able to seek clarification, discuss any issue and continue good relationship”* with the mentor. The mentor should be willing to listen to mentees’ worries, concerns and explanations on why they sometimes do certain things and then offer constructive feedback. Mentors should speak to the mentees as a friend, not as a superior. This statement was clearly affirmed by a mentee when she said, *“They listen to my worries, and reassure me when I’m doing well. They speak to me as a friend, not as a superior.”* If the mentees should make mistakes, the mentor should offer suggestions on how to avoid them, and should not point them out blatantly without offering practical solutions that could be implemented in the classroom. Mentors should be observant, yet specific, in providing guidance to the mentees.

The mentor should also be positive and open to the mentees’ views. If mentees say or did something that was not right, the mentor should be understanding and open and discuss improvement strategies, allowing the

mentee to make suggestions first. The qualities of being positive, open and understanding were voiced by one of the mentees: *“My Advocate Mentor is very understanding. She is very positive and open to what I share. If I said or do something not right, she is open and will tell me where to improve.”* to which another mentee added, *“The mentor need not give answers but allow the mentee time to explore the solution.”*

An effective mentor should be one who is helpful and proactive in providing support and encouragement. Trust, respect, patience, friendliness, honesty, integrity, fairness and professionalism are qualities that a mentor should possess. Most of all, the mentor should make the mentees feel successful by taking a genuine interest in their work.

In summary, the mentees described highly effective mentors as being guides and advisors who give helpful and constructive feedback based on their knowledge and experience. They are positive, open, understanding and are willing to listen as they provide support and encouragement. They are not rigid but allow flexibility in learning. Flexibility also includes being accommodating in arranging for visits that take into consideration the mentee’s work schedules.

### **Mentors’ and Mentees’ Views on Effective Mentoring**

Mentors and mentees have similar views on what makes mentoring effective. Both recognized that trust is essential in building a positive mentoring relationship. *“Without a certain measure of trust, it was difficult for both sides to work together”*. Trust also nurtures mutual respect for one another and fuels the relationship between mentors and mentees. A working relationship is essential so that the common goal of meeting the needs of the children is achieved.

When both mentors and mentees are engaged in a working relationship with trust

and mutual respect, it generates an atmosphere of friendliness. Mentors need to be friendly so that the mentees can approach them with problems they might face without the feeling of intimidation. In light-hearted moments, they could even share a joke or two.

Since mentors have walked the journeys of the mentees, they have the knowledge and understanding of the predicaments faced by the mentees. They will then be able to empathize with the mentees and provide the appropriate guidance and support. As such, the three ingredients highlighted by both and mentors and the mentees for an effective mentoring are trust, mutual respect and empathy.

To sum up the fore-going findings, the mentors and mentees have different perspectives on what make an effective mentor. The mentors view a highly effective mentor as one who enters into the mentoring relationship with the disposition of being open, positive, non-judgmental and demonstrates a sincere interest in the mentee’s development. And the mentees view highly effective mentors as being guides and advisors who give helpful and constructive feedback based on their knowledge and experience. The mentors’ perspective plants the seeds of building a trusting relationship and the mentees’ perspective crafts out the roles that mentors ought to play. However, both mentors and mentees agree that effective mentoring relationships are built on trust, mutual respect and empathy.

### **Benefits of Mentoring: Mentors’ Perspectives**

Mentors derive the sense of satisfaction from seeing the mentees joining the program not for money but having the children at heart. This heart attitude is most commendable as one mentor commented, *“They have very good educational*

*background, and many of them have got hearts, that is the key thing. They come in not because they want to earn money but because they have a heart for children who come from under-privileged families.”*

The sense of satisfaction is also derived from witnessing the mentees grow in their knowledge skills and dispositions. It is a great encouragement for the mentors when they see their mentee progress from novice to Master ProFLAiRs and taking pride as professionals who are confident and proud of their work in teaching children.

Finally, the development of positive relationships built between the mentors and mentees, and between mentees and the children is heartwarming. *“It was heartwarming to see that the mentees were more confident in teaching the children and giving a lot of care and attention to them.”*

#### **Benefits of Mentoring: Mentees’ Perspectives**

From the mentee’s perspective, they benefit from having a supportive mentor. A supportive mentor boosts confidence and contributes to the growth and development of the mentees. Many of the mentees interviewed agreed unanimously that a supportive mentor was most essential. *“I believe having a supportive Advocate and Principal Mentor is very important”. “My development is due to great support from my Advocate. She would boost teachers and successful students,” and “The Advocates I have had so far have all been very supportive ...”*

The mentees also reported that they benefitted from the mentor’s experiences which give them new insights and enable them to see things from different perspectives. Through the mentor’s guidance, learning is greatly enhanced as mentors share their knowledge and experiences in teaching

children, and provides suggestions on how to build trust and relationships with them.

Another benefit of mentoring is the guidance and help given by the mentors in areas of documentation and forms filling. Learning through reflections is an added benefit and it is through reflection that the mentees draw from the rich experiences of the mentor. Affirmation during times of uncertainty also provides great encouragement to the mentees and finally, the mentor provides strategies that mentees can use in helping the children to self-regulate. With regards to classroom management, the mentees received practical tips from the mentor.

#### **Challenges Faced: Mentors’ Perspectives**

One of the challenges faced by the mentors is not knowing the expectations of AECES or MOE. *“Sometimes, not knowing where the mentor stood and where the mentee ProFLAiR stood and what the Principal could do or could not do was really trying”*. At the same time, the different preschool cultures also pose a challenge to some of the mentors.

Another challenge is not being able to recognize each mentee’s unique strengths and to encourage mentee in their professional journey. A mentor needs to guide mentees in realizing their strengths and gaining their confidence in relating and working with children. *“So many a times I would wonder what is the best way to encourage them and kind of help them get along in this journey, especially in the first year because I do not want them to leave the industry, just because they feel discouraged that they could not go on with it, so this is the main challenge that I have.”*

Also, mentors sometimes found it difficult to put ideas and suggestions across to the mentees as they are at different stages of their personal and professional development. As such, to be appropriate and responsive,

mentors need to match their approach to the mentees' level, standard and expectations. Some mentees joined the FLAiR Programme with no experience in teaching children, whereas others may already have some knowledge and experience. The mentees need time to assimilate and accommodate information and experiences. This is where mentors need to be understanding, opened and non-judgmental and recognize that the mentees also need time to grow and develop in their teaching practices.

### **Challenges Faced: Mentees' Perspectives**

The challenges described by the mentees were the stresses related to being a new ProFLAiR. These included having to adapt to the new environment, staff and the children. Some felt stressed while others felt overwhelmed because of assignments and not knowing how to write a development portfolio or report. The lesson plans, documentation and getting resources ready or finding space to store resources apparently were things new to them. As one of the mentees light-heartedly expressed, *"The lesson plans, documentation and getting resources ready – everything was new, it was full of experiments."* Another mentee added, but with a more serious tone, *"First year was quite stressful because we still have to complete some assignments for our Flair training. We have to write a development portfolio, compile and write up a development report ... so there is a lot of fitting in".*

Classroom management seemed to be a common challenge for the new mentees. They acknowledged the need for more guidance from the mentors during their site visits. However, the mentor's visit may add more stress when mentors observe and evaluated mentees. *"I was worried at first, not sure if what I was doing or teaching was correct"*. One of them said *"I was still new and inexperienced, my initial lessons were a bit*

*disorganized, the children were not sitting down properly and they were a bit disorganized"*.

Another challenge was facing different cultures and language barriers as some children could not speak English at all. It was also a real challenge when some of the ProFLAiRS had children who have some behavioral or emotional issues. Under such stressful circumstances, building a positive working relationship with the mentor becomes a real challenge.

All in all, according to the mentees, the mentors have been a great help, guide and support for them. However, they expressed that they need to know their role as a mentee and ProFLAiR. As such, it would be good if the mentor could facilitate group mentoring together with all their mentees. This would help in overcoming the challenge of time that both mentor and mentees face in growing their relationship as well as clarifying their roles and relieving the stress of the mentor's first observation visit

### **Research Limitations**

The findings are limited to the pool of ProFLAiRs and their Advocates and cannot be generalized. As novice researchers, our shortcomings are rooted in our lack of experiences and formal training in doing research; however these can be improved with practice.

### **Future Studies**

This study can be expanded to include more Advocates (the mentors) and ProFLAiRs (the mentees). It can also be replicated with other mentees who are not ProFLAiRs and mentors who are not Advocates. Instead of the selection by convenience in this study, ProFLAiRs and Advocates can be studied in pairs. Purposeful sampling could be used in the case where pairs are studied. The role

and impact of mentoring can be further explored in relation to effective retention of teachers in the sector, which is beyond the scope of this study.

### Recommendations

It appears that for mentors to be effective, they need to recognize that ProFLAiRs, especially the new ones, are faced with multiple work stresses. These include adapting to the school culture and the adults and children working with each other. In addition, the visit from the Advocate can be another stress factor. As such, the first observation visit is crucial in that the Advocate must consciously try to reduce the stress level by coming in as a friend who has walked the journey and is open and willing to lend a listening ear. The mentor reassures, affirms, supports and offers suggestions based on knowledge and experience. In so doing, the mentee will be encouraged to enhance practice with the appropriate guidance from the mentor.

From mentors' and mentees' feedback, it is evident that they are not clear of the expectations of their roles. As such, group mentoring may be useful, as suggested by a Master ProFLAiR. The group mentoring session can be used as an orientation session for discussion of roles and expectation as well as a get-to-know session. This will help in alleviating the stress level of the mentor's first observation visit.

Finally, it is recommended that mentors and mentees use the research findings as food for thought. It helps mentors assess their current qualities and reflect on the gaps that they may need to work on. For aspiring mentors, the findings provide them with a benchmark to work towards becoming effective mentors.

### Implications

These findings will impact the field because teachers, administrators, principals, program directors, supervisors and policy makers will be better informed in what makes an effective mentor and gain a better understanding of the different stresses that mentees face. The findings can also be used in mentor selection and designing appropriate workshops to prepare mentors and mentees for the mentoring relationship. Such preparation for mentoring will result in more effective mentoring and help in staff retention.

*This study is funded by the Early Childhood Research Fund (ECRF) of the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA). The findings and views expressed in this research are that of the author and do not represent the views of ECDA or any government ministries.*

### References

- Bellm, D.; Whitebook, M & Hnatiuk, P. (1997). The early childhood mentoring curriculum: A handbook for Mentors. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House
- Chen, C. (2008). Mentoring as a learning relationship: The mentee's perspective. *International Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 14 (2).
- Cohen, N. (1999). *The manager's pocket guide to effective mentoring*. Amherst, Massachusetts: HRD Press.
- Dantonio, M. (2001). *Collegial coaching: Inquiry into the teaching self* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa.

- Gallagher, P.A., Abbott-Shim, M. & VandeWiele, L. (2011). An evaluation of the Individualised Learning Intervention: a mentoring program for Early Childhood teachers. *NHSA Dialog: A Research-to-Practice Journal for the Early Childhood Field*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 57-74
- Haack, P. A. (2006). Mentoring and Professional Development Programs: Possibilities and Pitfalls--A Good Mentoring Program Benefits Not Only the Novice Teacher, but the Mentor and School as Well. *Music Educators Journal*, 92(4), 60.
- Holloway, J. H. (2001). The Benefits of Mentoring. *Who Is Teaching Our Children?* 58(8), 85-86. Retrieved from ASCD website <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may01/vol58/num08/The-Benefits-of-Mentoring.aspx>
- Iancu-Haddad, D., & Oplatka, I. (2009). Mentoring Novice Teachers: Motives, Process, and Outcomes from the Mentor's Point of View. *New Educator*, 5(1), 45-65.
- Johnson, W. B. & Ridley, C. R. (2008). *The elements of mentoring* (Revised ed.). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan
- Murali, K; Dan C. & Jason, R (2005) Identifying Challenges *Responsible Conduct in Research Mentoring*. Retrieved from [www.niu.edu/rcrportal/mentoring/challenges/challenges.html](http://www.niu.edu/rcrportal/mentoring/challenges/challenges.html)
- Pavia, L., Nissen, J., Hawkins, C., Monroe, M.E., & Filimon-Demyen, D. (2003). Mentoring Early Childhood professionals. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 250-260.
- Podsen, I. J.. & Denmark, V. M. (2000). *Coaching and mentoring first-year and student teachers*. New York: Eye on Education.
- Rowley, J. B. (1999). The Good Mentor. *Education Leadership* 56(8), 20-22. Retrieved from NSW Department of Education and Communities, [www.det.nsw.edu.au/proflearn/docs/pdf/good\\_mentor.pdf](http://www.det.nsw.edu.au/proflearn/docs/pdf/good_mentor.pdf)

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Guide for Mentor

I understand that you have been an Advocate for ProFLAiRs. This interview seeks to understand what you think makes an effective Advocate Mentor. I will also like to reassure you that whatever you share in this interview will be kept in strict confidentiality.

1. How many years have you been an Advocate Mentor?
2. Why did you accept the role of the Advocate?
3. What was it like in your first year as an Advocate?
4. Being an experienced Advocate, now looking back, what were some challenges you faced?
5. How did you overcome these challenges?
6. Let's now talk about the highlights of your mentoring role as an Advocate.
7. Do you do any kind of preparation before the visit?
8. Do you think the ProFLAiRs are ready for your visit? What feelings do you think they might have in anticipation of your visit?
9. How do you give feedback to your ProFLAiR?
10. What are some of your thoughts and feelings after visiting your ProFLAiR?
11. What are your thoughts and views on effective mentoring?
12. If you were given one wish to enhance the effectiveness of your role, what would that be?
13. What has contributed to you being an effective Advocate Mentor?
14. What motivates you to continue to be an Advocate?
15. In conclusion, what message do you have for your ProFLAiR?

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Guide for Mentees

I understand that as a ProFLAIR, you are assigned an Advocate as your Advocate Mentor and you have also a Principal Mentor. This interview will focus on your relationship with your Advocate Mentor. The purpose of this interview is to understand how the mentoring relationship has been effective for you in affirming your competence as a ProFLAIR. I will also like to reassure you that whatever you share in this interview will be kept in strict confidentiality.

1. How many years have you been a ProFLAIR?
2. What was it like in the first year?
3. What helped in the first year or two?
4. Do you prepare for your Advocate's visit? What are some of your thoughts and feelings when you await your Advocate's arrival?
5. How did your mentor give you feedback?
6. Describe some of the things she said or did that you found most helpful?
7. What are some thoughts and feelings after your Advocate's visit?
8. What qualities do you appreciate in your Advocate Mentor?
9. What suggestions can you give your Advocate to make her a more effective mentor?
10. What do you think makes an effective Mentor?
11. What contributed to your development as a ProFLAIR?
12. What motivates you to continue to be a ProFLAIR?
13. In conclusion, what message do you have for your Advocate?

# Use of a Mentoring Guidebook to Develop Children's Portfolios: A Preliminary Study

Ke Yinshi

Bachelor of Early Childhood Education with Management, SIM University.

## Introduction

Efron, Winter & Bressman (2012) believed that mentoring is a powerful and often effective strategy in supporting the work of new and inexperienced teachers. I vividly remembered how I struggled in the first few years of my teaching career as the centre that I worked for did not have a mentoring programme. The two most difficult tasks that I struggled with were assessing children's behaviours and developing children's portfolios.

Portfolios comprise of purposeful and meaningful collection of children's work, representing the children's learning over time (Lai-Yeung, 2011). However, developing the children's portfolios is time consuming and this is a big challenge for novice teachers.

For this research project, I set the following research questions as my focus.

### Main research question

How would the use of a mentoring guidebook help novice teachers develop children's portfolios in an early learning centre?

**Sub-Question 1:** What content should be included in the mentoring guidebook to help novice teachers develop the portfolios for their class children?

**Sub-Question 2:** In what ways could the mentor support the novice teachers in using the mentoring guidebook to develop the portfolios?

## Literature Review

### Importance of Mentoring

Doan (2013) mentioned that novice teachers needed help during their first year of work as the diploma programs focused mainly on the child development theories and practices. These novice teachers believed that the most effective ways to improve their professional skills would be to "connect with an experienced educator" (Doan, 2013). With reference to the Singapore context, Lien Foundation (2012) revealed comparable issues faced by early childhood educators, such as low pay, low status, high turnover rate and low morale. Mentoring is one of the ways that could potentially revitalize the early childhood profession.

Kumar and En (2014) recently revealed that one of the common problems faced by preschool teachers in Singapore is the lack of mentoring during their attachments and early years of teaching. They also highlighted the importance of being engaged and mentored by experienced mentors at critical points of their training and initial stage of teaching.

### Mentoring Strategies

Chu (2012) mentioned that mentoring is relationship-based. Mentors who listened to the mentee's experiences, dilemmas and interests found it highly effective in guiding the mentees to overcome difficulties. Jordon (2014) supported the notion of building a trusting relationship with the mentee as the first step towards the mentoring process. Chu (2012) emphasized the importance for mentors to scaffold the mentees' development with stimulating questions,

careful observation and critical thinking skills. Whitebook and Bellm (2014) proposed that mentors demonstrate excellent skills with young children, families and other adults in the early learning environment, have conversations with the mentees on their skills and practices meaningfully. By having dialogue, mentors help mentees clarify their thinking and reflect on their practices.

### **Use of a Mentoring Guidebook**

In Singapore, shortage of teachers and an overloading work environment in early childhood centres could be the main causes for centres not having a mentor for novice teachers. Thus, an alternative way to assist novice teachers would be to compile relevant information in a mentoring guidebook that novice teachers could refer to as and when they need assistance. This guidebook could include many useful topics for novice teachers, including assessing children's progress using portfolios. There are mentoring guides developed for the early childhood sector such as those developed by Armstrong, Henson and Savage (2009), Arthur et al. (2012) and Seitz and Bartholomew (2008). These guides, if used, would need modification to suit the Singapore context.

### **Portfolio as an Assessment Tool**

Armstrong, Henson & Savage (2009) defined assessment as "the purposeful collection of data from a variety of sources for the purpose of rendering a judgment". This implies that implementing the portfolio assessment method requires teachers' effort and time. A comprehensive portfolio includes different documentations of a child's development and progress. Documenting children's learning involves gathering and organizing information to help teachers, families, children and the communities to understand and value children's learning and development (Arthur et al., 2012).

In a portfolio, the common documentations used by most preschools in Singapore include checklist, work samples and anecdotal records. Arthur et al. (2012) emphasized that documenting and assessing children's learning is more than just planning and collecting sample of work, writing anecdotal records; these collected documents need to be analyzed for meaning and future planning.

Seitz and Bartholomew (2008) stated that the key to successful commencing of children's portfolio is patience as it involves time to plan, organize and implement. Harris (2009) highlighted that purposeful observation has an important role in the development of children's portfolios. Teachers have to observe the children's current progress so as to make plans for their future development. Similarly, teachers have to plan what to observe and to look out for in children.

Thus, in this suggested mentoring guidebook, it should include an introduction; an explanation of each method such as anecdotal records, checklists and work samples; a need for planning the assessment of children's learning and development; and details of an assessment plan. In this mentoring guidebook, information on how to gather the evidence of child learning should include observing, organizing and evaluating the evidence of learning.

## **Methodology**

### **Setting and Sampling**

In this study, I refer to novice teachers as diploma trained teachers with less than 3 years of teaching experience in Singapore preschools. There are very few studies in Singapore concerning the difficulties faced by novice teachers, specifically in developing the portfolios for young children.

Two novice teachers and their principal of a pre-school were invited to be the participants

in this study. Both the teacher-participants were diploma trained, were in their 20's and had less than two years of classroom experience.

In this research project, I acted as a mentor to introduce the use of a mentoring guidebook to help the beginner teachers.

### **Research Design and Research Tools**

This research project adopted mainly the qualitative approach. The research tools used to collect data were interviews (Annex 1), reflection journals (Annex 2), a mentoring guidebook, and work samples.

### **Implementation Procedure**

The research implementation began with interviews with the novice teachers and the principal to find out their views on mentoring and assessing children, in particular in developing the children's portfolio and the difficulties the novice teachers faced. With input from the teachers and principal, I drafted the content of the mentoring guidebook, explained the guidebook to the teacher-participants and the principal and obtained their feedback about it through the reflection journal. Work samples were also collected to extract evidence of how the teacher-participants came out with the portfolios of their class children.

A month later, I visited the novice teachers to check on their progress and to offer mentoring service. More work samples were collected from them for analysis. They were also asked to fill up the reflection journal on how the mentoring guidebook was used. Separate interviews with the novice teachers and principal were conducted at the end of 2 months. The focus of these interviews was on the usefulness of the mentoring guidebook and how the mentoring guidebook and mentoring experience had helped the novice teachers to develop the children's portfolios.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results of the study were positive. The novice teachers were pleased with the children's portfolios that they created. The principal was also satisfied with the children's portfolios and the novice teachers' ability to develop these portfolios. The results of this study are summarized in Findings A, B and C:

### **Finding A: Teachers gained knowledge and skills to develop children's portfolios.**

Before intervention, during the interview session, the two novice teachers confessed that they had not started on developing the portfolio due to their hectic workload and having difficulties in selecting which of the children's work should be included in their portfolio. With the mentoring guidebook, the two novice teachers were pleased with the effort they made in developing the portfolios. The guidebook provided them a clear direction and clear steps to collect relevant evidence to show children's progress.

The principal had also expressed at that first interview that the teachers needed to improve in their inclusion of children's work in the portfolios. After using the guidebook, the principal noticed the improvements in the teachers, she found that they were able to select a range of evidence of the children's involvement and the children's individual progression with an assessment plan in mind.

The following data presented the evidence in response to the main research question.

**Main question:** *How would the use of a mentoring guidebook help novice teachers develop children's portfolios in an early learning centre?*




This mentoring guidebook has provided comprehensive information and tips to equip the novice teachers with essential skill sets to tackle the different components of a child's portfolio. Relating to the work samples of

Participant 1 below, there has been a gradual transformation of the documentation of artwork.

It is evident that Participant 1 has demonstrated the ability to provide individual

child's work with detailed documentation, rather than using a standard template with a generic write-up.







Before intervention







		
<p><b>Picture of child doing craftworks</b></p>	<p>Theme: Going Green Activity: Sunflowers Skills Attained: Creativity Fine motor development Eye-hand coordination</p>	<p>Procedure: First, the children tore the unwanted paper into small pieces. Then, they pasted the torn pieces of paper on the sunflower template given. Lastly, they pasted the rolled up magazines as the stem for the flower.</p>
<p>21-8-2014</p>		

After second intervention

Changes: Individualized artwork documentation and changes made to 'Skills Attained'- attune with the items in the children's checklist


After first intervention  
Change: Individualized artwork documentation

		
<p><b>First picture of child doing craftworks</b></p>	<p>Theme: Birthdays Activity: Handprint Candle Cake Skills Attained: Count numbers 1-3 Identify primary colours Eye-hand coordination</p>	<p>Procedure: First, the children's hand was painted and their handprints were printed on a piece of paper. Then, cut-outs of flames were pasted on top of the candle.</p>
		
<p><b>Second picture of child doing craftworks</b></p>	<p>Child's comment: I like blue and red cake... I wash my hands first, Teacher A... I am 3 years old... So I need 3 candles, Teacher A. 1, 2, 3... Teacher A... Is it nice?</p>	<p>Teacher's interpretation: Kylie is able to name the primary colours easily. And she is well aware of her age and is able to do one-to-one corresponding counting up to 3 from this craft activity. Kylie is also very proud of the craft which she had produced.</p>
<p>8-10-2014</p>		

		
<p><b>First picture of child doing craftworks</b></p>	<p>Theme: Transportation Activity: Land/Sea/Air Transport Skills Attained: Creativity Fine motor development Eye-hand coordination</p>	<p>Procedure: First, the children chose a cut-out of transport once at a time. Then, they pasted the chosen transport in the right category (land/sea/air).</p>
		
<p><b>Second picture of child doing craftworks</b></p>	<p>Child's comment: There's so many... I see helicopter... Ambulance... Ship... What's this? Oh... It's a digger... What's this? Hot air balloon... So it's hot?</p>	<p>Teacher's interpretation: Christian is able to name most of the transportation given to him to choose. When he was unsure of the name of digger and hot air balloon, he asked the teacher to find out the answers.</p>
<p>23-9-2014</p>		

Referring to the work samples of Participant 2 below, there has also been a transformation of the artwork documentation.

Before intervention

 <p>Picture of child doing craftworks</p>	<p>Theme: Colours</p> <p>Activity: Balloon Sand Collage</p> <p>Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify the primary colours</li> <li>Exploring different forms of art materials</li> <li>Eye-hand coordination</li> </ul>	<p>Procedure:</p> <p>The children were given red, blue and yellow food colourings to add into the sand that they brought back during their sand play. With guidance, they spread the white glue onto the balloon template and used the sand to decorate their balloons.</p>
--	--	---



19-9-2014

Participant 2 also demonstrated her ability to provide detailed anecdotal notes of a child. The following samples of anecdotal notes she took can be found below:

**Before intervention:** *Observation record of K, 29 August 2014*

It has been 2 weeks since K joined us. He settled down quite quickly. His parents did not follow him after the second day. He did really well and did not really cry when he realized that mummy was not in the classroom with him. However, K preferred to be carried when we go for outdoors. Yesterday, he wanted Lao Shi to carry him but Lao Shi told him to walk on his own and she held his hands wanting to walk together with him to the playground. But he refused to and stayed on the spot not wanting to walk. He said something which I did not get to note down in time. Later that day, when his parents came to pick him up, we talked to his parents about it and they said he probably had said “bao bao me, pain” (meaning – “carry me, my leg is painful”). They explained that their parents, K’s grandparents, often

After intervention  
Change: Individualized artwork documentation

 <p>First picture of child doing craftworks</p>	<p>Theme: Minibeasts</p> <p>Activity: Ant Trail</p> <p>Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhance eye hand coordination</li> <li>Exploring different forms of art materials</li> </ul>	<p>Procedure:</p> <p>The teacher guided the children to draw out the ant trail that they wanted using the white glue. Then they chose the colour sand that they wanted and scooped the sand using a spoon and spread it over the paper. Then glitters were added and they used their fingers to print the bodies of the ants.</p>
 <p>Second picture of child doing craftworks</p>	<p>Child's comment:</p> <p>I like red ants... I want yellow... Oh no... The sand on the table... Haha... Look, teacher! Rainbow! So cold...</p>	<p>Teacher's interpretation:</p> <p>Zachary was able to say his choice of colour sand (yellow) and when adding the glitters onto the sand, he said the different colours looked like rainbow. When using his finger to print the bodies of ants, he said that the paint felt cold. To conclude, Zachary enjoyed doing this artwork.</p>

1-10-2014

carried him instead of letting him walk, and even told him that walking too much would make his legs painful. They agreed that they should and will let him walk on his own more often and said that they will speak to the elderly about the problem too.

**After first intervention:** *Observation record of K, 19 September 2014*

K has made some progress in walking on his own to outdoor play! For the past week, he had been walking to the playground on his own. Recently, K has also been talking a lot. He repeats whatever that he hears when I speak to him. Usually when I greet him “Good morning K”, he will repeat the same thing, “Good morning K”. But after explaining to him and demonstrating to him how to greet back, he is able to say ‘Good morning Teacher B’.

***After second intervention: Observation record of K, 8 October 2014***

Recently, K displayed a more 'bossy' side of himself in class. Last Thursday, while he was playing at the home corner, he shouted at C (a new girl) as she was trying to go near the stove. K said, "Mine! Go away!" K was playing at the other side but he did not want C to turn the knobs on the stove. I went up and told him that we should share with our new friend and not ask her to go away; C would be sad if no one plays with her. He seemed to understand and allowed C to play with him. He told C, "Come Le Le, share!" I shared this incident with his mum after school and mum feedback that she will reinforce the concept of sharing with him at home too.

**Finding B: Usefulness of the mentoring guidebook to develop a child's portfolio**

Both the novice teachers and principal shared similar positive views about the contents of the mentoring guidebook. The teachers commented that the contents were comprehensive and easy to understand. The principal found the guidebook informative with details and she also commented that the tips and guidance were helpful to the teachers. This could be because I responded to the learning needs of the teachers.

In my reflection notes, I summarized what the teachers' needs were. This enabled me to answer the sub-question of this study.

***Sub-Question 1: What content should be included in the mentoring guidebook to help novice teachers develop the portfolios for their class children?***

In my reflection journal to this research, I had noted that:

'The interviews gave me some ideas of what content to include into the mentoring guidebook for the 2 teacher-participants. I felt that it is important to include the process to

go about developing the children's portfolios. The first step would most probably be planning. The rest of the process would require research from reference books and/or internet source. There is a need to include a short introduction about the importance of assessment, specifically through the use of portfolios, to include some short write-ups regarding the different documentation methods used by the school. The contents of the guidebook will include 1) an introduction to assessment, in particular on the use of portfolios, 2) explanations to the 3 different documentation methods- anecdotal records, checklist and work samples and last, and, 3) the process to start developing the children's portfolios.'

**Finding C: Effectiveness of the Mentoring Strategies**

Both the novice teachers commented that the mentoring experience had been useful for them. They commented that the mentor was attentive, helpful, supportive and clear in her explanation. As a mentor, I was able to adopt various strategies that I learnt from the literature review. The following are some of my reflections in answer to the second sub-question.

***Sub-Question 2: In what ways could the mentor support the novice teachers in using the mentoring guidebook to develop the portfolios?***

The literature reviews had suggested some ways that a mentor could support the novice teachers, attributes such as 'patience', being 'clear thinking', 'helpful', 'good articulation ability' and 'supportive'. From the reflection journals/reflection logs of the novice teachers, these similar keywords appeared too; 'clear in explanation', 'helpful', 'patience' and 'supportive'.

I adopted these strategies as a mentor:

'As a mentor, I had listened patiently to their problems, helped them to find solutions and gave them further suggestions. For instance, I suggested to participant 1 to make use of the learning centres to assess children's learning progress instead of 'purposely' creating an activity to observe the children's development... I also suggested to them to let the children be involved in developing the compilation of the artworks, as ultimately, it is a showcase of the children's learning... When children are involved, the compilation will be attractive and creative to their readers.'

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The data from the interviews, reflection journals and work samples showed that the novice teachers had improved their skills and enhanced their ability to develop the children's portfolios through the use of the mentoring guidebook.

The data also revealed the appropriateness of the contents of the mentoring guidebook and the supportive strategies used by the mentor to guide the novice teachers. Although this was a preliminary study, it demonstrated that a specific intervention focused on novice teachers' needs and ability to develop the children's portfolio could be successful. In this study, the novice teachers became more effective and confident in assessing children with the use of children's portfolio.

### Implications for Future Research

On reflection of this research study, I found some areas needed improvements. First, the use of only the qualitative method could be subject to researcher bias. A rating scale for the participants could be adopted to support the findings and improve the validity of the research. It would also be useful if parent-participants were invited to provide

comments and feedback on the child's portfolio. In other areas of focus for future research, I could look at how mentoring could tackle other difficulties faced by novice teachers, such as managing children's language development and classroom management.

### References

- Armstrong D.G., Henson K.T. & Savage T.V. (2009). *Teaching today; An introduction to education* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). New Jersey, NJ: Pearson.
- Arthur L., Beecher B., Death E., Dockett S. & Farmer S. (2012). *Programming & planning in early childhood settings* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Australia. Cengage Learning.
- Chu, M. (2012). Observe, reflect, and apply: Ways to successfully mentor early childhood educators. *Dimensions Of Early Childhood, 40*(3), 20-28.
- Doan, L. K. (2013). Mentoring: A strategy to support novice early childhood educators. *Canadian Children, 38*(2), 21-24.
- Efron, E., Winter, J. S., & Bressman, S. (2012). Toward a more effective mentoring model: An innovative program of collaboration. *Journal Of Jewish Education, 78*(4), 331-361.
- Harris, M. (2009). Implementing portfolio assessment. *Young Children, 64*(3), 82-85.
- Jordan, I. (2014). Supporting teachers as learners. *Exchange (19460406), (218)*, 66-68.
- Kumar C. & En S.M. (2014). Channel NewsAsia. *New centre to provide training, mentoring for pre-school teachers*. Retrieved August 12, 2014 from <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/new-centre-to-provide/1308182.html>
- Lai-Yeung, S. (2011). Using student learning portfolios: Intended outcomes and additional benefits. *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal, 5*(2), 1-5.

Lien Foundation. (2012). Call for a vital changes to improve preschool education in Singapore. *Vital voices for vital years-Lien Foundation*.

Seitz, H., & Bartholomew, C. (2008). Powerful portfolios for young children. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 36(1), 63-68.

Whitebook, M., & Bellm, D. (2014). Mentors as teachers, learners, and leaders. *Exchange (19460406)*, (218), 14-18.

If you are interested in this research and the Novice Teacher's Guidebook: Developing Children's Portfolios, you may contact the researcher at: Evelyn Ke: [evelyn\\_ke@hotmail.com](mailto:evelyn_ke@hotmail.com)

## Interview Questions

### Set 1- For Teacher-Participants

1. How do you find your current work situation? Have you started preparing the children's portfolios?
2. What difficulty(s) do you encounter in developing the children's portfolio?
3. Have you been a mentee before? If yes, how was the mentoring experience? If no, do you think you could have handled work related issues better if you have had a mentor before?
4. What kind of support do you anticipate from a mentor with regards to developing portfolios?

### Set 2- For Principal

1. How do you find the portfolios developed by the two novice teachers?
2. Are they developing and doing according to what the centre and you expect?
3. What are the centre and your expectations for a child's portfolio?
4. Any room for improvement?

### Set 3- For Principal

1. What do you think about the contents of the guidebook?
2. Do you think that this guidebook will be useful to the teacher-participants? Why?
3. Any other content(s) which you feel is missing?
4. What are your views on mentoring? Do you think that it is important?
5. What kind of support do you anticipate from a mentor to mentee?

### Set 4- For Teacher-Participants

1. What do you think of the portfolios created by you this time?
2. Which changes did you like best? Why?
3. Do you think mentoring is important for novice teachers? Why?
4. Would you encourage the use of this guidebook to other novice teachers? Why?

### Set 5- For Principal

1. What do you think of the portfolios created by the two teacher participants this time?
2. What changes is evident to you from the portfolios created by the two teacher participants this time?
3. Which changes did you like best? Why?
4. Would you encourage the use of this guidebook to novice teachers? Why?

## Reflection Journals

### Pointers for Researcher's journal- 1

1. After interviewing the Principal
2. After interviewing Teacher Participant 1
3. After interviewing Teacher Participant 2
4. Reflecting on responses to the research

### Pointers for Teacher-Participants' journal- 2

1. What did I learn from the guidebook?
2. What are some of the difficulty(s) which I am facing now?
3. Will the guidebook be useful to help me tackle the difficulty(s)? Why?
4. Short-term implications
5. Long-term implications
6. Was the mentor helpful in explaining the guide? How?

### Pointers for Researcher's journal- 3

1. After interviewing the Principal
2. After reading the reflection log of Teacher Participant 1 and seeing the work sample
3. After reading the reflection log of Teacher Participant 2 and seeing the work sample
4. Reflecting on responses to the research

### Pointers for Teacher-Participants' journal- 4

1. Was the guidebook helpful in helping me develop the children's portfolios? How?
2. Any other difficulty(s) I am facing now?
3. If yes, did the guidebook help me overcome them? How?
4. Was the mentor supportive? How?
5. Any other support which I require from her?

### Pointers for Researcher's journal- 5

1. After reading the reflection log of Teacher Participant 1 and seeing the work samples
2. After reading the reflection log of Teacher Participant 2 and seeing the work samples
3. Reflecting on responses to the research

### Pointers for Researcher's journal- 6

1. After interviewing the Principal
2. After interviewing Teacher Participant 1 and seeing the work samples
3. After interviewing Teacher Participant 2 and seeing the work samples
4. Reflecting on responses to the research

# Family Involvement in Mathematical Games Can Help to Enhance Children's Numeracy Skills

Wong Lee Na

Advanced Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education – Leadership  
Ngee Ann Polytechnic

## Introduction

I am Head of Mathematics in my school and I specialise in Elementary education. I work closely with my colleagues, monitor their classroom teaching, share subject expertise, and also coordinate their work with the high school. My school promotes a conducive environment for parents to be part of the life of the school. In our community, parents are very involved in their children's learning; when I conduct mathematics sharing workshops, they are well attended by parents.

Parents with children in the Early Years level often put in requests to the school that they would like to learn more about Early Years mathematical skills and concepts. They want to learn ways to help their children develop these skills and concepts at home. My Grade 1 team had also expressed their concerns about some children who could not recognise numerals, perform one-to-one correspondence and do simple addition, they were asking for support to the Early Years team. Hence, I gave it some thought and it resulted in this action research project. This paper presents an action research project about how family involvement in mathematical games enhances children's numeracy skills.

## Literature Review

In the sociocultural view, learning and development are seen as a result of social interaction by Lev Vygotsky (Eggen & Kauchak, 2007). In the process of appropriation, adults

facilitate learning, provide feedback and their interactions with children allow the exchange of information and reaffirm children's ideas (Rogoff, 2003, cited in Eggen & Kauchak, 2007). Therefore, it is important for parents to be engaged in their children's learning and to reap the innumerable benefits from being involved. The complementary roles played by both families and the teacher help to support school readiness, children's development and later academic success (Snow, 2014). A few literature reviews will be examined to show how family engagement, such as playing mathematical games at home, help to enhance children's numeracy skills.

Numeracy skills *"involves knowing and using mathematical concepts, skills and processes in ways such that relationships and connections are formed and to apply them meaningfully in daily experiences"* (Ministry of Education, 2012, pg. 93). As pre-school educators, we plan numeracy activities that build on children's prior knowledge which allows them to make connections and meaning between what they can do and what we want them to learn.

For this research, numeracy skills are defined as a child's general understanding of numbers such as the understanding of one-to-one correspondence and recognising numerals 1 to 20. It is about handling daily life situations that include numbers (Yeo, 2014) and this experience is authentic and concrete. According to Fuson (1992), cited from Yeo (2014), research has shown that children can develop their own strategies for

arithmetic skills and explore number relationships which help to develop numeracy skills. Hence, there should be an emphasis on learning through the use of concrete materials for young children.

Jerome Bruner, cited from Edge (2006), viewed learning as an active process in which learners construct new ideas and acquire full conceptual understanding through three stages. Firstly, in the enactive stage, concrete material or manipulatives should be provided for children to make meaning of their learning. Next, with some conceptual understanding, they will progress to the iconic stage of representation in which they represent the situation or problem mentally or graphically. Lastly, when they have acquired a good understanding of mathematical concepts, children use symbols to represent situations and to problem solve in the symbolic stage. Zoltan Dienes, cited from Edge (2006), also discussed the importance of having multiple representations of the concept with different types of material to develop children's relational understanding. His *"Principle of Multiple Embodiment states that whenever we are using concrete materials to develop relational understanding we must use more than one material to exemplify the concept"* (Edge, 2006, pg. 38). Hence, the reinforcement of numeracy skills could be further enhanced with family involvement. For instance, a teacher could use counters to teach number bonds within 5; this skill could be reinforced with suitable games at home using other manipulatives for them to make relational understanding.

Extensive research has shown that parental involvement is essential and important to the educational success of children. Some of the benefits for children's successes include better grades and attendance, quality homework produced and more positive learning attitudes and behaviour. For families,

they experience a better self-efficacy of themselves as parents when they are valued by the teachers and the school. This in turn will lead to an increased level of engagement in their children's education, thereby furthering their children's achievement in school. For teachers and schools, the involvement of families will fuel a culture of energy and build good relationships. These help to improve the quality of educational opportunities and experiences that are offered to children (Driscoll & Nagel, 2006 – 2012).

A research article, "Parental involvement in mathematics education in a Canadian elementary school" by Freda Rockliffe (2001), examined the factors influencing parental participation in their children's mathematical learning. The analysis from the parents' responses was that some parents loved and enjoyed mathematics when they were younger and because they had support from their families, they would like to extend this support to their children. Other parents who did not excel in mathematics or had bad experiences avoided the subject as much as they could. From the findings, regardless of parents' skills and abilities in mathematics, it was interesting to find that all parents viewed mathematics as a very important subject. They wanted their children to have a good foundation in numeracy in their early years, so they would try to teach mathematical skills and concepts to their pre-school aged children. With this belief and expectation from parents, it was important for schools and teachers to recognise it and work collaboratively with parents to develop children's numeracy skills using mathematical games at home.

Many board games for pre-schoolers, such as "Sum Swamp" and "Snake and Ladder", involve either counting or identifying numbers. These mathematical skills could be reinforced when families played these board

games at home. Furthermore, when the family plays games with children, they help children to build their character and develop virtues such as patience, resilience, integrity and honesty. During the game, one must learn the associated social skills such as turn-taking, dealing with winning and losing and following the rules of the games (Family Education, 2000 – 2014). These are important life lessons for the children and teaching moments for the parents. Hence, there are both academic and social advantages when families play mathematical games with their children.

### Baseline Data and Findings

For my Action Research, I decided to conduct it with a Prep 1, Kindergarten 1 class, their teacher and parents were very

supportive and keen in helping to extend the children’s numeracy skills. 10 copies of consent forms were passed to the Class Teacher who helped me to choose 5 participants. Out of the 10 parents who were chosen, 6 parents replied with interest and enthusiasm. However, only 4 parents were able to meet with me. My baseline data sources were 4 parents and their children, the Class Teacher and Teaching Partner and myself.

A triangulation of methods [observation, survey questionnaire and unstructured interviews] was adopted to gather information on the children’s learning. The depth and accuracy of the research was increased when the use of several methods was employed in Action Research (Woods, 2006).

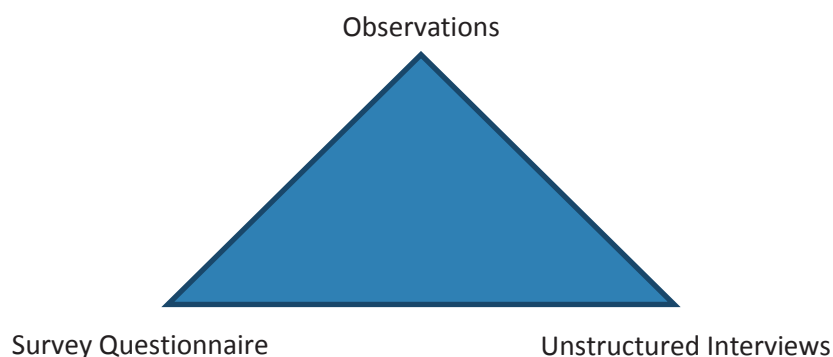


Diagram 1: Triangulation of methods

### Information was gathered through

- Observation of the children by using field notes, to read their responses and abilities towards mathematics.
- Unstructured interviews were done with parents, Class Teacher and Teaching Partner.
- Parents’ survey questionnaires were collected.

### Key findings

1. Children were not engaged when they were doing their mathematics activity

book. Two out of the four participants kept asking to leave the mathematics learning corner; 3 out of 4 children could not identify numbers 11 to 20 well; 2 children’s abilities in performing one-to-one counting were not consistent.

2. Teachers commented that most children did not enjoy working on their Activity Book. Most children were able to recognise numbers 1 to 10 most of the time but they faced some challenges recognising numbers 11 to 20. See Diagram 2 below:

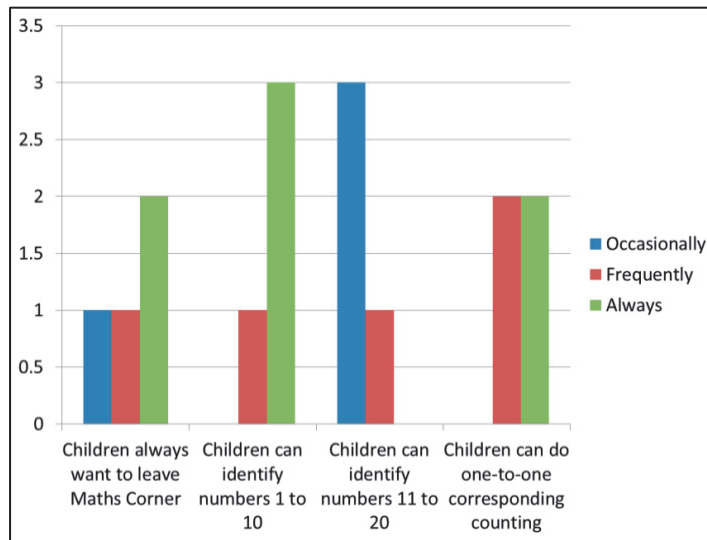


Diagram 2: Teachers' unstructured interview responses

3. From the survey questionnaire, all parents believed that their children could always or frequently identify numbers 1 to 20 and all of them would like to help their

children in acquiring numeracy skills. Parents' responses were tabulated in the following table:

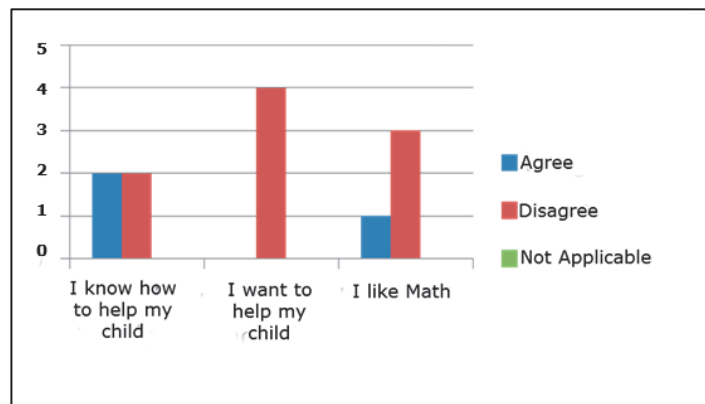


Diagram 3: Parents' Questionnaire Survey

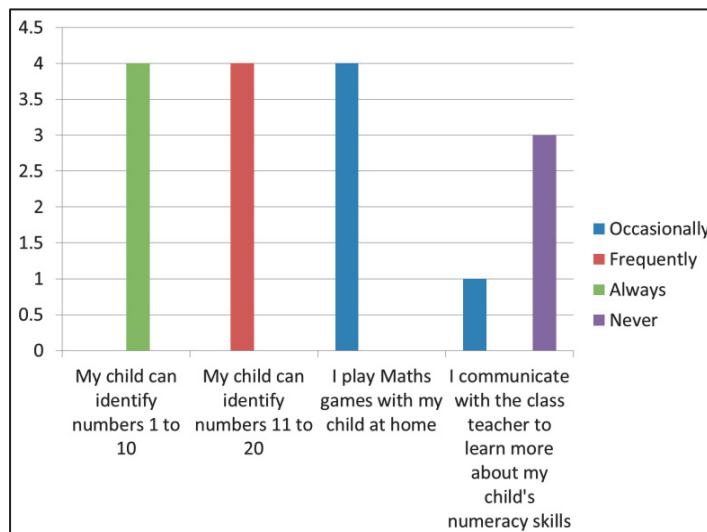


Diagram 4: Parents' Questionnaire Survey

From the unstructured interviews with teachers and the parents' questionnaire survey, it was interesting to note that teachers' perception of the children's ability to recognise numbers 11 to 20 was contrastingly different from the parents' observation and beliefs. Therefore, I wanted to address the following questions:

- How could I help parents recognise their children's mathematical skills and abilities; such as identifying numbers 11 to 20, through the use of mathematical games?
- What mathematical games could be offered to parents that would help to engage the children and thereby enhance their numeracy skills?

#### Action Plan

To empower parents with some skills and knowledge on how they could support their children's mathematical learning, I developed an action plan that involved the following strategies:

- Finding and making interesting mathematical games that helped to develop children's numeracy skills.
- Conducting a sharing workshop for the parents.

A research to find appropriate games that were interesting and beneficial in developing children's numeracy skills was undertaken. Not wanting to run into problems where some families may or may not have certain concrete manipulatives such as Lego bricks or counters, I decided to create a range of mathematical games from which the parents or the children could choose. The games included:

- Lollipop Trail board game
- Roller Coaster board game
- Enchanted Unicorn board game
- Matching cards
- Caterpillar cards
- Number cards

- Bouncing Ball



Diagram 5: Mathematical Games

Out of the 7 games I prepared, 3 were board games which encouraged the development of one-to-one correspondence in counting and performing basic addition with the use of 2 dices. Another 3 were card games which encouraged identifying numbers 1 to 20, number patterns and matching. 1 game was more physical, the parent could play a math game using a ball. For this game, the parent would ask the child "What number comes after 11?", then he/she would bounce the ball to the child, the child had to give the answer as he/she caught the ball. With the games prepared, I had a workshop with the parents.

During the sharing workshop, a handout was distributed to parents; it contained information about how children learn through play, the numeracy continuum and the definition of numeracy skills for my action research. Parents were also informed of the learning objective of this project and how the various games were played. They were encouraged to play various mathematical games at least thrice a week, each session lasting about 10 to 15 minutes and they were to record the games played, the dates and the duration. They were given two weeks, from 30 October 2014 to 13 November 2014, for them to engage their children in the games. They

would then meet us again two weeks later. Parents left the workshop feeling happy and enthusiastic. From the baseline data, parents were supportive in helping their children to acquire numeracy skills but needed some guidance. Hence, this workshop highlighted to them the important numeracy continuum and how the mathematical games act as a resource tool kit for them to engage their children in their numeracy development.

### Post Action Data, Findings and Analysis

Similarly, a triangulation of methods (observation, survey questionnaire and unstructured interviews) was adopted to gather information about the children’s learning after the introduction of games in the families. The methods used were the same as that of the baseline data findings, this helped to add depth and consistency in my research.

### Key findings

1. 3 out of 4 children were observed staying at the mathematics learning corner for a longer period of time. They were better engaged as their attention span seemed to have improved. A new observation was also made, the children were seen to be communicating mathematical ideas, such as “15 is 1 more than 14” and “I have 3 more blocks than you”, more frequently during their play.
2. From the unstructured interviews with the teachers, they revealed that most children had made improvements in their numeracy skills.

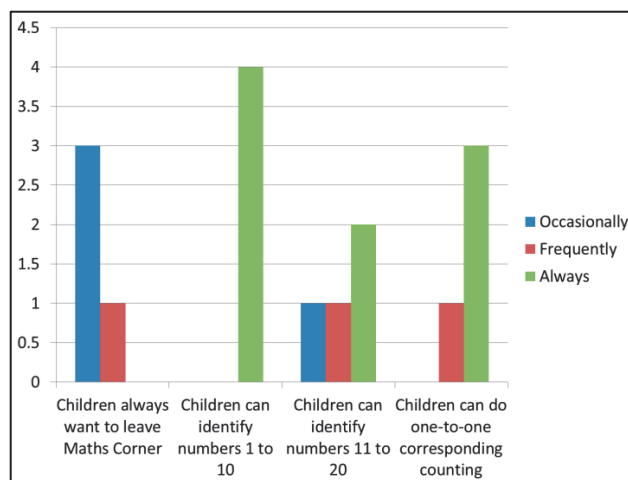


Diagram 6: Teachers’ unstructured interview responses

Comparison of baseline data and post action data revealed these keys findings:

- 100% of the children were able to identify numbers 1 to 10. A good progress of 50% made prior to the implementation of the action plan. Refer to Diagrams 7 and 8.

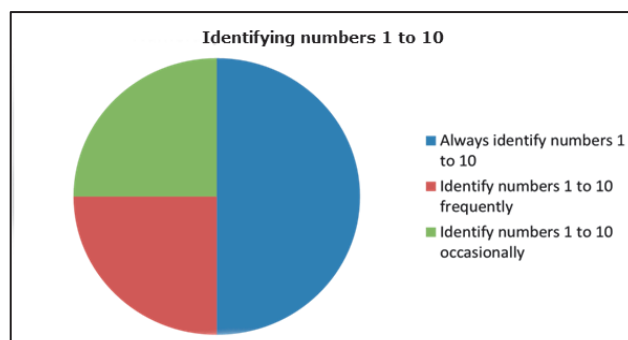


Diagram 7: Baseline data of children’s numeracy skill made by the teachers

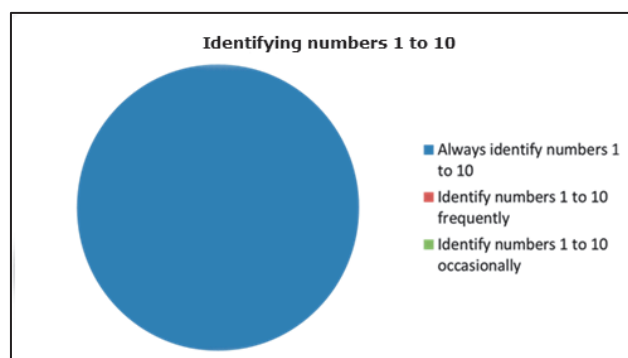


Diagram 8: Post action data of children’s numeracy skill made by the teachers

- 25% of the children were able to identify numbers 11 to 20 while 50% of them always recognised the numbers. There was an improvement of 50% for always

identifying the numbers prior to the implementation of the action plan. Refer to Diagrams 9 and 10.

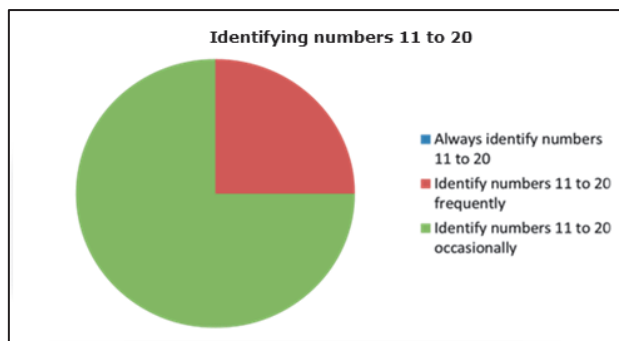


Diagram 9: Baseline data of children’s numeracy skill made by teachers

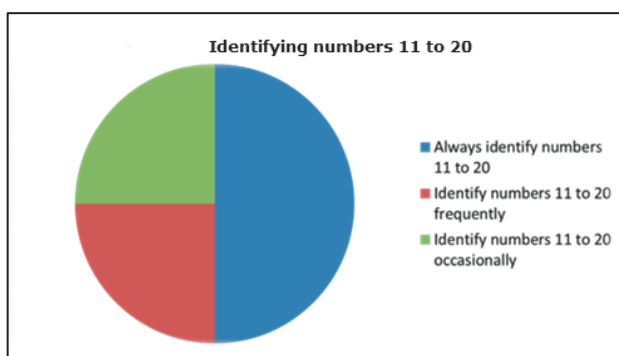


Diagram 10: Post action data of children’s numeracy skill made by the teachers

From the unstructured interviews with the parents, it was interesting to learn that 50% of the children had enjoyed the games and they were both girls. Girl A had liked the game so much that she took pride in playing with her young sister, explaining to her the mathematical concepts of counting. Mother A thought that her girl would not enjoy the games as she did not like the feeling of losing. However, in the various games, the girl assumed the role of a teacher and corrected her sister’s counting. She even tried to explain to her sister that there would be times when one may win or lose, almost mirroring what the mother had told her before. Mother A had also noticed that her skills in identifying numbers 1 to 20 and the number of dots on the dice improved. She was a lot faster. This

result was consistent with my observation made in class and from the teachers’ comments.

Girl B had good mathematical skills and abilities prior to the implementation of the action plan. So it was no surprise to Mother B that there was no noticeable progress in her numeracy skills. However, the games did reveal to both parents that she had some challenges in pronouncing the words for numbers 13, 14 or 15. When asked what number was 1 bigger than 12, she would reply 30 but she picked the correct numeral card 13. After a few rounds of matching games, both parents concluded that she needed some help in enunciating clearly the numbers ending with the syllable “teen”. Hence, they both encouraged her to say the numbers

again whenever she made a mistake. They also tried to play the games involving numbers 13 to 19 more frequently. During the interview, Mother B expressed that she was glad to have participated in this research as she became more aware her child's needs and was able to intervene and offer remediation almost immediately.

In contrast, the boys did not like the games at all especially when they lost. It infuriated them so much that they refused to play the games. Boy C played one of the games only once and for 20 minutes with his mother before refusing to play it again. Though he refused to play the games at home with his parents, it was interesting to note that Mother C found her child sharing in school what he had learnt, which was never communicated before. As Mother C knew that there was no chance to persuade her child to play the games again, she tried other ways to incorporate informal mathematics learning during meal times and these strategies were shared during my sharing workshop. In one example, Mother C asked the child, "How many more cookies do you need to have 10?" and he responded to it well. Though the planned numeracy skills were not achieved,

Mother C was still happy with the action plan as she had gained more knowledge about her child's learning and the various informal ways she could engage her child.

The response and reaction from Boy D was very contentious and negative as Mother D only managed to engage him in playing the games for 5 minutes. He detested the games and refused to engage in any mathematical games at home. Mother D suggested that more physical games should be shared in order to engage boys in their learning. She revealed that boys tended to be highly active at this age and it would be a challenge to engage them with board or card games. Furthermore, she felt that the selected games were biased towards girls. As a result, she was not very pleased with the action plan and found it ineffective in helping her child.

From the post action survey questionnaire, all parents became more involved in their children's learning at school; they revealed that they came to know how to help their children in acquiring numeracy skills. There was also progress shown in most children in terms of identifying numbers 11 to 20. Refer to Diagram 11.

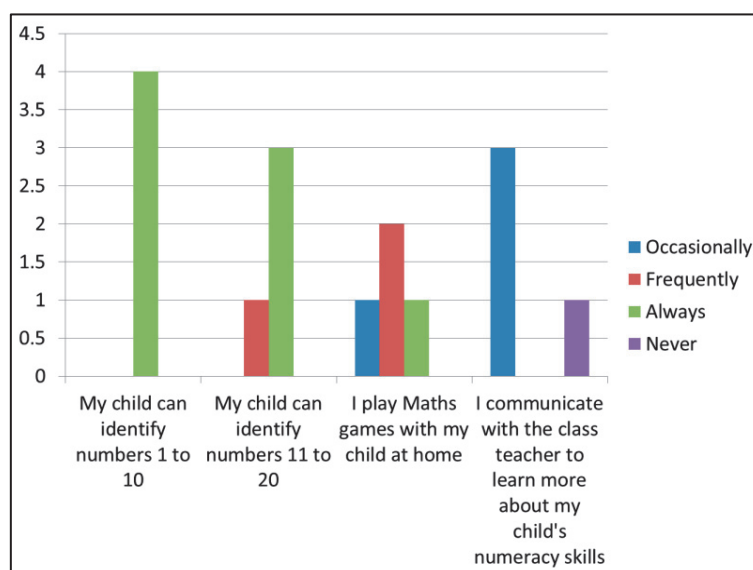


Diagram 11: Post action data- Parents' Questionnaire Survey

**Comparison of baseline data and post action data**

**- Key findings**

- 75% of the parents felt that their children could always identify numbers 11 to 20. This was a 75% improvement compared to the baseline data, then 100% of the

parents felt that their children could identify the numbers frequently. These findings were further supported by the teachers' comments and observations.

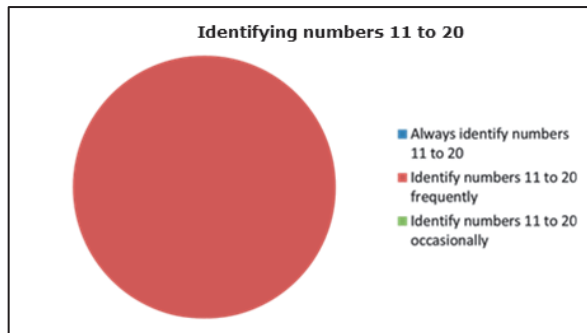


Diagram 12: Baseline data of children's numeracy skill made by the parents

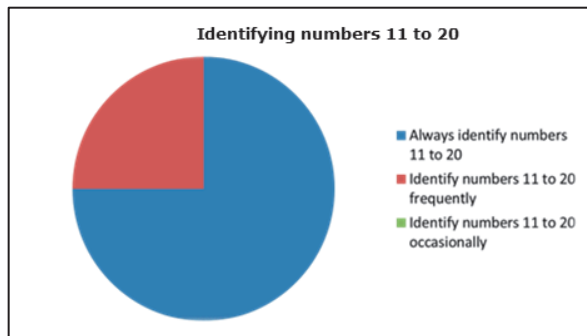


Diagram 13: Post action data of children's numeracy skill made by the parents

- 75% of the parents now attempt to communicate with the class teacher to find out more about their children's

learning. This was an improvement of 50%.

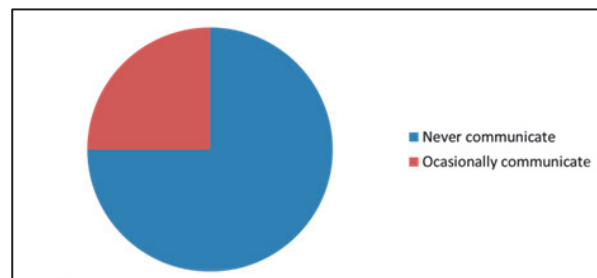


Diagram 14: Baseline data of parents' communication with the teacher

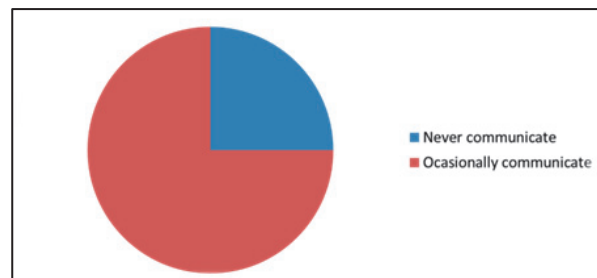


Diagram 15: Post action data of parents' communication with the teacher

- There was an improvement of 75% where parents either always or frequently played games with their children. This positive finding correlates highly with my school's culture where we encourage a collaborative partnership with parents and all stakeholders. *"We believe parental involvement is essential to every child's success at school and we hope parents will contribute to and enjoy the dynamic and vibrant school community here at SJIIES"* (SJI International Elementary School, 2014)

### Discussion

My findings supported my research question that family engagement such as playing mathematical games at home helped to enhance children's numeracy skills. It was evident that children's numeracy skills, such as identifying numbers from 1 to 20 and one-to-one correspondence and counting, improved. With social interactions between children and parents, children's understandings were reinforced when parents reaffirmed them through games or conversations. Therefore, children's learning was extended when supported by parents' involvement.

My planned action was effective, to as much as 75% of children showing some or great improvement in their numeracy. This was highly evident in the findings for both girls. Unstructured interviews with teachers and parents and the questionnaire survey reaffirmed the success of my action plan for them. However, it was not very successful for the boys. Both mothers had commented that the boys hated to lose in games and that they generally found the games boring. Their feedback was completely different from the girls' mothers. It made me ponder about gender differences and how it can affect

outcome. This led me further into research on gender differences in education.

From research, there is an increasing recognition that males and females think, communicate and behave differently. *"In play, girls gravitate toward activities with a social component, such as verbally interactive play with others"* (Eggen & Kauchak, 2007, pg. 117). Girls were also more compliant than boys towards adult and peer instruction or request (Berk, 2003). They were more collaborative and this suggested the key reason why both girls enjoyed the games with their families a lot more. Boys, on the other hand, were more orientated towards visual and physical activities. They tended to interrupt more frequently and showed their feelings when unhappy. This further reinforced knowledge of the different brain developments between the two genders. The corpus callosum is much bigger in females than in males and the left cortex develops slower in males than in females (Education Scotland). Thus, boys develop formal language at a slower pace and this could explain their frustration towards collaborative play.

It was important to include the stakeholders in the children's community as this would help to enhance the quality of their education in school. Choosing and collaborating with supportive parents contributed to the success of my action research. Their interaction, through speech or games, helped to enhance and reinforce children's mathematical skills and concepts learnt at school. In doing so, it also encouraged parents to be more involved in their children's learning as they began to show more initiative in approaching the class teacher to find out more about their children's progress. Furthermore, this research also created some awareness in parents about their child's strengths and weaknesses, academically and socially.

The main challenge I had encountered in this research was time, such as, finding time outside of my own timetable (of the upper elementary level) to go into the kindergarten class, to spend time there to observe or work with the children and the teachers; scheduling meetings with parents; and even in implementing my action plan and analysing my post action data within a very short timeframe. I believed that this action research project would have been more effective if I had taught and known the children personally so that the games and activities I planned could be tailored more specifically to meet their developmental needs. Despite these challenges, I was very pleased that it went well with the help and support from the parents, my school and my colleagues.

### Reflection

In conducting the Mathematics workshops for both staff and colleagues, it provided me the platform to do extensive research on Singapore Mathematics Curriculum, which includes the teaching pedagogy and children's learning continuum. This invaluable knowledge has helped me to evaluate the types of information that I could share with parents, as well as selecting appropriate mathematical games that enhance the development of children's numeracy skills.

Through this action research, I learnt more about the processes and development of a research. Additionally, I began to understand how self-reflection is related to theory and practice. It helped to develop my professionalism, my knowledge of teaching and learning deepened, for instance, the research in gender issues enlightened me and helped me to make better educational plans in helping children realise their potential. In my future action plans for my school, for learning numeracy, I would choose activities that are more active and engaging, using Lego

bricks, balls and those requiring gross motor actions. Activities or games where boys sit for long periods of time should be avoided. Instructions must also be clear and concise.

Through games where they have opportunities to practise their skills, children learn to develop and reinforce knowledge and concepts. It is a tool for structuring experiences to meet their developmental needs and is also a formative assessment tool which allows teachers and parents to identify their strengths or weaknesses, academically and socially (Baroody & Wilkins). This action research reminded me that children are active learners who readily construct their own knowledge. While some did not enjoy waiting passively for their parents to play the games, Boy C engaged his mother with other mathematical discussions. Imposing knowledge on children may lead to a negative disposition towards mathematics and I was glad that the boys' parents did not insist on playing the games with them (Baroody & Wilkins). When given the right tools and resources, they were able to explore their own learning and understanding. It was also important for educators to listen to the children as their questions or conversations do give a good indication of what materials or experiences could be provided for them. This has helped me to relate to my learning of the "Emergent Curriculum". Instead of having structured activities planned for them, I could have used everyday situations to create fun and meaningful experiences for them, for example, family activities could include story telling involving numeracy, shopping in the supermarket or cooking; these are activities which provide rich and interesting mathematical context.

Finally, the preparation, guidance and consultations with various tutors helped me to carry out this action research successfully. The tutors made a consistent effort to revisit previous learning goals and emphasise the

importance of linking our actions back to our research question, which reinforced the importance of careful planning and scaffolding by the teachers. As educators, it was crucial for us to break down the steps so that our learners would find the learning goals achievable.

### Conclusion

In this action research project, family involvement in mathematical games helped to enhance children's numeracy skills. It was found that children were active learners who constructed meaning in their learning through their interactions with people around them. Numeracy skills could be reinforced further and developed through the use of games at home. My findings highlighted to me the importance of considering other factors such as gender differences and in turn, this would play a more active role in future educational planning. Furthermore, I have gained knowledge that I needed to include more hands-on activities when I conduct workshops for parents. I would recommend that families include informal mathematical activities such as board games, counting while preparing for dinner plating and a trip to the supermarket. What could have been improved for this research was to include more parents as the data gathered from the 4 participants may not be representative. More time could also have been taken into consideration. As an extension of this research, I would like to delve deeper into gender differences and then consider integrating my knowledge from these two researches to devise strategies and games that could help develop the numeracy skills of both genders.

### References

Baroody, A. & Wilkins, J. L. The Development of Informal Counting, Number, and

- Arithmetic Skills and Concepts. Retrieved from [www.soe.vt.edu/tandl/pdf/Wilkins/Book\\_Chapter\\_Wilkins\\_The\\_development\\_of\\_informal\\_counting.pdf](http://www.soe.vt.edu/tandl/pdf/Wilkins/Book_Chapter_Wilkins_The_development_of_informal_counting.pdf)
- Berk, L. E. (2003). *Child Development* 6<sup>th</sup> edition. U.S.A.: Pearson Education Inc.
- Driscoll, A. & Nagel, N. G. (2006 – 2012). Importance of Early Childhood Education: Family Involvement. Retrieved from [www.education.com/reference/article/research-family-involvement-early/](http://www.education.com/reference/article/research-family-involvement-early/)
- Edge, D. (2006). Teaching and Learning. In Lee, P. Y. (Eds), *Teaching Primary School Mathematics* (pg. 29 – 46). Singapore: McGraw Hill.
- Education Scotland. Research summary-gender in education. Retrieved from [www.journeytoexcellence.org.uk/resourcesandcpd/research/summaries/rsgenderineducation.asp](http://www.journeytoexcellence.org.uk/resourcesandcpd/research/summaries/rsgenderineducation.asp)
- Eggen, P. & Kauchak, D. (2007). *Educational Psychology. Windows on Classroom*. New Jersey. Pearson
- Family Education (2000 – 2014). The importance of Playing Games to your preschoolers. Retrieved from [life.familyeducation.com/play/toddler/53823.html](http://life.familyeducation.com/play/toddler/53823.html)
- Ministry of Education. (2012). *Nurturing Early Learners: A Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens in Singapore*. Singapore.
- Rockliffe, F. Parental involvement in mathematics education in a Canadian elementary school: A research article. Retrieved from [www.ernape.net/articles/2001/session3/Rockliffe.pdf](http://www.ernape.net/articles/2001/session3/Rockliffe.pdf)
- SJI International Elementary School (2001). How to get involved. Retrieved from [www.sji-international.com.sg/page.cfm?p=409](http://www.sji-international.com.sg/page.cfm?p=409)
- Snow, K. (2014). Research News You Can Use: Family Engagement and Early Childhood Education. Retrieved from [www.naeyc.org/content/research-news-family-engagement](http://www.naeyc.org/content/research-news-family-engagement)

Woods, P. (2006). Qualitative Research. A research article. Retrieved from [www.edu.plymouth.ac.uk/resined/Qualitative%20methods%202/qualrshm.htm#Triangulation](http://www.edu.plymouth.ac.uk/resined/Qualitative%20methods%202/qualrshm.htm#Triangulation)

Yeo, K. K. J. (2014). Making Sense of Number Sense: Creating Learning Experiences for

Primary Pupils to Develop their Number Sense. In Toh, P. C., Toh, T. L. & Kaur, B. (Eds), Learning Experiences To Promote Mathematics Learning (pg. 153 – 170). Singapore. World Scientific Printer.

If you are interested to know more about this action research, write to the author Wong Lee Na at [joyous\\_love\\_you@hotmail.com](mailto:joyous_love_you@hotmail.com).

## Blue Horses and Morning Glory: Enhancing Children’s Learning Through Picture Books and Art-Making

Sua Swee Lee, Nurul Izzah  
Healthy Start Child Development Centre

### Introduction to our Innovation Project

Our centre has been undergoing a review of its programme in order to move towards the development of curriculum that is more teacher-designed, child-led and emergent; a curriculum that is informed by teachers’ careful observation and interpretation of children’s strengths and progress. It was timely, therefore, to embark on an innovation project for our K1 and K2 children as part of our efforts to strengthen teachers’ child observation and reflective planning skills. We were pleased to be able to partner artists (Cindy and Sumi) from Playeum so as to focus on promoting children’s learning through the use of stories in high quality picture books and a variety of media for art-making. Together, we all shared this belief: that the ability to make art is a uniquely human characteristic which throughout human civilization, is as ubiquitous as play; and art-making is simply about turning ordinary things into extraordinarily special creations (Dissanayake, 2003). For young children, we believe the arts fosters cognitive growth, promotes literacy, develops confidence, supports individual well-being as well as community building (Eisner, 2002; Koster, 2009; Rinaldi, 1993). Similarly, we chose to focus on stories in this project because stories are an essential part of human culture and stories have historically helped us learn about ourselves and about our world, even before the invention of the written word.

During each week of our project, the artists first introduced a picture book and an

accompanying art medium or art technique to the children and teachers. For the remaining week, the teachers would build on this introductory learning experience, reflect on their observations of the children, and plan for subsequent learning experiences so that the children deepen their understanding of the picture book’s illustrations and story, the artistic medium, and/or art-making technique. Planning was thus, an ongoing and daily process based on the teachers’ observations and interpretations of the children’s progress and interests. Other than helping the children develop an appreciation for stories, art and art-making, the teachers were also constantly thinking of ways to help children become more observant and confident in verbalising their ideas and thoughts in the English language.

By the end of the project, the children and teachers had explored picture books by Eric Carle, Leo Lionni, Nick Sharratt and Margaret Wild, created multiple collage styles, accordion books, wire sculptures, clay figurines, and a communal canvas with ball painting. The project made us realise that we may have been too “safe” in our past art explorations with the children, perhaps not bold or knowledgeable enough to work with unfamiliar medium such as thin wire, different kinds of clay and the integration of physical movement and art-making. We also found it extremely valuable for children to be able to work continuously or repeatedly over a week or more (if necessary) to create and build their stories, and to experiment in-depth

when working with the same or similar art technique or media.

All throughout the project, the Playeum artists remained as resource persons, co-planners and collaborators with whom the teachers shared observations and feedback. About two months before the project started, we exchanged ideas and planned for the classroom space to be improved (within its given constraints) so that the children would better-develop independence and a sense of ownership and belonging (Koster, 2009).

### Goals for the Children and for Ourselves

The children in our centre come from homes that have little connection to museums and art galleries, and many have atypical families challenged by economic disadvantage. One year, we had the opportunity to visit the Singapore Art Museum for its children's season exhibition but the field trip turned out to be disappointing. Many of our children were not engaged when the museum guide tried to explain about the artwork that was on display and even the interactive works did not capture much of their attention. The visit puzzled us initially but we realised upon reflection that it was not enough to just take the children to an art museum, they needed more art experience and scaffolding *prior* to such a trip. They needed to engage with art (i.e., to look, listen, talk about, and imagine) and be actively involved in art-making as a way of learning and knowing about our world.

At the same time, as teachers, we knew that we needed to improve our skill as facilitators in supporting the children's observation and talk about pictures and art elements; and we needed to expand our own knowledge of art techniques and explore a wider range of art-making media.

Within the limits of this article, we have chosen to share a few pertinent observations

of individual children's learning and progress during the project. In so doing, this article also presents some aha moments in our learning journey with the children.

## Teachers' Observations of Individual Children

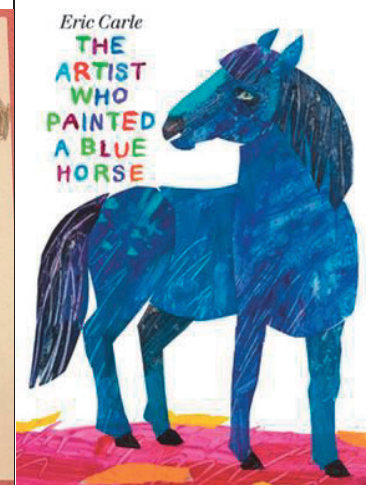
### 1. Taufiqillah

On one of the days while we were still focusing on the same Eric Carle story, Taufiqillah picked up the book and flipped through the pages during his free time. Watching from a distance, I was pleasantly surprised to see him absorbed in looking through the book. A little later, I went up to him and saw that he was imitating the picture of the blue horse on the front cover of the book. His drawing resembled the book cover and yet it was his original interpretation of a blue body with dark brown mane, tail and hooves. He had also intentionally copied just the book title without the author's name.

Fig. 1 Taufiqillah's drawing of the blue horse



Fig. 2 The front cover of the book



I have known Taufiqillah since he was three years old and knew that he was capable of being a self-motivated learner, but I had not seen him so immersed in a drawing activity before. Without any adult instruction, he had made the decision autonomously. Even though he could not complete his drawing in

one sitting (due to the limited free time), he persevered to finish it in two. We provided the flexibility and time for him to pursue his personal project.

## 2. Qamillia

As I was not present for the artist-led session the previous day, Qamillia patiently talked me through the materials and tools needed for making the clay figurines. She explained the need to have water readily available to stick the clay pieces together when forming parts of the body. As I worked on my clay figurine, I dipped a strip of clay into the water. She quickly told me without hesitation that we were not supposed to dip the clay in the water. She then explained calmly that the clay could melt and advised us to dip our little finger in the water to join the parts. She had remembered and understood the artist's instructions well. Not only did she guide me in the process, she calmly guided peers at her table and was encouraging and reassuring.

When she was done helping her peers, she sat down and worked on her own clay creation. As I observed her at work, I knew she had developed a really good understanding of clay as a medium and she showed mastery in using the various sculpting tools to create lines and textures. This observation reminded me of how the visual arts can create community by inviting children to work and learn together – talking about ideas, sharing materials and space, working together, accepting and respecting one another (Kindler, 1996; Kolbe, 2007; Koster, 2009). This activity helped me to see the importance of subtly balancing between the need to provide children with necessary skill and know-how in art-making, and encouraging individual expression and creativity without imposing our teacher-ly ideas (McArdle & Piscitelli, 2002).

Fig. 3 Asking her friend to dip her little finger into water



Fig. 4 Using sculpting tools to create a textured surface



## 3. Irwan

Towards the end of our project, we took the children to the Centre of Contemporary Art in Gillman Barracks. There was an exhibition of sculptures, including a “Morning Glory” shipped from the Guggenheim Museum in New York City and created by a Cambodian-born artist, Sopheap Pich. Prior to our trip, Cindy and Sumi told a story about the artist and showed the children a series of slides containing pictures of other exhibits that they would be encountering at the gallery. They urged the children to look out for the main exhibit called the “Morning Glory,” made of woven rattan and bamboo, and helped the children make some connection to the *kang*

*kong* vegetable. I realised then that the slide presentation was important in preparing the children for what to expect. On our bus ride to the gallery, I sat next to Irwan and throughout the journey, he told me that he was so excited about the field trip and was looking forward to seeing the “sharp bed” and the “magical chair” sculptures. He mentioned that the chair looked huge compared to a normal chair and he would like to see it with his own eyes.

Once we arrived at the gallery, the artists distributed clipboards to encourage the children to draw and sketch anything that interested them. As the gallery space was not very big, we entered the space in smaller groups at slightly staggered times, and agreed that the children could spend as much or as little time as they wanted at each exhibit.

As our main focus from this exhibition was Pich’s “Morning Glory,” my group of children sat around the giant sculpture but were free to move around it as they drew what they saw and they could draw more than one rendition of the artwork.

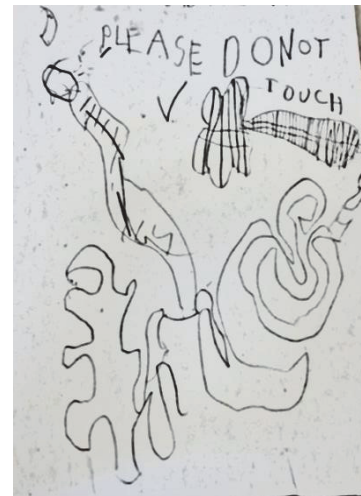


Fig. 5 Morning Glory Sculpture

Every child in my group, including Irwan, remained focused for at least ten whole minutes. This was remarkable because Irwan was usually unlikely to remain still for such a length of time. I was amazed to see each child give their fullest attention to a sculpture and be able to perceive the sculpture differently. Some children drew individual squares first to form the bigger picture. Others drew a

continuous criss-cross pattern on their paper. As for Irwan, he drew a long curly outline first, before adding the criss-cross pattern inside it.

Fig. 6 Child’s drawing of the sculpture along with the gallery’s “Please do not touch” sign



At one point during the visit, I wanted to walk past a huge painting of an aeroplane since we were focusing on sculptures for this field trip. However, I stopped in my tracks as I overheard a discussion between Irwan and Rebecca about the painting. They each had different ideas about what some of the lines in the painting represented. Rebecca thought the plane was flying over clouds and the black brush strokes on the clouds represented heavy rain. So, according to her, it was very dangerous for the plane to fly above these clouds. Irwan had a different idea. He argued that the plane was flying over the sea and that the huge brush strokes of black paint represented instead, the waves. He added that the waves were very big because the wind was very strong. Rebecca continued to disagree and she talked about the thin wavy strokes under the clouds which she interpreted as a mountain under the clouds. She even noticed a long, narrow and winding river appearing in between the mountains.

I witnessed how a painting could stimulate talk and imagination among children and the

incident reaffirmed my belief that art can indeed be a platform for children to become more articulate if they are consistently encouraged to express their feelings and ideas, and to back up their views with what they see (Koster, 2009; McArdle & Piscitelli, 2002; Yenawine, 2013). But I also reminded myself that the children had taken a few weeks to arrive where they were – they had needed time to sharpen their observation skills and to get used to talking about stories, possibilities, lines, shapes, colours and textures. It was really satisfying for me to see how Irwan and his friends had become more interested in looking at details in a picture, compared to when they first started with “The Artist Who Painted A Blue Horse.” It was a great joy to see them improve in their use of the English language to describe what they saw and thought.

#### 4. Louis

Like Irwan, Louis has also been known for his short attention span during seatwork and he usually takes a long time to complete a piece of drawing or writing. As a result, he often needed an adult to constantly remind him to stay on task until he finished his work. However, we witnessed a different Louis during a wire-sculpting activity after our visit

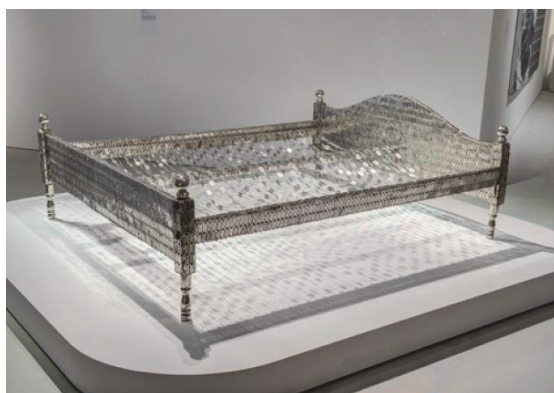
to the art gallery.

The artists had introduced the children to the use of malleable wires and pipe cleaners. Like several of the other children, Louis was really interested in a metal bed sculpture, more so than Pich’s “Morning Glory”, perhaps because the bed appeared shiny and attractive, and it was a more familiar object.

While referring to a picture of the bed sculpture, Louis was able to stay seated for a whole 20 minutes twisting and fixing the metal wires until he created his own little bed structure. It was clear to me that art activities that allow children to make their own decisions can help them become self-motivated learners who will grow to take responsibility for their own learning (Koster, 2009). Rather than asking for help from his teachers, Louis decided to set goals for himself and he was able to problem-solve during the art-making process. Since he was given the freedom and independence to create his own art work, he remained focused and motivated when working with the wires.

Such art-making opportunities have shown us that children can indeed learn about “cause and effect” when they explore with their hands and fingers ways to manipulate changes to an object (Kolbe, 2007; Koster, 2009). Louis tried multiple times to make his bed sculpture stable by making sure that the

Fig. 7 Bed Sculpture and a child’s interpretation of it



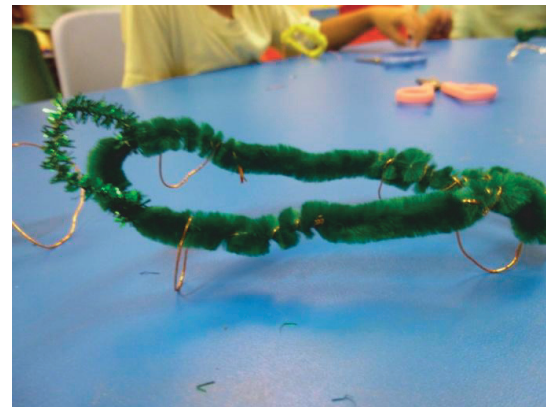
four legs were of equal length. He used scissors to cut off the metal wires and then measured them again. In the process, Louis showed us that he was able to reflect on his actions, able to persevere with his experimentation until he managed to create a stable bed structure that met his own expectations.

Upon completing his art work, Louis admired his creation up close and he looked very pleased with his accomplishment. What took me by surprise was that right after he had completed his task, he looked around the classroom to see if any of his friends needed help. This was an anecdote for the record books because Louis' friends used to always have to help him complete his work. Throughout the remaining time, Louis displayed real patience, confidence, clarity and leadership when coaching his peers who were struggling to use the thin wires in combination with the pipe cleaners.

Fig. 8 Twisting wires to form the bed sculpture



Fig. 9 Final product of child's bed sculpture



### Conclusion

This project has demonstrated to us the importance of *learning in action*, more than mere learning by doing (Hargreaves, 2004) and that social interactions, practice and experimentation have to be consistently encouraged in order for children (and ourselves as adult learners) to grow self-motivated, and to continually make sense of what they are learning, especially through the visual arts (Kindler, 1996; Kolbe, 2007). We have since shared our learnings with the rest of our colleagues and we will continue to create a culture of learning among our community of adults and children so that we can all find ways to best cater to each child's strengths and interests through an emergent curriculum that promotes multiple literacies and "languages" (Rinaldi, 1993).

### References

- Dissanayake, E. (2003). The core of art: Making special. *Journal of Canadian Association of Curriculum Studies*, 1(2), 13-38.
- Eisner, E. W. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind*. New Haven: Yale University.
- Hargreaves, D.H. (2004). *Learning for life: The foundations for lifelong learning*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Kindler, A. (1996). Myths, habits, research and policy: The four pillars of early childhood

- art education, *Arts Education Policy Review*, 97(4), 24-30.
- Kolbe, Ursula. (2007). *Rapunzel's Supermarket: All about art and young children* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Sydney NSW: Peppinot Press.
- Koster, J.B. (2009). *Growing artists: Teaching the art to young children* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- McArdle, F., and Piscitelli, B. (2002). Early childhood art education: A palimpsest. *Australian Art Education*, 25(1), 11-15.
- Rinaldi, C. (1993). The emergent curriculum and social constructivism. In Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini & George Forman (Eds.), *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Yenawine, P. (2013). *Visual thinking strategies: Using art to deepen learning across school disciplines*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

#### **About the authors**

**Healthy Start Child Development Centre** is a child care centre run by Beyond Social Services, catering exclusively to children and families with multiple needs and are supported by social workers. The centre advocates for the well-being of children and their families, and supports their integration into the larger community. Ms Sua Swee Lee is currently the principal, and has worked in the centre as a teacher since its inception eight years ago. She recently completed SIM University's part-time early childhood degree. Ms Nurul Izzah joined the centre three years ago after graduating from Ngee Ann polytechnic (Diploma in Early Childhood Education) and Wheelock College (B.Sc. in Early Childhood Education).

#### **To cite this article:**

Sua, S.L., and Nurul Izzah. (2015). Blue horses and morning glory: Enhancing children's learning through picture books and art-making. *Early Educators, Issue No. 25: June 2015*

## Children As Creators: An Urgent Need to Re-imagine and Re-define Play in Singapore

Sumitra Pasupathy, Jennifer Loh Nee Sian  
Playeum: Centre for Creativity and Culture

Sirene Lim  
SIM University

### The Child's Right to Play

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an agreement between countries on the rights of children (persons below 18). The Convention contains 54 "articles" detailing how countries should ensure children's survival, look out for their best interests, and engage children and youth in meaningful ways. As such, when a country becomes a signatory to the Convention, it promises its children access to minimum standards of healthcare, education, legal, protection, social services, and their right to participate as citizens in society.

Of relevance to this paper is the article declaring that every child has the right to leisure and play:

***States Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.***

***States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity. (Article 31)***

Singapore has been signatory to the UNCRC since October 1995 and the government has since submitted three reports to the UNCRC committee (MSF, 2014).

In 2008, Playeum commissioned Dr Barbara Piscitelli, Australian Medal of Honour and Champion for Children to conduct a base line study

to investigate the needs of children and parents in our local communities. The study with close to 200 participants confirmed there was still a lack of play and a lack of cultural experiences in children's lives. Instead, there was "concerted cultivation" among middle-class parents who prefer to put their children through structured learning activities (Lareau, 2011). In 2014, a group of final year undergraduate communications students at NTU found that young children in Singapore have 9 hours less of unstructured play per week than did their parents during their childhood at least 20 years ago.

Through this article, we invite early childhood professionals to pause and enter into a conversation with us about how we can all work together to create a Singapore that is both play-friendly and child-friendly.

### Different Kinds of Play

Play can take many forms. It spans a continuum that ranges from free play activities initiated by children to highly-structured and adult-led activities (Fleer, 2013; Lim, 2010; Ministry of Education, 2012). For instance, Singaporean children enjoy a range of adult-directed sports activities such as tennis or football, or they could initiate free play in our public playgrounds, and at home, they could be provided with educational toys or technological gadgets such as tablets and phones. Contemporary childhood in Singapore can offer children a gamut of play possibilities.

However, the idea of "unstructured free play"

(or “child-led play”) may need to be re-emphasised from time to time in our Singaporean culture because many adults think it is just pure fun with little learning involved. Even the Prime Minister has pointed out that tuition has become a “minor national obsession” with tuition (Lee, 2012). Tuition and enrichment activities are an example of how we structure children’s learning, and sometimes these could be fun music lessons or art lessons. But we know from research studying children’s perspectives that children will always have their own ideas about what constitutes real play and what constitutes work to be done for adults (Howard, Jenvey, & Hill, 2006; Wing, 1995). Some scholars have argued that contemporary childhood is overly structured by adults who may unknowingly hothouse their children and reduce opportunities for children’s healthy free and creative play (Elkind, 1981, 2007; Postman, 2011).

Playeum’s goal is to provide opportunities for Singaporean children to engage in free and creative play. Unstructured free play for children can take on many forms, including outdoor rough and tumble in natural environment and minimal playground fixtures,

child-designed games with rules, and symbolic and creative play with open-ended materials (e.g., pretend play). Vygotsky has advocated for pretend play to be a critical part of childhood because such imaginary role play encourage children to learn to be in control of objects and of themselves, engage with signs and symbols, to make decisions, to problem-solve, to collaborate with others, and to feel a lot bigger than they really are. Vygotsky explained that when a child can pretend that a broomstick is a horse, he or she is able to think abstractly and that is a huge mental leap forward (Bodrova & Leong, 2006). Only in the children’s self-directed and authentic play situations can this happen, albeit with the adult’s careful selection of materials and design of the learning environment. The child’s learning experience is just not the same when a teacher directly instructs, “Pretend this is a horse.” To support children’s growth within their individual *zone of proximal* development, adults must facilitate and intervene skillfully and sensitively (Bodrova & Leong, 2006; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012).



## Playing and Learning

Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) coined the phrase “playing learning child” to argue that there should be no separation between play and learning for young children. Lim (2010) proposed that we think of play and work (i.e. the task of learning) as overlapping experiences in a young child’s life, rather than total opposites. Similarly, Fler (2013) argued that play is developing learning, and learning is developing play.

In the Ministry of Education’s *Nurturing Early Learners* kindergarten curriculum framework (2012), the concept of “purposeful play” has been introduced. This concept builds on existing literature about play-based curricular practices for young children, and the need to offer children play activities of a wide range (both child-initiated and adult-initiated). The term is in the document to encourage teachers to purposefully plan for children’s learning and for teachers to observe children’s interests and strengths so as to think about multiple ways to support and interact with them during their play. Teachers should always try to find out what motivates children -- “what [children] know,” “what they are paying attention to” and “what might engage them to learn in fun and meaningful ways.” (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 52).

### Pedagogical Principles that We Have Embraced

In our years of working with children and families there are a few key principles that we have learned and would promote across all settings for early childhood care and education where possible. We share four principles that guide the design of our activities, interactions and environments.

## 1) Respect children’s voice and empower them as learners

We have always shared the belief that every child is a curious learner yet a uniquely competent citizen that wants to participate in and contribute to our physical and social world (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012).

This is also what the *Nurturing Early Learners* framework (Ministry of Education, 2012) promotes as a starting point in all our effort to “teach” children: believe that all children are competent, curious, and active learners. And this shifts our mindsets away from seeing children as empty vessels relying only on adults to provide them with knowledge.

As a result of our long-held beliefs, this is what we have tried to do:

- a) Show that children are capable and make their thinking visible to adults.
- b) Give children time and space to set their own goals, to create and construct while we provide them with support (i.e., the necessary skills and tools).
- c) Provide children with multiple experiences and entry points to extend their own self-directed creative processes.

“Creativity is the type of learning process where teacher and pupil are located in the same individual” (Arthur Koestler, novelist).

## 2) Design inspiring spaces and experiences

We have experimented with ways of designing physical spaces that will invite children to initiate messy exploration, provide open-ended learning experiences, and provide children with maximum ownership.

Our strategy could be described as a kind of unstructured-structure - from the child’s point of view, he has choice, freedom and control to experiment and create; while from the adult’s point of view, the thoughtfully selected

provisions are supposed to inspire the children to take action and to learn.

In Vygotskian terms (1978), children's learning experiences are supposed to be mediated and scaffolded by the tools provided by adults or their more knowledgeable peers. Sociocultural theorists and activity theorists have since explained that these "tools" include both physical tools (e.g., paper, pencil, objects), as well as psychological tools (e.g., language, strategies for remembering).

Playeum has been using ordinary, low cost materials to support children's play and learning. We find that when we carefully select and offer inexpensive open-ended materials, children choose to play collaboratively without the pressure to produce a specific outcome, and can become very immersed in the creating *process* without being overly-concerned about the final *product*. We have witnessed how the low cost design of our programme spaces and exhibits encourages maximum "tinkering" (we borrow this term as a concept from the Tinkering Studio in San Francisco's Exploratorium).

We encourage children to be themselves when they are creating and playing and we try to cater to different kinds of learners. For example, we let children lie on their stomachs if they work better that way. Usually, only a few children need to do so. But making allowance for such children behavior has helped us provide the kind of "hot and sweaty learning" that physically active children need (Piscitelli, Everet & Weier, 2003). We allow for children to move things around and arrange things according to their needs and we give children the opportunity to make choices and to exercise control. This is in contrast to some classrooms that may be more adult-controlled and kept clean during activities so the children do not work in messiness. To us, a process-centric view allows for organised mess and we think this

has resulted in children being engaged in Playeum's activities for extended periods of time.



### 3) Transform the Way Adults Think, Talk, and Act

In order to respect children as competent and active learners, adults need to learn how best to support their playing and learning processes. We have developed our role as play facilitators - to support children with what they need, to observe the children's process, and to facilitate that process by not overly directing the children's ideas. It is an art to know the how, what and when to intervene. This kind of practice is counter-intuitive to our cultural tendency to lead and instruct children all the time. And it requires us to constantly reflect on how we can do better in our efforts to learn *with* children (Edwards & Gandini, 2015).

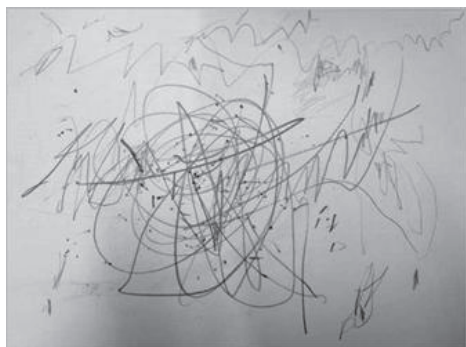
Not long ago, we developed a simple yet innovative, purpose-built observational table to a preschool. The design of the table was inspired by a deep observation of children's love for "hiding places". The table allowed children to climb under so as to observe objects placed on the transparent tabletop

from below. We created a “provocation”, (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). Over time, the teachers and the children co-constructed an emergent curriculum that revolved around this table and invited children to think in ways the adults would never have imagined possible. For instance, the children started to independently move plants from the nature corner onto this table in order to observe the root system from below. They also placed marbles on the table top to see them roll in different directions from above and below (see Figures 1 and 2). Children constructed ideas by questioning, drawing and discussing.

Figure 1: Some children had placed marbles on the sensory table earlier. Two children experience what it is like below the table.



Figure 2: A child’s visual representation of the sound of marbles rolling about the table-- “Marble is raining, the rain, it is raining here, so many marbles, it is raining heavily.”



#### 4) Collaborate with the Community

The old African proverb, “It takes an entire village to raise a child,” succinctly expresses Urie Bronfenbrenner’s well-known theoretical idea that human development is shaped by nested ecological systems.

We continually ask: How can we work with schools, communities, homes, public spaces to invite all children (regardless of ability and socio-economic background) to engage in a diverse range of creative, challenging and meaningful play opportunities?

Through our many collaborations with artists, designers, educators, youth and community groups, we have learned the importance of giving time and creating a safe space for adults to reflect and to celebrate children’s achievements as a group. This helps build trusting and productive relationships where we all learn to do better for children.



## Conclusion and Invitation

We invite all educators to join us in the combined effort to create a more child-friendly and play-friendly Singapore. This is work-in-progress in many places. Vivian Paley, a renowned kindergarten teacher, has repeatedly shown us through her books (e.g., 1992, 1997, 2004) that children learn about the social world and develop creativity through all kinds of child-directed fantasy play that is structured merely by teachers' selection of material, design of space, and verbal prompts and encouragement. Howard Gardner has shown us the need to let "unschooled minds" and multiple intelligences flourish (2011).

A classic study (Land & Jarman, 1993) investigating creativity and divergent thinking was conducted in 1968 using a test developed to identify innovative space engineers and scientists. The test was administered to 1,600 3-to-5-year-olds in Head Start programmes and at different time points as they grew older. Results showed diminishing creativity over time:

- Results amongst the 5-year-olds: 98% creative geniuses
- Results of same group when they were 10 years old: 30%
- Results of the group when they were 15 years old: 12%
- Same test given to 280,000 adults: 2%

While no research to date has been able to pinpoint the exact causes of such diminishing levels of creativity, these researchers had postulated that "non-creative behaviour is learned." And this particular conclusion is supported by more recent study which found that adult participants who had unlearned creativity the most, showed the greatest increase when put through a course framed by neuroscience models (Onarheim & Friis-Olivarius, 2013).

In Singapore, we want to continue working with families, communities and public institutions to strengthen a local ecology that:

- respects children as competent learners,
- re-defines play as a wide range of structured *and* unstructured activities,
- acknowledges the child's need to play freely, and
- nurtures both child-led and adult-child play explorations

Our desire is for children and future generations to grow to be social, creative, curious, persevering, and self-motivated learners for life.

## References

- Bodrova, E. & Leong, D.J. (2006). *Tools of the Mind: The Vygotskian Approach to Early Childhood Education* (2nd Ed). Prentice Hall.
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L. (2015). Teacher research in Reggio Emilia: Essence of a dynamic, evolving role. *Voices of Practitioners, 10*, 89-103. Retrieved from: [www.naeyc.org/publications/vop](http://www.naeyc.org/publications/vop)
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L., Forman, G. (Eds). (2012). *The Hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia experience in transformation* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger/ABC-CLIO.
- Elkind, D. (1981). *The hurried child*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Elkind, D. (2007). *The power of play: How spontaneous, imaginative activities lead to happier, healthier children*. Da Capo Press.
- Fleer, M. (2013). *Play in the early years*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Gardner, H. (2011). *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). New York: Basic Books.
- Howard, J., Jenvey, V., and Hill, C. (2006). Children's categorisation of play and learning based on social context, *Early*

- Child Development and Care*, 176, 379-393, doi: 10.1080/03004430500063804
- Land, G. and Jarman, B. (1993). *Breaking Point and Beyond*. San Francisco: HarperBusiness.
- Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life, With an Update a Decade Later*. USA: University of California Press.
- Lee, H.L. (2012). Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at groundbreaking of Yale-NUS College on 6 July 2012. Retrieved from [www.news.gov.sg/public/sgpc/en/media\\_releases/agencies/micacsd/speech/S-20120706-2.print.html?AuthKey=](http://www.news.gov.sg/public/sgpc/en/media_releases/agencies/micacsd/speech/S-20120706-2.print.html?AuthKey=)
- Lim, S.M. (2010). Reconsidering the play/work dichotomy in pedagogy. In Ebbeck, M., & Waniganayake, M. (Eds.), *Children's play in early childhood education: Facilitating learning in diverse contexts* (pp. 141-156). Sydney: Oxford University Press.
- Ministry of Education Singapore, (2012). *Nurturing early learners. A curriculum framework for kindergartens in Singapore*. Singapore.
- Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2014). *Obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved from [app.msf.gov.sg/Policies/Children-Youth/Obligations-under-the-UN-Convention-on-the-Rights#sthash.53P7FVMm.dpuf](http://app.msf.gov.sg/Policies/Children-Youth/Obligations-under-the-UN-Convention-on-the-Rights#sthash.53P7FVMm.dpuf)
- Onarheim, B., & Friis-Olivarius, M. (2013). Applying the neuroscience of creativity to creativity training. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 7, 656. doi:10.3389/fnhum.2013.00656
- Paley, V. G. (1992). *You Can't Say You Can't Play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Paley, V.G. (1997). *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Paley, V.G. (2004). *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Piscitelli, B., Everet, M., and Weier, K. (2003). *Enhancing young children's museum experiences: A manual for museum staff*. Queensland, Australia: QUT Museums Collaborative. Retrieved from: [www.qm.qld.gov.au/~media/Documents/Learning%20resources/QMSB/Manuals/enhancing-childrens-museum-experiences.pdf](http://www.qm.qld.gov.au/~media/Documents/Learning%20resources/QMSB/Manuals/enhancing-childrens-museum-experiences.pdf)
- Postman, N. (2011). *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology*. Vintage.
- Pramling Samuelsson, I. and Carlsson, M. A. (2008). The playing learning child: Towards a pedagogy of early childhood. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 52(6), 623-641.
- United Nations General Assembly (1985). *United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child*.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wing, L.A. (1995). Play is not the work of the child: Young children's perceptions of work and play. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 10, 223-247.

## **About Playeum**

Founded by Sumi and Jennifer, Playeum is Singapore's first charitable centre for creativity and culture to nurture the next generation of creators, innovators and thinkers. Playeum inspires creativity and collaboration in children and families through innovative and playful experiences. Over the past 6 years, Playeum has engaged over 50,000 children and families in over 150 programmes and novel experiences through collaborations with other museums, public institutions and creative practitioners. Playeum has been the recipient of four international awards from the UK based Campaign for Drawing for innovative work on community engagement in The Big Draw, and has been named a Pacesetter by the Lego Foundation through the global Re-Imagine Learning Challenge. In order to establish a culture of meaningful and impactful play, and with a formal research agenda, Playeum is developing a dedicated creative space for children and families, Children's Centre for Creativity.

## Postbox and Restaurant

Mira Naharto  
Nafa Arts Kindergarten

### Introduction

This article shares my teaching and learning experience in a privately run kindergarten of 300 children. Like many kindergartens, we have the morning and afternoon sessions, each session has eight classes and two teachers per class, English and Mandarin teachers. The levels span from Playgroup (2-3 yrs), Nursery (3-4 yrs), K1 (4-5 yrs) to K2 (5-6 yrs). Currently, I have the K1 class; I had the same children when they were in the Nursery class the previous year. I conducted two activities, called The School Postbox and Our Class Restaurant.

### The School Postbox

It was the beginning of the year and we started off with "Our Neighbourhood" theme in the first term. A parent helped me in making a postbox when she learnt of my intent. Initially, I planned to have the children write letters to their classmates and to post them in the postbox. Then, I remembered that some of the children in my class had siblings in other classes and I thought it would be great to extend the activity by having them write letters to their brothers or sisters, and they could deliver letters to other classes. In week 3, the postbox was ready. On the board, I put up each child's photo with their names; this was for the children, to help them in the activity, for example they could copy their friends' names. I created envelopes and stamps from recycled papers. The children were excited when I introduced this activity. I taught them how to write a name on the

envelope, stick a stamp and then write their own name at the back of the envelope. As each child has a partner in this class, I told them to write a letter to their own partner. Their letters were in the form of drawings because at this age they could not write yet. Some children who were very good in their phonics would try to write by building words using letter sounds. Every day, I assigned two children as postal workers; they collected the letters from the postbox, checked whether there were stamps, stamped the date on the stamps and then delivered the letters. The children showed enthusiasm in writing letters every day and they were equally excited receiving letters. On the third day, I encouraged some children who had siblings in other classes to write letters to them and to post them in our class postbox. The next day, our "postal workers" delivered the letters to their siblings. During this time, I guided our "postal workers" on how to enter other classes politely and to seek permission from class teachers to deliver their letters. It was a good opportunity for them to learn some basic social skills.

I then extended the activity. Firstly, I made bags for the postal workers. Next, I involved their parents and asked them to write letters to their own children because I felt that it would be wonderful and meaningful for the children to receive letters or cards from their parents. I placed our class postbox outside the classroom, with this note:

Dear Parents,

You can write letters to your child and post them in our postbox. Our "postal workers" will deliver the letters.

To my surprise, parents were very supportive. In the following three weeks, parents wrote letters to their children, some even wrote to other children in the class and some put in the extra effort to decorate their letters with stickers. At home, the children began writing letters to their friends. I received a letter from an ex-student whose younger sister was presently in my class and enjoying this activity. Parents encouraged their children to write letters and to send Chinese New Year cards to their other teachers and to Principal too.

For the third part of extending this activity, I engaged a fellow teacher, Ms Adeline, to write simple letters to the children in my class. She was very supportive and prepared 40 letters, five letters were sent each day. The children were surprised to receive letters from a teacher. Some parents began to ask who Ms Adeline was. In return, parents taught their children to write thank you notes to Ms Adeline and these were posted using our class postbox. Through this, the children and their parents came to know Ms Adeline.

Lastly, in an attempt to have the children deliver letters to other classes, I packed a small gift bag that held encouraging words, welcome notes and thank you notes. They were for all the teachers and staff in the school. Four gift bags were posted every day, our "postal workers" placed them in their bags for delivery to other classes, the school office, for the cook and cleaning helpers.

In this activity, the children learnt pragmatics, the use of social language use, for example, "Good morning, Ms. Adeline. I have a letter for Andrea", or, "Thank you for your

help". The children became familiar with other teachers and staff in the school. Some teachers were excited to receive packages and the office staff was also glad to be included in the class activity. Every day, our "postal workers" looked forward to their adventure to other classes and other children looked forward to receiving letters. Parent's support and Ms Adeline's participation also made this activity a success.

### **Our Class Restaurant**

Last year, when the children were in Nursery, I noticed their love for playing at the kitchen corner and pretending they were at a restaurant. I thought it would be a good idea to turn it into a class project. I shared my idea with some parents. One parent suggested selling pancakes; she offered to help in making pancakes. I then took it to my children, to seek their opinions about opening having a restaurant. There was a lively discussion, some came up with a few choices of restaurants, in the end, the majority decided on a pancake restaurant. Then they brainstormed about toppings and flavours.

Initially, five parents were roped in to help me and they provided the necessary toppings. I made menu cards and order forms. On the day of the activity, I was surprised when nearly half of the parents in my class of 20 turned up to help and they even brought in additional toppings, more than what was available on the menu cards and order forms. We quickly adapted and said these would be available on special request. One parent shared that they had learnt of this activity and my call for help from other parents.

During the activity, some parents and children role played being customers. We had four chefs and five waiters and waitresses. The parent, who volunteered to make the pancakes, had prepared a story about pancakes. He read the story and then gave a

demonstration on how to make pancakes. Then the 'restaurant' started. Parents helped to guide our waiters and waitresses on how to take orders, write the name/s of the customer/s, sending the order form to the "kitchen" and then serving the order to the customers. I was in the "kitchen" helping the chefs with the order forms and in preparing the food. It was such a successful project, enjoyed by both children and parents. Photos taken by parents were shared with other parents via social media platforms.

The restaurant activity was also carried out for another class in the afternoon session. That decided on an ice cream bar which they named "Frozen". I requested for help from three to four parents who willingly provided the ice creams and other necessary materials like paper plates and toppings. One parent good in graphic design helped make the menu cards and order forms. On the day of the activity, seven parents came in to help. Other teachers were invited to participate. Again, I my role was in the "kitchen" helping the chefs. The children really enjoyed it. They took turns to be waiters, waitresses or chefs.

This activity inspired me to think about how to keep it going and interesting for the children, for example, making it a regular feature in the school and which would be open to other parents. Parents who send in their children in the morning could take away coffee or kaya toast served by the children. Children could distribute pamphlets to other parents, inviting them to visit their restaurant. Another idea could be to have the restaurant serve mothers cupcakes during the week leading up to Mother's Day. I shared the idea with a parent and she was very supportive.

### **Reflections**

I pondered about these activities and over the word "community". I thought we usually associated the word "community" to mean

that we would teach the children how to be involved in the school community, such as the school's neighbourhood. However, from this experience, I realised that we could create a community within our school. A community need not be outside the school or located far off, it could be within the school itself. It could be a community of stakeholders in this school, for example the parents who became such a strong and important support in these class activities. The children were also very happy to see their parents in the classroom. One boy told his mother to come help because he heard other parents were going to come. Another parent called to volunteer to assist in a school field trip because her daughter kept pestering her to offer her help to the school.

The parents' positive spirit and participation helped me greatly to understand and to value it. Where once I had to do everything on my own, I now found I had new resources and lots of willing hands.

# Engaging Parents Purposefully to Support Children’s Learning

Yap Soon Lan  
Master Pro-FLAiR

## Background

As I approached my third year of teaching FLAiR, I began to ask myself about the areas I have done well in the past two years and the areas I would like to improve on. After much reflection, I decided that I must engage parents more as they are the key people who can support their children outside of school. Considering that the children’s time is often divided between their homes and their early childhood education programmes, there is a clear relationship between strong programme-family partnerships and children’s academic success (Weiss, Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Henrich & Gadaire, 2008). When parents are involved in school, their children’s achievement improves and the children are more successful learners (NCPIE, 2006).

## The Selected Approaches

I explored further how I could better engage the parents to support their children at home. I came up with a three-pronged approach.

The **first approach** was to have regular and timely exchanges to engage parents actively to empower them to provide the necessary home support to their children. After garnering full support from my centre principal and the parents, I adopted these three modes for communication:

- (i) face-to-face exchanges
- (ii) FLAiR-dedicated communication handbook (mainly to inform them of the books read and the book-related activities carried out during the FLAiR lesson, and suggestions for parents to

try out so as to help increase their children’s interest in learning English), and

- (iii) Instant Messaging (via WhatsApp)

The **second approach** was to plan activities for the children to work with their parents at home, as a meaningful extension of classroom learning. These activities were in addition to the activity sheets provided as part of the FLAiR Home Learning Pack.

The **third approach** was to encourage the children to bring home their favourite books to read with and read to their parents at home. These books were carefully selected to meet their interests and were in addition to the books provided as part of the FLAiR Home Learning Pack.

## A peek into the home-school partnership activities carried out during the year

Approximately 12 home based assignments were successfully completed during the course of the year.

At the start of the year, in order to instil a strong sense of belonging in each child in the FLAiR classroom, I asked each one to bring home a strip of paper (3cm x 20cm) to write and decorate his/her name on it, together with his/her parents. Every child brought back a personalised name tag and then used that to demarcate his/her own wall space to display selected work for the rest of the year.

Other home assignments included:

- 1) personalising a mailbox (using a cereal box)
- 2) making an alphabet chart
- 3) finding/drawing pictures with beginning sounds of the letters

- (taught as part of Direct Teaching module)
- 4) recording the food each child consumed at different times of the

day over five days; the favourite food of each family member

My favourite food FLAIR - Home assignment

Name	Favourite food	Food prepared by	Place to get food
Aqeela	Sweet and sour fish	mam	market
Idad	chicken rice	mam hawker	hawker centre
mom	mee goreng	mam hawker	hawker centre
Ameera	beef curry	mam	market
Aleqa	mee goreng	mam hawker	hawker centre
Aleza	pasi lemak	mam hawker centre	
Faresz	chicken nuggets	mam	market

Notes: 1. Your child has to record his/ her favourite food on the first row.  
2. Your child has to record the favourite food of all the other family members in the subsequent rows.  
3. Please encourage your child to write by himself/ herself. You may write down the words he/she needs help with on a separate piece of paper so that he/ she can copy them onto this activity sheet.

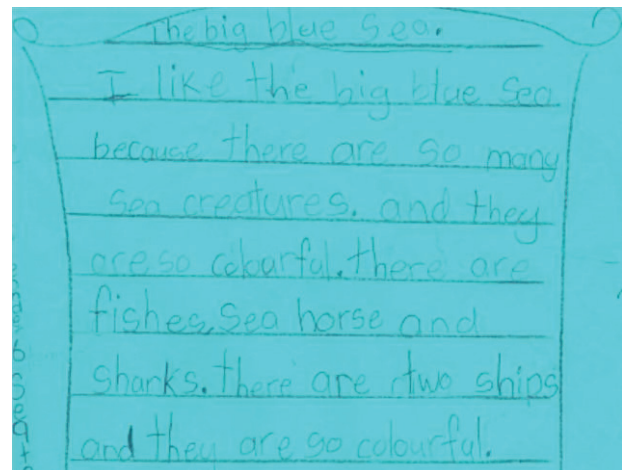
This was completed by Aqilah\* with the help of her mum in September

- 5) gathering food wrappers of each child's favourite food

- 6) writing - such as (i) making a storybook about each child's family, (ii) personalising a story after completion of a class group work (The Big Blue Sea) and (iii) recounting a class outing (with a few pictures provided to aid writing).



Examples of food wrappers contributed by some of the children in September 2013



A write-up by Aqilah\* about The Big Blue Sea, September 2013.

[\* The children's names have been changed. Names used in this article are pseudonyms.]

The instructions to carry out the home assignments were usually issued to the

parents via a note in the FLAiR communication handbook (an example is shown below).

Dear Parents/Guardians,

The theme for the four weeks (12 Aug to 4 Sep) is “The Big Blue Sea”. We read books and also watched a short video clip regarding the sea and the sea creatures. In addition, we did a group work where each and every child filled up the sea with his/her favourite sea creatures /objects. More details are provided in the table below.

We also embarked on learning how to blend sounds of three to four letters together to make words (for e.g. c-a-t, m-a-n, f-i-s-h).

S/N	Period	Books read to your child	Main activities carried out
1	5-6 Aug	Revision of some past lessons as it is a short week	
2	12 Aug – 5 Sep	<p><b>Rainbow Fish and the Big Blue What</b> (by <i>Marcus Pfister</i>, Library call no. JP PFI)</p> <p><b>I spy under the sea</b> (by <i>Edward Gibbs</i>, Library call no. JP GIB)</p> <p><b>Swimmy</b> (by <i>Leo Lionni</i>, Library call no. JP LIO)</p> <p><b>Rainbow Fish and the Big Blue Whale</b> (by <i>Marcus Pfister</i>, Library call no. JP PFI)</p> <p><b>The Big Blue Sea</b> (by <i>Janine Scott</i>)</p> <p><b>Baby Dolphin’s Tale</b> (by <i>Lynette Evans</i>)</p> <p><b>Little Blue Fish</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Discussion about sea creatures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Types of sea creatures</li> <li>- Food each kind of sea creature eats</li> <li>- What each sea creature can or cannot do</li> <li>- Compare and contrast the similarities and differences between the sea creatures</li> </ul> </li> <li>2) Group work – fill up the sea with sea creatures; and all the children make up a story about the completed work.</li> <li>3) Word search</li> <li>4) Make a storybook – Sharks (<i>for those children who wish to do it</i>)</li> <li>5) Make cards for Teachers’ Day</li> <li>6) Learn sight words</li> </ol>
	<p><u>Information Books</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Sharks and other monsters of the deep (Library call no. JP507.3PAG)</li> <li>2) The Baby Shark (by <i>Sharon Street</i>)</li> <li>3) I am a whale (by <i>Barbara Todd</i>, Library call no. JP500.5TOD)</li> <li>4) The world’s deadliest sharks (by <i>Nick Healy</i>, Library call no. J507.3HEA)</li> <li>5) Everything Dolphins (by <i>Elizabeth Carney</i>, Library call no. J500.53CAR)</li> </ol>		

Please note that your child brought home two books (Croc by the rock and Perfect Pets) last Friday (30 Aug). Please read with them. The books can be retained at home.

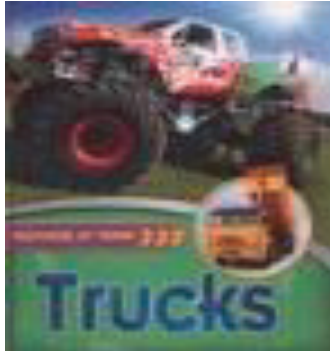
Home Assignments (to be returned on 16 Sep-Monday)

- 1) As an extension of our class theme, please spend some time with your child to write his/her story about “The Big Blue Sea” which all the FLAiR children put together. The picture and writing frame have been given out to your child.
- 2) Please spend some time with your child to read the list of word families.
- 3) Please assist your child to complete the activity sheets, if necessary.

Any supplementary information, communication and/or follow-up with parents were usually via mobile messaging.

In addition, the children were encouraged to bring home books they were interested in, to read with their parents. The children also had the liberty to ask for books which they

would like to read but not available yet. I usually try to source for them from the public libraries, the centre's library or my own resources. The parents are always updated on the same day when their children brought any book(s) home.



e.g. in April 2013, Harry\* took home a book on trucks, he was fascinated with these big machines.

*Me: Aqilah\* told me you borrowed some Berenstain Bears storybooks to share with her. Thanks for your support in helping her read at home. :-)*

*Mum: Yes, she likes me, her dad or siblings to read to her. I can see that she's enjoying going to Flair class especially doing the puppet. She kept reading The Very Hungry Caterpillar book.*

*Me: Hope together we can make her learning fun & enjoyable but at the same time educational.*

*Mum: Thanks for your update on her.*

### Reflections

All the home assignments were designed to promote a higher degree of parental involvement in each of the FLAiR children's learning journey. According to Keyser (2006), encouraging family involvement in early childhood settings creates partnerships, develops a sense of community and acknowledges the expertise of the families. It is my fervent hope that the parents, through doing these assignments with their children, will comprehend the significance and importance of their active involvement in their children's schooling years. Consequently, the parents commit to take an active interest in their children's education by providing them with the fullest support throughout their school years. The greatest benefit to children of a successful home-school partnership is that they are more motivated to succeed (Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005).

I am grateful that the parents have been very responsive and forthcoming in our communication and exchanges. Hamre & Pianta (2005) highlighted that the positive interactions teachers use to create connections with parents are in the best interests of the child. This is an example of an exchange I had with a mother:

I observed that the parents enjoyed getting a peek into the activities their children were engaged in during FLAiR, through the pictures and also bite-size updates on their children's progress along the way.

The main purpose of sending the updates and pictures was to enable the parents to gain a better understanding of their children. The secondary purpose was to showcase the children's strengths/interests, and then to encourage the parents to provide support to the children by building on their strengths/interests. Some parents also provided feedback that the pictures and updates provided a good platform to springboard into conversations. I also observed that the parents welcomed the feedback which shifted focus on their children's problems to affirming their strengths. With the open and frank exchanges I had with the parents, I believed we had established a certain level of mutual trust with each other. This allowed us to constantly exchange our knowledge of the children's abilities which then translated into designing appropriate activities to scaffold and move them towards a higher level of skill and understanding (Vygotsky, [1934], 1962)

It was indeed heartening to get positive feedback from the parents that their children

had shown greater interests in books after they brought back books. Sometimes, parents were surprised to learn about their children's new interests and so gained a better understanding about their children. It was a booster to me to see parents going the extra mile to bring their children to public libraries to borrow more books so as to meet their children's desire to delve further into their area of interests. I felt very reassured to see the children gradually developing a love for books through a simple act of having access to the books they were interested in. The importance of reading to learn was reinforced in children when parents set aside time to read with and discuss about things of their interests. This supports Colgan's (2002) research which highlighted that children's reading skills improved, that these were an enhancement of their interest in reading and completing literacy-based activities increases through family literacy intervention.

#### **Last but not least**

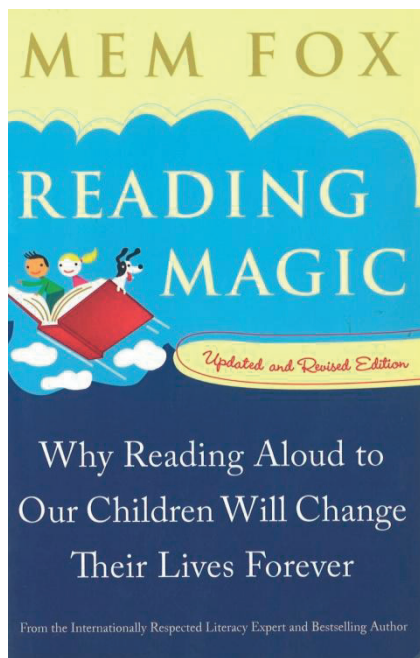
I am inspired to see the Flair children gradually gain confidence in their own capabilities. I was touched to witness each FLAiR child blossoming at their own pace. These encouraging experiences reaffirmed me that my work did make a positive impact in the children and their parents, and it endowed me with a renewed passion and dedication such that I look forward to my new batch of FLAiR students and their parents in the new school year.

#### **References**

- Colgan, K.A (2002) Parental involvement in Reading Development
- Hamre, B., & Pianta, R. (2005) Can instructional and emotional support in the first-grade classroom make a difference for children at risk of school failure? *Child Development* 76 (5): 949-67
- Henrich, C., & Gadaire, D. (2008) Head Start and parental involvement. *Infants and Young Children* 21 (1): 56-59
- Hoover-Dempsey K., Walker, M., Sandler, H., Whetsel, D., Green, C., Wilkins, A., & Clossen, K. (2005) Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. *Elementary School Journal* 2 (106): 105-30
- Keyser, J. (2006) From parents to partners: Building a family-centered early childhood program. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf; Washington, DC: NAEYC
- NCPiE (National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education) (2006). What's Happening. A New Wave of evidence: The impact of school, family and community connections on student achievement. [www.ncpie.org/WhatsHappening/researchJanuary2006/html](http://www.ncpie.org/WhatsHappening/researchJanuary2006/html)
- Vygotsky, L.S. [1934](1962) Thought and language, Ed. & trans. By E. Hanfmann & G. Vakar. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Weiss, H., Caspe, M., & Lopez, M.E. (2006) Family involvement in early childhood education. *Family Involvement Makes a Difference* 1 (Spring). [www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/family-involvement-in-early-childhood-education](http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/family-involvement-in-early-childhood-education)

## Reading Magic by Mem Fox

Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever



As early childhood educators, we practise the daily ritual of story time with the children, but have we looked deeper into what reading a story (aloud) is all about? Why is it important, what sort of benefits it brings, how it can change the lives of these children?

Mem Fox, the author, provides an insight to the benefits of reading aloud. First and foremost, she establishes that reading aloud is not a task with the sole purpose of teaching the children, rather it is to enrich them and it is a relationship bonding process which involves the book, the child and the adult. According to her, *“It isn’t achieved by the book alone, nor by the child alone, nor by the adult who’s reading aloud – it’s the relationship winding between all three,*

*bringing them together in easy harmony”* (p.10).

Children do not learn to talk and they cannot learn to talk unless they are spoken to. Reading aloud provides endless possibilities and opportunities to the children, through words which are essential in building the thought connectedness in the brain. The more a child experiences language through books and meaningful conversations, the more the connections. Conversely, the fewer words a child experiences before school, that child’s brain would be more stunted.

The author emphasizes that the best time to start reading aloud is when the baby is born. *“Children who are read to early and regularly, quickly acquire the skill of listening and the desire to hear stories. They understand the immense pleasure waiting for them in books and develop the ability to concentrate and relax.”* (p.33). It is important to keep reading aloud as a regular routine, for example, reading aloud three stories a day. In doing so, this can help address and fix the problems of illiteracy now and for the future.

One may wonder how does one do reading aloud? The author provides a list of voice and eyes techniques. Other than trying to be as expressive as possible, the story ought to be coming from the eyes as much as from the mouth. Loud and soft tones, fast and slow, high and low pitches and pausing are the seven important factors to keep the listeners engaged. You can visit [www.memfox.net](http://www.memfox.net),

“Reading Aloud” section, to listen to the stories and learn from the author.

Mem Fox emphasises the importance of taking reading aloud as an entertainment for the children, making it fun, comfortable and relaxed to help children gravitate towards a love for reading. The most effective way of learning to read is the stories approach where children start from stories-to-words and letters through an interesting and enjoyable process. Many children can read if they learn through the letters-and-phonics-first approach, but it begs the question whether it means anything to the children? This is because reading without understanding is not reading. What is needed is a balanced approach, where these two methods can go hand-in-hand to ensure a higher success rate in raising literacy competency.

The three magical elements in reading are print, language and general knowledge.

By exposing children to print and language frequently and daily through rhymes, rhythm and repetition helps to ensure that learning to read can be easy. Reading extensively widens the children’s perspective and it gives them a great deal of information. Children, as readers and listeners, should never be underestimated. *“If children love the words they hear, they’ll use them delightfully in their own speaking and in their own writing... words heard often previously are easier to read than unfamiliar words.”* (p.47).

“Reading Magic” affirms the importance of reading aloud to children. As early childhood educators, let us do our part in helping to spark an interest and ignite a passion for reading for a lifetime. Parents and early educators can give their children a good head start, by spending just 15 minutes a day reading aloud to them. A must-read book for those who want to find out how magical reading aloud is!

### The Giving Chair

A story by Yoshiko Kouyama

Illustrated by Kozo Kakimoto

Translated by Mia Lynn Perry

This is a lovely book by an award-winning Asian writer. The story provides a more diverse insight into culture and values, and has an Asian perspective to children's literature. The nuances in the written and implied messages are somewhat different from books from other cultures.

In the story, the rabbit is making a wooden chair, she even added a short tail to it. After contemplating about where to put the chair, she then made a sign "Help yourself" and puts both the chair and the sign in the woods. Along came a donkey and it was carrying a heavy load of acorns. "Oh what a KIND chair," he said, upon seeing it and the sign. Instead of resting on the chair, he put his basket of acorns on the chair, he rested under a big tree nearby and soon fell fast asleep.

A bear came next. He had with him a jar of honey. He saw the acorns and the sign, he said, "Thank you for this meal. I shall go ahead and eat, since it says, 'Help yourself'." After eating them, he thought about "others who might come along" after him, he felt bad that he had finished all the acorns, so he left his jar of honey on the chair for them to enjoy.

The story goes on to tell of other animals that came, ate what was left on the chair and, in return, left their own food for others. By the time the donkey woke up, to his surprise, his basket of acorns was filled with chestnuts instead!

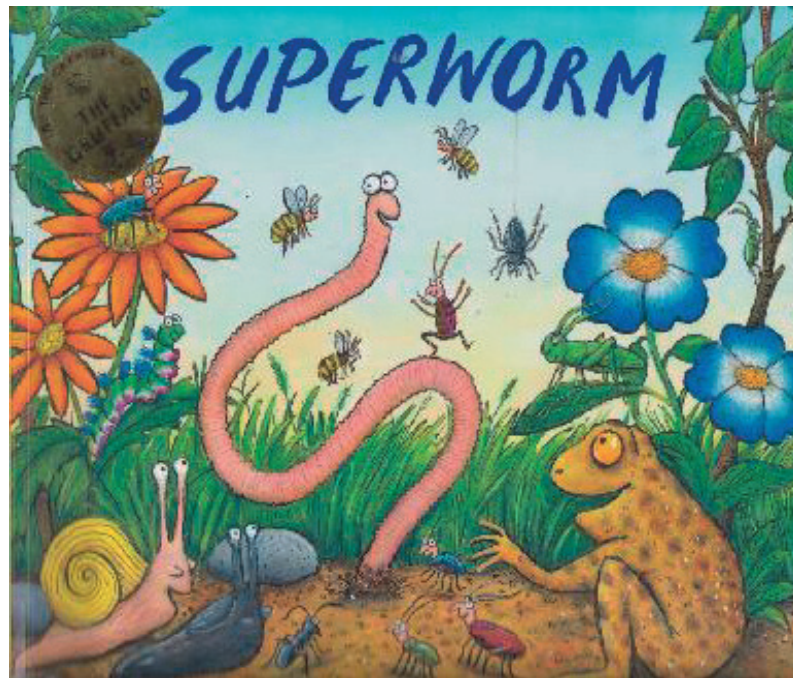
I liked this story because there is so much to talk about with the children. For instance,



how the animals received gratefully and gave graciously in return, and the oft repeated phrase "Thank you for this meal" can be a subtle way of teaching our young children to appreciate kindness.

The story is exciting; it provides anticipation and suspension in the way it unfolds, leading to a surprise at the end for the donkey. We can explore other possible endings too with the children because, here, there is room to introduce the thinking skill of inference.

An underlying yet unspoken value that the animals apparently understood was that the chair was in the public domain and therefore belonged to the forest community at large. This respect for the right of other users of public property is a worthy point to highlight to our children.



## Superworm

by Julia Catherine Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler

This is from the duo, Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler, who gave us GRUFFALO. The text has a mixture of long and short sentences but they are engaging. What is interesting is that the story is told in two, three or four line limericks. The children learn rhyming words in a fun and in a meaningful context.

Axel Scheffler's illustrations are vividly coloured and have details that engage the children and make them wide-eyed and interested. The combination of these vibrant colours and details also help in developing them towards expressing themselves through their drawings.

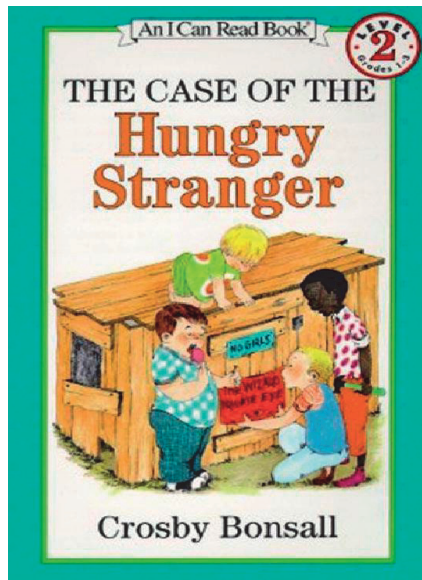
Superworm's friends have a favourite chant

which is very catchy and some of my children can repeat it by the end of the story. The story has a plot that makes the children think; and, at an age when they are transitioning to Primary Level, it can hopefully make them wiser.

I chose this book for my children for the plot, the exposure to the English language in an interesting way and for the vibrant graphics; and they liked it. This book has a ready-made song which is the animals' favourite chant from which we can devise further interesting ways to use it in the classroom. Not every book has a ready-made song which is catchy and easy to remember.

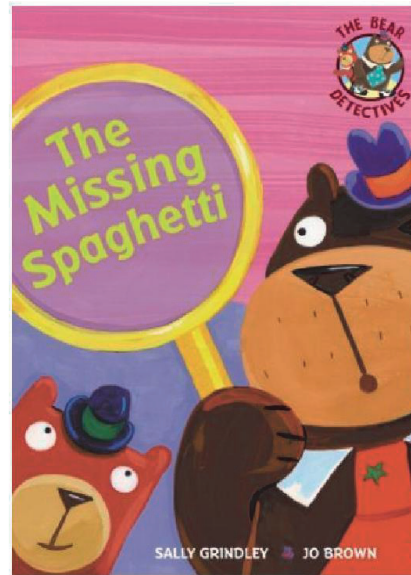
Other recommendations:

### The Case of the Hungry Stranger



I used these two books for some of my children who were ready for chapter books. The children had a common interest in mysteries and mysteries do make us think. Mystery books have a built-in problem and solve mechanism that is presented in an engaging way. The children encounter various stages, beginning with an unsolved problem, the suspense of the case and then having to think of ways to solve the mystery. Children do get to experience empathy and feel a sense of achievement and relief when the

### The Missing Spaghetti



case is solved.

The plot in a mystery book is generally longer and thus tests their stamina, albeit in a good way. It does pave the way for them to be ready for more challenging books in the future. In my experience, I have found that children would want to finish reading the book in one sitting because they become very engrossed in the story. This helps to gauge their level of comprehension as it has to make sense to them for the books to be engaging.

For those who teach the Malay language:

### Ulat Bulu Yang Gemuk (The Fat Caterpillar)



Jack was a caterpillar who lived in an apple. One day he realised that he was getting too fat for his apple home. He decided to find himself a new home. Children love this story, especially if they have read 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar'. It is a twist to a familiar character and can be food for thought for our children. Use it as a springboard to generate other ideas from them.

# 幼儿园的辅导-殊途同归、不放弃每个孩子

張孝筠

Hsiao-Yun Chang

国立台北护理和健康大学, 婴幼儿保育系

首先让我将台湾的幼儿园辅导计划做一个概要的介绍。

2006 年台湾尚未幼托整合之前, 幼稚园及托儿所在不同法律及主管单位管辖之下, 进行评鉴。评鉴制度行之有年, 但是接受评鉴的机构, 提出改革的声音, 认为评鉴是批判而不是帮助幼儿教保机构提升教育品质, 希望评鉴之前能先接受辅导然后再实施评鉴。教育部聆听业者的心声后, 认为合理, 随即发布自 2006 年, 幼稚园 (Kindergarten) 先尝试建置辅导的机制, 评鉴暂停五年。当时, 托儿所 (Child Care Centers) 因管辖机构与法规不同, 仅幼稚园进行辅导计划, 托儿所仍持续进行评鉴机制。2011 年幼托整合成功, 幼稚园与托儿所改制为幼儿园, 招收满 2 岁幼儿至入国民小学前的幼儿, 主管机关在中央为教育部国民及学前教育署 (简称国教署), 在地方为各县市的教育处 (局)。经过 6 年的时间, 幼儿园辅导计划已趋至成熟, 2012 年国教署发布幼儿园辅导计划, 针对不同动机、需求的幼儿园实施合宜的辅导计划。

幼儿园辅导计划的目标为: 1. 建立具体明确之辅导目标, 逐步提升幼儿园教保服务品质。2. 建立权责明确之辅导架构, 提升

辅导效能。3. 建置各类辅导人员专业培训制度, 形塑辅导专业性。4. 建立幼儿园及教保服务人员专业发展支持系统。幼儿园辅导类别分为「基础辅导」、「专业发展辅导」及「支持服务辅导」三大类, 分述如下:

## 1. 基础辅导

尚未接受基础评鉴, 或虽经基础评鉴但评鉴结果为未通过之幼儿园可以提出申请基础辅导。辅导的目的是使幼儿园符合基础评鉴指标及相关法令规定。由各直辖市、县 (市) 主管机关负责教保服务业务之行政人员或教保辅导团团员执行辅导。

## 2. 专业发展辅导

此类辅导又分为「适性教保辅导」、「课程大纲辅导」、「特色发展辅导」及「专业认证辅导」。幼儿园依据教保服务的需求, 自发性申请专业辅导计画:

期待发展自编教保活动课程或强化教保情境规划之幼儿园可以申请「适性教保辅导」。已能自编教材, 期待实施课程大纲规划教保活动课程、实施教学及评量的幼儿园可以申请「课程大纲辅导」。已能自编教材, 希望发展在地化课程或其他具特色之教保活动课程的幼儿园可以申请「特色发展辅导」。能依课程大纲发展教保活

动课程，并经直辖市、县(市)政府推荐之幼儿园可以申请「专业认证辅导」认证为优质幼儿园。

专业发展辅导计划的共同属性包括：由经过各项训练的大学幼儿教(保)系所教授或资深幼儿园教师担任辅导人员，采每个月入园临床辅导至少一次，无论是公立幼儿园或是私立幼儿园，辅导人员的辅导费用及交通差旅费由教育部国教署编列经费完全补助。

### 3. 支持服务辅导

此类辅导比较特殊，针对离岛、偏乡及原住民族地区未参与前述各类辅导之幼儿园，经各直辖市、县(市)政府或巡回辅导人员评估各园教保发展情形，认有纳入支持服务辅导之必要者。台湾 22 个县市，台东县与花莲县全县纳入支持服务辅导，另外 13 个县市部分乡镇属于支持服务辅导的区域。辅导人员分为两类，一



类是县市甄选出的公立幼儿园资深教师担任专职的巡回辅导员，另一类是教育部遴选各县市在地大学幼教系或幼保系的教授担任巡回辅导教授，加上当地政府的行政人员的支援，以及中央教育部国教署

的经费补助与支持，四类人员相互支持与合作，形成一个幼儿教育及照顾的网路。辅导的对象以这些县市招收 5 岁幼儿的班级又称为国民教育幼儿班(简称国幼班)的教保服务人员(教师、教保员、助理教保员)为主，辅导的内容包含教师教学及幼儿照顾品质的提升。

支持服务辅导区域因位于离岛、偏乡及原住民族地区，教保服务人员异动率高，幼儿的学习需要教师更用心投入，巡回辅导人员常需要上山下海，游走于土石流区，入班辅导除了教学专业外，也必须陪伴身处异乡孤寂的教保服务人员。因为县市国幼班的班级数差异大，有些县市巡回辅导人员与国幼班的辅导比例为 1:8，有些县市辅导比例为 1:30-45，加上教保服务人员专业背景差异大，异动率高对于巡回辅导人员的压力相对高。

2011 年台湾实施「5 岁幼儿免学费教育计划」，将近 96% 的 5 岁幼儿都已进入幼儿园就读。离岛、偏远地区及原住民族地区的国幼班将近 1 万名幼儿，这些地区除了出生率低之外，外移人口也多，国幼班会形成满 2 岁到 6 岁的幼儿在一个班级内生活与学习，对于新手教保人员特别多的国幼班而言辅导人员及教保人员的压力都非常高。因此国幼班教保辅导的模式采支持服务，以支持及陪伴教保服务人员稳定教保品质，及协助教保服务人员建构回应在地文化及学习需求之课程为目的。

来自台湾的我们好奇的想知道，倡导双语、超菁英制度，以及 2015 年世界经济自由度排名第二位的新加坡是如何看待幼儿

教育?以及幼儿园的辅导制度为何?

相同的新加坡与台湾的少子化现象都相当严重以及人才培养是国家竞争力的主导。在此背景下,由政府主导制定了各种对策,新加坡采取了初生儿祝贺金、育儿支援补助的发放,但是不采取福利国家的路线,而是在自力更生的原则下进行育儿支援。台湾最近数十年倾向采取福利与教育整合的国家路线,中央政府大量挹注公共资源于幼儿教育及照顾。从教育公平机会的概念下自 2011 年开始实施 5 岁幼儿免学费教育政策,对于经济弱势中低收入户及低收入户的 5 岁幼儿给予加额补助,除免学费外其他杂费亦可免缴。

新加坡的超菁英及双语制度,从幼儿园的经营政策可见端倪。新加坡的幼儿园以私立幼儿园为主。截至 2015 年新加坡教育部设置 10 所公立幼稚园,仅招收满 4 岁幼儿(K1)及满 5 岁幼儿(K2),2016 年将再增设 5 所幼稚园,入学幼儿的以低收入户家庭的幼儿为主。至于私立幼儿园则是百家齐放,在新加坡常见的教保模式包括 Montessori, Waldorf Steiner, the Play-Based curriculum, the Reggio Emilia approach, the High Scope Method and the Theory of Multiple Intelligences.

感谢 4 月 1 日晚间 AECES 特别为我们安排了一场与幼儿园现场老师分享幼教专业辅导的经验。分享辅导经验的历程中,比较了解新加坡的幼儿园辅导与台湾幼

儿园辅导的差异。新加坡私立幼儿园教师的专业成长分为园外的增能研习,或者延聘幼教专家入园课程与教学的辅导,由园方自付费用。台湾公立与私立幼儿园可以申请教育部国教署提供的专业发展辅导,「适性教保辅导」、「课程大纲辅导」、「特色发展辅导」及「专业认证辅导」,或由地方政府评估后指定幼儿园参加基础辅导或支持服务辅导,这些经费由教育部国教署编列经费完全补助。新加坡以辅导幼儿为对象,而非幼儿园的教保人员。相同之处是针对特殊需求幼儿的辅导,新加坡与台湾一样,依据幼儿的个别需求,提供早期介入的辅导。对于咱台湾的我们,Project Flair 是一个很有意义的幼小衔接方案,此方案服务的对象以教育部设置的公立幼儿园英文能力落后的幼儿为对象,此方案由 AECES 与新加坡教育部合作,派遣 Flair 教师,进入公立幼儿园,针对英语能力落后的幼儿实施英文能力提升方案,目的为增进幼儿在英语听说的能力,为幼儿的阅读能力建构扎实的基础。当新加坡的孩子们进入小学接受义务教育时,英文是用来学习学科知识的工具,英语能力不足会影响孩子的学习成效,与其进入小学后再补救教学,不如趁着孩子在幼儿园就读时,提升她的英文能力。

新加坡幼儿园实施的英语及母语的双语教学及 Project Flair 的提升幼儿主流教育使用语言的能力,可作为幼儿园支持服务辅导方案未来方案努力的方向。

# 台湾早期疗育的发展现况

林敏慧

Min-Huey Lin

国立台北护理健康大学, 国立台湾师范大学特殊教育

## 一、前言

台湾早期民间普遍存在「大鸡晚啼」的传统观念,认为儿童总有一天会「开窍」,使得许多发展迟缓儿童错失及早接受适当教育和治疗的机会。民间社会福利团体大力的倡导之下,首先在 1993 年修订通过的儿童福利法中将发展迟缓儿童与其家庭的早期疗育服务纳入该法的保障中(王国羽,1996)。目前台湾透过立法来维护发展迟缓儿童之权益,主要有儿童及少年福利与权益保障法、特殊教育法、幼儿教育及照顾法、特殊教育法、身心障碍者权益保障法等四项,整合不同政府层级和部门,例如中央部会的卫生福利部、教育部、内政部和地方政府各局处等;也结合不同专业领域人员例如社政、卫生、教育、警政等;共同推动儿童发展早期发现与筛检、通报转介与个案管理、联合评估、疗育与服务、家庭支持服务等工作,以提供发展迟缓儿童及其家庭一适性的整合性服务。

## 二、台湾早期疗育的服务流程

2013 年修正通过的「发展迟缓儿童早期疗育服务实施方案」系台湾推动早期疗育的主要依据,包括「发现与筛检」、「通报转介与个案管理」、「联合评估」、「疗

育与服务」为服务主要内涵,兹说明如下。

### (一) 发现与筛检

此阶段的工作重点在于在预防和早期发现,工作内容包括(1)运用各种宣导管道,加强家长及相关人员对儿童发展之认知;(2)加强孕产妇产前照护,减少高危险群新生儿的诞生;(3)推展 0 至六岁之儿童发展筛检,以期早期发现发展迟缓个案,适时办理通报、评估及予以妥适之疗育。(4)加强办理弱势家庭发展迟缓儿童之发现,及早转介疗育服务。

### (二) 通报转介与个案管理

此阶段的工作重点在于进行通报转介和个案管理,工作内容包括(1)辅导下列机构及人员办理疑似发展迟缓儿童通报措施:社区保母系统、社会福利机构、托育人员、保育人员、助理保育人员、教保人员、助理教保人员、社会工作人员、社会工作师、一般家长、监护者;(2)辅导下列机构及人员办理疑似发展迟缓儿童通报措施:医疗机构、医师、护理师、物理治疗师、职能治疗师、心理师、其他相关治疗师,并汇送疑似发展迟缓或异常儿童资讯,转介通报转介中心提供后续服务;(3)辅导办理疑似发展迟缓儿童通报措施:

各公、私立幼儿园、学校、教保服务人员，并汇送疑似发展迟缓儿童资讯，转介通报转介中心提供后续服务；(4) 设立通报转介中心，建立单一窗口，统筹汇整疑似发展迟缓儿童资料，办理下列服务：宣导社会大众及家长对儿童发展及早期疗育的基本认知、提供对社会大众及家长的儿童发展谘询、受理通报个案、提供儿童发展联合评估资源谘询服务、其他有关转介、转衔、疗育服务谘询、追踪辅导及相关服务；(5) 设立个案管理中心，建立单一窗口，统筹办理下列服务：进行个案评估及拟定服务计画、执行服务计画以满足儿童及其家庭各项需求、结案及追踪、规划及执行家庭支持性活动；(6) 建立通报转介中心、个案管理中心与联合评估中心、评估医院、疗育单位间的个案转衔与追踪机制；(7) 运用个案管理系统，掌握个案动态，建立个案追踪机制；(8) 建构跨县市资源网络、早疗个案转介与追踪制度；(9) 受理父母或监护人之申请，建立疑似发展迟缓、发展迟缓儿童、身心障碍儿童指纹资料。目前22个地方政府（含福建省金门县及连江县）设置发展迟缓儿童早期疗育通报转介和个案管理中心，建立迟缓儿童各县市之单一窗口，统筹汇整疑似发展迟缓儿童资料，以利各项通报转介和个案管理工作之推动。

### (三) 联合评估

此阶段的工作重点在於确认儿童是否为发展迟缓，工作内容包括(1) 每一县市至少设置一所联合评估中心、建立联合评估机制，并辅导公、私立医院规划组成发

展迟缓儿童联合评估团队，办理联合评估服务事宜，增加评估的可近性；(2) 建立评估团队工作人员间之完整评估流程与合作机制；(3) 辅导联合评估团队于个案评估日起八週内，填具综合报告书，提供家长并协助转介当地通报转介中心，以利后续服务之进行。目前卫生福利部已建置45家儿童发展联合评估中心。

### (四) 疗育与服务

此阶段的工作重点在于提供发展迟缓儿童及其家庭适性的整合性服务，工作内容包括(1) 辅导托婴中心、儿童少年安置及教养机构及早期疗育机构(含兼办早期疗育服务之身心障碍福利机构)收托发展迟缓儿童及身心障碍儿童，补助教材及设备，并提供托婴中心专业团队巡迴辅导服务，加强儿童融合托育的环境与成效；(2) 对发展迟缓儿童提供疗育、临时托育费用补助；(3) 规划改善全民健康保险早期疗育门诊医疗给付；(4) 辅导医疗机构提供发展迟缓儿童医疗复健之服务；(5) 辅导幼儿园招收发展迟缓儿童，提供特殊教育支援及专业团队服务，协助学习、生活、心理、复健训练及转衔辅导，加强儿童融合教育的环境与成效；(6) 建构发展迟缓儿童学前与国民教育之融合与转衔服务；(7) 在幼儿园或其它适当场所实施发展迟缓儿童特殊教育，并补助其教育费用；(8) 鼓励增设社区化之早期疗育机构，并规划多元与创新性服务计画；(9) 针对幼儿园提供巡迴辅导服务，加强教保服务人员对发展迟缓儿童融合教育之专业知能；(10) 建构早疗单位（社政、医疗、教

育)的合作模式,提供完善、连贯性的服务方案(11)提供到宅、到社区疗育据点、居家托育或其他定点之疗育服务,以满足早期疗育个案及家庭之需求。

### 三、台湾早期疗育的特色

台湾早期疗育发展迄今已超过廿年,以2013年为例,发展迟缓儿童的通报与转介人数约18,197人,接受个案管理人数约39,278人,个案疗育服务人数约25,473人(卫生福利部社会及家庭署,2013);主要特色包括「推展融合教育」、「拓展专业人力资源」、「提供适性课程与教学」、「提供友善且无障碍的校园环境」、「促进家庭参与」等五项,兹说明如下。

#### (一) 推展融合教育

在推展策略方面,包括立法保障安置在最少限制的环境、学前教育推动优先入园就读、提供巡回辅导、特殊教育、专业团队(例如复健师等)等;在推展成果方面,包括(1)发展迟缓儿童接受特殊教育的人数有逐年增加的趋势,多安置在普通班;(2)发展迟缓儿童安置在普通班,接受资源班或巡回辅导的支援,故班级数亦有逐年增加的趋势。

#### (二) 拓展专业人力资源

在推展策略方面,包括专业人力培育管道日增、教师在职进修资源系统多元化、建置专业团队合作模式等;在推展成果方面,包括(1)大学设立特殊教育系所培育特殊教育师资,目前约有14校;(2)专业人员培育方面,则鼓励优先设立沟通障碍、复健谘商、早期疗育、科技辅具等学系或

研究所,约有12校。

#### (三) 提供适性课程与教学

在推展策略方面,包括为每位学生拟定并执行个别化教育计画、提供多元且适性的评量、课程与教学活动等;在推展成果方面,包括(1)提供服务单位多能依法为发展迟缓儿童及其拟定个别化教育计画、个别化服务计画、个别化家庭服务计画等;(2)发展迟缓儿童多就读一般学校的普通班,内容包括一般课程、补救教学、社交技巧训练等。

#### (四) 提供友善且无障碍的校园环境

在推展策略方面,包括改善校园的物理环境、奖助特殊教育学生就学、提供无障碍生活评量与考试服务措施、提供教育辅助器材与相关支持服务、建置特殊教育网站及研发电脑辅助教学软体等;在推展成果方面,包括(1)透过督导与补助的双重机制,逐年改善校园环境,以增加发展迟缓活动和社会参与的机会;(2)提供就读普通班或普通学校的发展迟缓儿童支援服务,例如课业辅导、报读、巡回辅导、座谈或心理辅导、提供学习辅具等。

#### (五) 促进家庭参与

在推展策略方面,包括立法保障家长参与的权利、奖助民间团体办理家长成长计划、补助设置各县市特殊教育谘询服务、提供家庭支持服务等;在推展成果方面,包括(1)各级政府及学校有关身心障碍教育的各种委员会均需纳入家长代表;(2)家长参与拟定发展迟缓子女的个别化教育计画或个别化服务计划;(3)透过多元

化的家长成长活动来促进亲职增能，或通过电话或面谈的谘询提供家庭支援服务。

#### 四、结语

早期疗育是一项人性化、主动且为专业性整合的服务，透过各专业如医疗复健、特殊教育、家庭支持、福利服务及专业谘询等整合介入，除协助儿童发展之外，亦对家庭提供必要之支持服务；目的为透过福利与服务之提供，以减少儿童迟缓程度且促进其学习与适应，以及提升家庭的能力，更能有效减少长期的社会成本(国立台中教育大学, 2015)。

#### 参考文献

卫生福利部 (2013)。臺闽地区发展迟缓儿童早期疗育概况表。资料来源：2015 年 4 月 7 日  
[www.sfaa.gov.tw/SFAA/Search/List.aspx?query=%E6%97%A9%E6%9C%9F%E7%99%82%E8%82%B2](http://www.sfaa.gov.tw/SFAA/Search/List.aspx?query=%E6%97%A9%E6%9C%9F%E7%99%82%E8%82%B2)

卫生福利部 (2015)。儿童发展联合评估中心名单。资料来源：2015 年 4 月 7 日  
[www.hpa.gov.tw/BHPNet/Web/HealthTopic/TopicBulletin.aspx?No=201307230012&parentid=200712250006](http://www.hpa.gov.tw/BHPNet/Web/HealthTopic/TopicBulletin.aspx?No=201307230012&parentid=200712250006)

国立台中教育大学 (2015)。早期疗育资料库。资料来源：2015 年 4 月 7 日  
[ip192172.ntcu.edu.tw/index.php?inner=about\\_ei&num=1](http://ip192172.ntcu.edu.tw/index.php?inner=about_ei&num=1)

## 台湾海外游学体会之一——幼儿教师是幼儿教育的专家

### Taiwan Overseas Study Tour Experience— Early Childhood Teacher is the Expert in Early Childhood Education

孙英剑

Sun YinJian

Knowledge Universe Singapore (Pat's Schoolhouse)

#### 幼儿教师应成为幼儿教育的专家

幼儿教育与其他年龄层次的教育不同，这个年龄段的孩子存在着非常大的个体差异，不能用统一的标准评价他们，更不能够用统一的课本教授他们，对于教学的方法和手段也要针对孩子的特点来选用，这些都不是制定教学大纲的人所能够完成的部分。所以，老师在教育中的地位显得更为突出，更为重要。在灵活多变的教学过程中，老师是唯一了解班级里孩子们的个体差异的人。老师每天与孩子们朝夕相处，在不断的接触、观察、互动的过程中，老师掌握每个孩子的个性特征。针对孩子们的发展和进程，决定孩子们到底应该学得多广泛，学得多深奥，用什么方法能够发挥最好效果等，这样使教育达到最好的教学效果。所以老师一定要具备这种专家的态度和专家的能力，才能够胜任幼儿教师这个角色。在台湾，老师个个都是专家，她们决定班级的方案教学的目标和内容，设计安排班级的各种活动，甚至培训家长，把幼儿教育的工作搞得有声有色。在教研活动中与同济、园长、教授等，共同研讨，并成为大学幼教专业的客串讲

师，协助在校的师范学生更直接地了解幼教。

#### 幼儿园老师如何能够成为专家？

信任、宽容、放手

幼儿园的老师能不能成为专家呢？

“新生国小附幼”的张园长说：对老师要信任、宽容、放手。园长要坚信无论老师们的学历高低，只要学校坚持耐心的培养，在工作中不断地和老师们一起学习、研究、讨论，他们一定会成为一名幼儿教育的专家。确实，在台湾我们见到的每位老师面对幼儿教育的问题都侃侃而谈，对于幼儿和教育都有着独到的见解，真是令人佩服。

#### 指引、协助、鼓励

现在幼儿园的老师都经过专业的培训，多数都获得了大专学历，甚至更高的学历，具备了专业研究的基本条件。老师们在实践中获得了很多第一手的材料，总结了很多的心得，也累积了很多的经验。但是基于没有一定的方向和能力，缺少有意识、有步骤、有计划地把理论和实践联系起来，把这些宝贵的实践经验上升到理论的高度，她们需要一定的指引和协助。在台湾，幼儿园老师们得

到了充分的指导和协助，一些有经验的专家教授，走进幼儿园，亲身与老师们共同实践，给老师们指点方向，并给与老师们思想和理论上的支持和协助，鼓励老师不断地在教育事业上上升，使老师们能够尽快地从一位幼儿园老师进入到专家的行列中。

### **机会、平台、蜕变**

当台湾的老师站在讲台上，她对着参观者镇定地讲解自己的幼教经验和心得时，我们由衷地钦佩她，认同她的观点。而从老师的脸上也看得出她对自己的肯定，还有在事业上获得的成就感和满足感。幼儿园的老师需要这样的机会，平台，展示自己的教学经验和成果，使自己在幼儿教育事业上形成完美的蜕变。

研讨会、杂志、报章、专业论坛等等都应该有幼儿教师的一片蓝天。

当然作为幼儿园老师本身，首先要把自己放在专家的位置上，以专业的态度对待自己的工作，除了努力的学习，必要的专业知识的学习，在工作中用专业的角度去看待和分析孩子们一个小小的动作，一个小小的思想，一个小小的言语，在工作中不断反思、不断学习、不断进取。争取尽快地站在幼教的舞台上，展示自己的教学成果，讨论教学方向，推进幼教氛围，带动新生力量，在幼教界形成一个百家争鸣、百家齐放的欣欣向荣的景象。

