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Front Cover: *Super Hero Man beats Godzilla!* by Sanechan Nuttawat, age 5 years, K2 Newton, MFS@Compassvale2  
"Godzilla and the Super Hero Man!"

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### *From the Editor*

Half the academic year has gone by. You have had your hands full with your pre-schoolers, but they did settle down and now you are on to the second half of the year.

Looking at your young charges that are active, curious, some are quieter than others, a few make you smile, a few make you worry; this is our garden variety. In this issue, Dr Yvonne Chan writes about resilience in every child. Resilience is not about teaching numbers or the alphabet. Dr Chan defines it as 'the mental health and psychosocial state of wellbeing which allows the individual to realise his or her potential and cope with the normal stresses of life'. Look at your young children again, with this definition in mind, how many would you be able to say have this resilience in them? I think it is a characteristic that is very important for all of us. Read her article for her 7C's Well-Being Programme.

Enjoy yourself too with the other articles contributed by writers who range in ages, preschool experiences and their different jobs within our sector.

I want to introduce another topic – the Code of Ethics (COE). AECES has been conducting COE workshops for centre leaders and practitioners. To date, we had 500 leaders who attended our workshops. We invite you to write about ethical issues you may have faced in the workplace, seeking views from our community of early childhood professionals. Through this, let us make the Code of Ethics a living document, a daily companion of our practice, one where we can learn to apply appropriate principles of good practice that help practitioners adopt an ethical response and uphold to the highest professional standards. Your contributions can be sent to me, at [ruth@aeces.org](mailto:ruth@aeces.org).

Ruth Wong  
Editor

# An Inquiry-Based Project to Promote Well-Being and Develop Resilience in Preschool Children in Singapore

Yvonne Chan Yoke Yin  
SEED Institute, Singapore

## Introduction

In Singapore, a meritocratic society, parent expectations for academic achievement often begin early in life (Ebbeck & Gokhale, 2004; Ebbeck & Warrior, 2008; Zakaria, 2006). When children's stress symptoms are not recognised or managed effectively, long-term effects can be serious and may include behavioural and social problems, mental illness, ill health and lack of fulfilment, well-being, resilience and happiness in life (Thomas, 2006). Parents seeking help for their child patients for mental health disorders in Singapore have risen and peaked in 2008, and the reasons include academic stress, as well as peer and family pressure to do well in school (Tan & Huang, 2010).

Research has emphasised the importance of early childhood as a time for promoting resilience (Linke & Radich, 2010; Masten & Gewirtz, 2006; Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). Resilience by definition is the mental health and psychosocial state of wellbeing which allows the individual to realise his or her potential and cope with the normal stresses of life. Resilience is a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity (Luthar, Suniya & Cicchetti, 2000, p.543; WHO, 2011). Positive relationships and environments

that support healthy cognitive, social, emotional and physical development provide the foundation for young children to develop the resources and skills they need to cope and adapt to adversity throughout childhood and the rest of their lives (Masten & Gewirtz, 2006; Pizzolongo & Hunter, 2011).

## Purpose of the Study

A well-being program was implemented in 2012 in selected Singaporean kindergartens classes with 5 and 6 years old children. The aim of the well-being program was to address the physical and psychological considerations that impact on child health and self esteem. The well-being program focused on building children's capacity to cope with academic stresses faced by Singaporean children in the school system.

## The 7 C's Well-Being Programme

The well-being programme was adapted from concepts taken from *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2009); Grotberg's (1995) *I Have, I Am, I Can* model; and Laevers' (2000) *Experiential Education (EXE)* model. It was also based on different theories about early childhood. The well-being programme was targeted at promoting

well-being and developing resilience through developing:

- i) Emotional well-being and self understanding (I AM);
- ii) Social well-being and social understanding (I HAVE); and
- iii) Skills for successful learning and developing resilience (I CAN).

The 7 C's programme was targeted at developing in children -

Confidence	Connectness
Cooperation	Compassion
Communication	Creativity
Commitment	

This was by having children participate in the *I AM, I HAVE, I CAN scrapbook project*.

### Method

#### *The setting*

The study was conducted in Kindergarten Two classes (6 year old children) in eight different preschool settings in Singapore, excluding the pilot centre. A total of 85 children participated in the study. A purposive sample was chosen for this study. The class teachers participating in the project have between one and a half years to twenty one years of teaching experience in the profession. Their teaching qualifications ranged from Diploma in Teaching, Diploma in Leadership, and Degree in Early Childhood Education.

#### *Participants*

The class teachers helped facilitate the inquiry based project in the classroom. The children participated in different tasks in the project. The researcher acted as a

mentor to the teachers, supporting them in the projects.

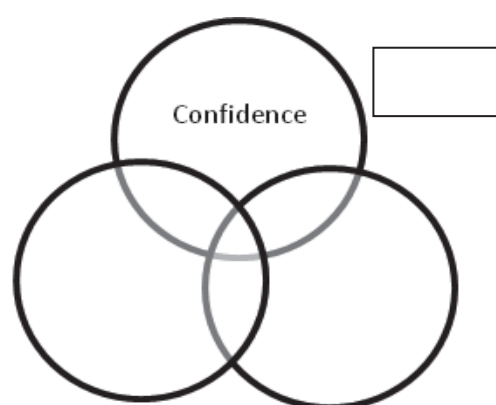
### Process

At different stages in the study the teacher discussed with the children topics related to developing resilience. The children were required to reflect on the topics and draw and document their thoughts into a scrapbook. The teacher helped those children who were not yet able to write to scribe their ideas next to their drawings. The children were given time to discuss, draw and comment on different topics related to resilience over a period of 10 weeks.

#### *The stages*

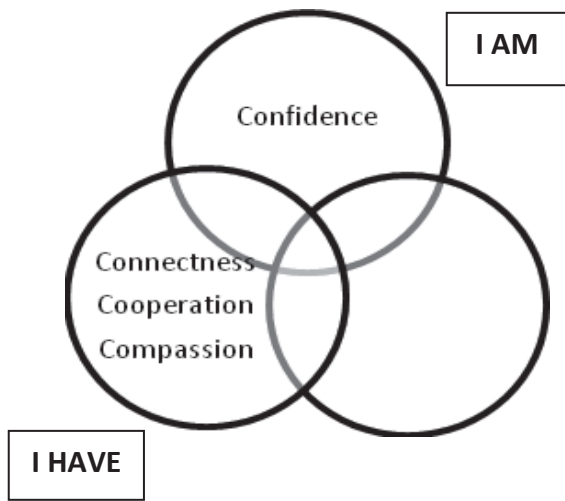
The different stages for the project were the following:

Stage 1 – Develop Emotional well-being and self understanding (I AM)



Children were encouraged at this stage to discuss their feelings. They were also made to be aware about what was unique and positive about themselves.

Stage 2 – Develop Social well-being and social understanding (I HAVE)



During this stage, children explored how they could get along with others by contributing to a group, cooperating with others and showing compassion for others.

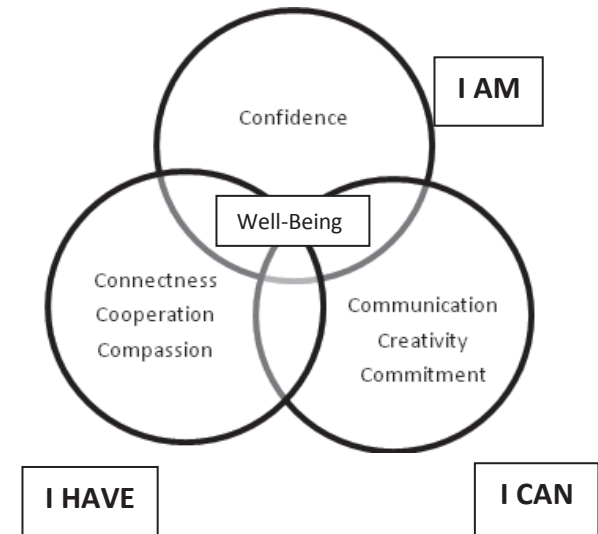
Stage 3 – Develop Skills for successful learning and developing resilience (I CAN)



At this stage, children learned that it was important to be able to communicate well, to be creative (problem-solve) and to

be committed to being successful in their learning.

Stage 4 – Measuring the impact of the programme on well-being



The feedback from the teachers was gathered to help the researcher understand the effectiveness of the programme in helping build resilience in the children using the inquiry-based strategy.

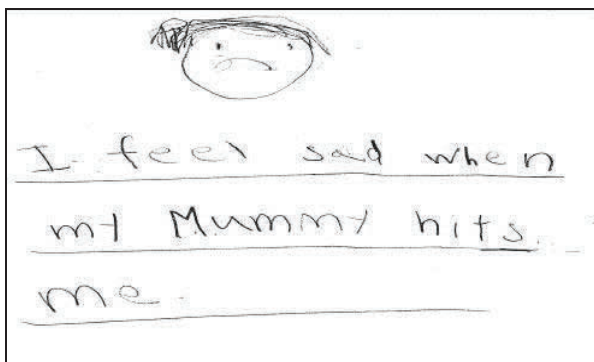
### Data Collection and Analysis

A reflection for each task was written by the teachers. The reflections highlighted what the teachers noted about the children’s resilience as they worked through activities in the various learning areas

### I AM Emotional Well-Being and Self Understanding

Task 1 (CONFIDENCE)  
Happy and Sad moments for me

**Objective:** To help children express their emotions



*Reflections by teachers for Task 1:*

The teachers noted that many of the children were happiest doing things with their families or with their friends. Children were noted to be happy when they did the things they liked. Sad moments for the children included: times of separation, sickness or when experiencing conflict with others. One child shared that she was extremely sad and misses her father who had to go away to work in another country.

The teachers felt that the task helped them to be more aware of the children's emotions. Teachers were provoked to think of what they could do to help children stay happy. One teacher added that she needed to be more sensitive and pay more attention to the children's emotional needs. By doing so, it would

enable her to support children's responses appropriately to challenges.

**Task 2 (CONFIDENCE)**  
My self portrait

**Objective:** To help develop the child's self concept (ideas about self)



*Reflections of teachers for Task 2:*

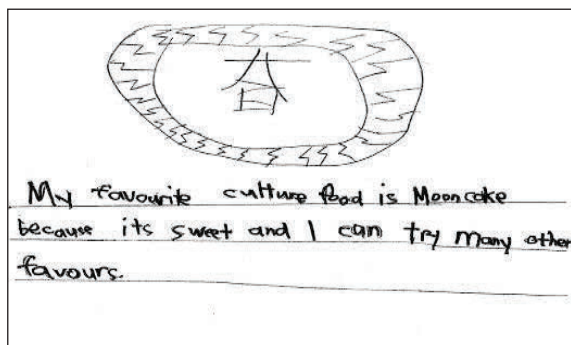
The teachers noted that some of the children's portraits had a close resemblance to themselves. The children seemed to recognise their uniqueness. Some children were able to share that their looks resembled that of their parents. A few children shared how they would like to look differently. One boy was noted to refuse drawing his curly hair because he was the only one in class with curly hair. Teachers said the task provided the opportunity to help children recognise that they were different, but

also unique. It was important for children to be able to respect that everyone was unique.

### Task 3 (CONFIDENCE)

My special dish from my culture

Objective: To help develop the child's self-identity (self that is shared with other people and society)



#### Reflections of teachers for Task 3:

Many of the children were unsure of their cultural dishes initially. This included a few foreign students living in Singapore. Many children referred more to their favourite dishes instead. It is interesting to note that children in Singapore are taught to embrace diversity in a multi-cultural society from young. The children seemed to enjoy food from the different races. The children were asked to interview their parents at home about the subject matter. The children became

more aware of dishes from their cultures and were able to complete their given task back in school. Teachers used the opportunity to highlight to children that dishes have different origins and distinct characteristics.

### Task 4 (CONFIDENCE)

I am good at ...

Objective: To help develop the child's self esteem (evaluative dimension of self concept)



#### Reflections of teachers for Task 4:

Some children were lost initially when naming something that they were good at doing. For children who were able to do so they were proud and felt good in acknowledging their strengths. Their strengths ranged from skills in non-academic to academic tasks. From Task 4, the children realised that they were good in different areas. Children shared with the teachers that they have those strengths because they practice often,

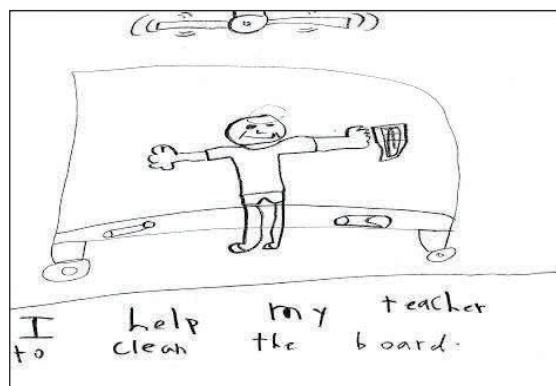
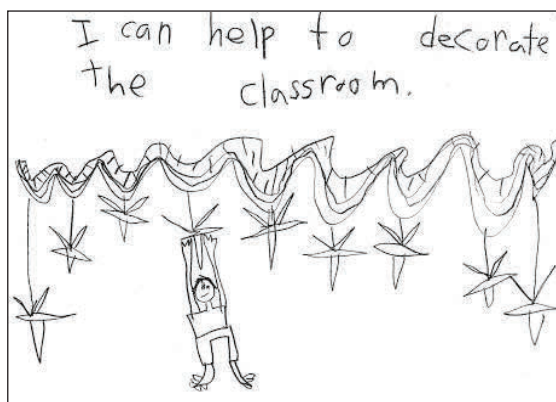
and learnt from their family members or teachers how to be good at it. A few added that 'practice makes perfect'. A teacher noted that children needed positive feedback, assurance and praise from adults to feel confident about themselves, even if they were at an emergent stage of learning a new skill. Their effort in learning should not be neglected. Teachers felt that strengths and talents in children can be both innate or can be nurtured through the opportunities provided for them.

**I HAVE**

**Social well-being and social understanding**

Task 5 (CONNECTEDNESS)  
In class I can help by...

Objective: To help develop the child's sense of belonging to the classroom



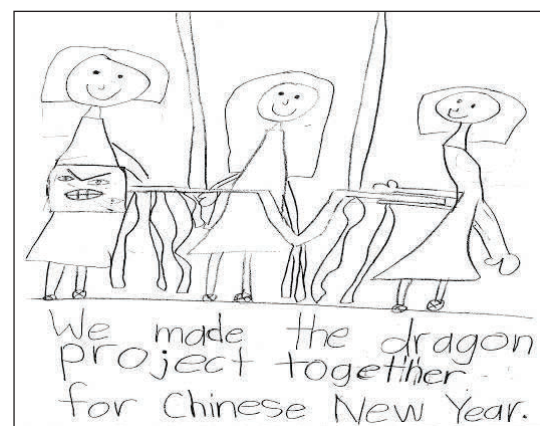
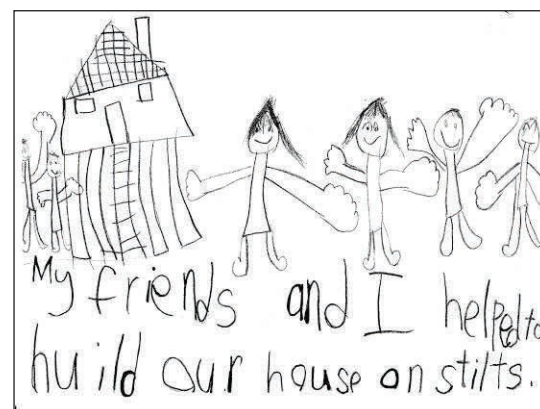
*Reflections of teachers for Task 5:*

This was an easy task for the children. They were excited to share the tasks they could do with their peers. Their shared tasks included helping to tidy up, reminding their friends the class rules or helping their friends to decode words in writing. It was noted that the children knew that they played a part in caring for the class and helping each other.

Task 6 (COOPERATION)

I can do things together with others in my class

Objective: To help develop the child's ability to cooperate on a task with their classmates



*Reflections of teachers for Task 6:*

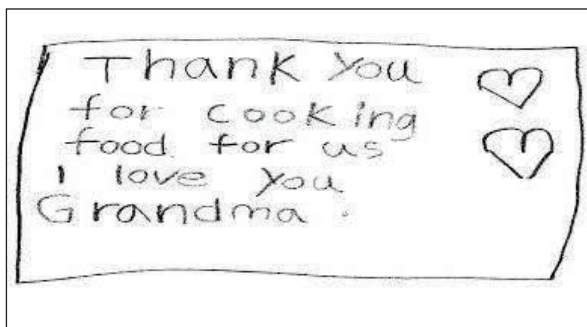
The children valued encounters with their friends during play time. To the

delight of one teacher they could recall other group activities that they did with their friends previously. The children shared how they felt working in a group and the disagreements that they sometimes encountered. The teachers noted that for children to cooperate they need to learn how to compromise. Learning to choose the correct partner to work with is a valuable skill to acquire to avoid unnecessary disagreement. The teachers felt that this was an important skill for children to acquire in order for them to accomplish tasks with others, even in the future.

#### Task 7 (COMPASSION)

I am making a card or craft for others

Objective: To help develop the child's sense of compassion towards



*I drew a card for my mummy who is sick*

#### Reflections of teachers for Task 7:

Many of the children did not understand what it meant to show compassion. However one teacher managed to help children to see that it was about making someone happy when they may otherwise be sad. A child shared he could make a card for daddy who is staying in hospital to get well soon, and another girl shared to make a card for someone who is dying in hospital to cheer them up. For most of the other children, they were more interested in making cards for their parents or mothers. On a positive note, the activity was a reflection of how much they valued their parents. The children displayed their love and gratefulness to their love ones through the effort they put into completing their gifts for their loved ones.

A teacher noted that compassion could be taught by role modeling to children when the opportunity arose. The task for the teachers is to educate children to think beyond themselves and spare a thought for others. Upon reflection on facilitating the task, another teacher shared that children living in a comfortable and competitive environment like Singapore may find it difficult to show compassion towards others. This is the result of having difficulty in understanding poverty and taking the perspective of others in need.

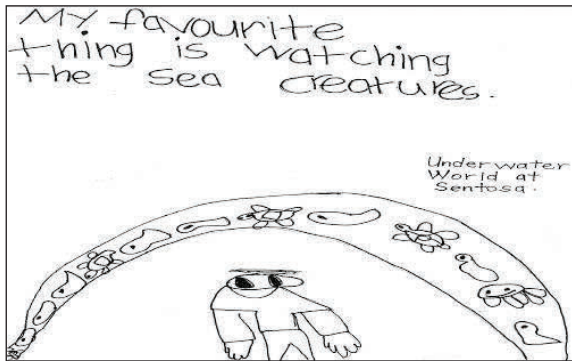
#### I CAN

**Skills for successful learning and developing resilience**

#### Task 8 (COMMUNICATION)

My favourite thing

Objective: To help develop the child's ability to express ideas and feelings



*Reflections of teachers for Task 8:*

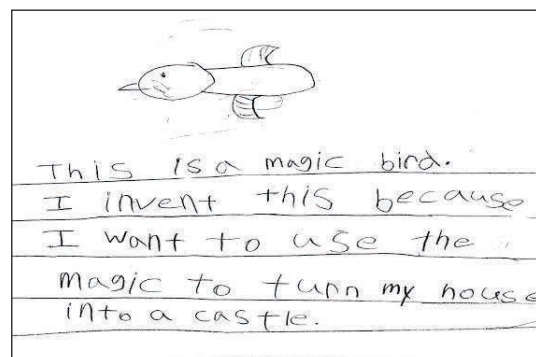
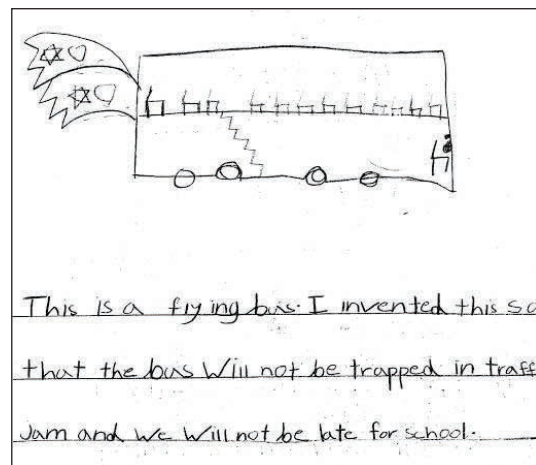
Children were eager to share their favourite thing, this included toys, activities they enjoyed, food they love to eat, books, clothes and accessories. For many of the children, their toys served as their companion and helped them to learn things. Some had difficulty sharing one favourite thing because they had a few. The teachers noted that this was one of the tasks the children enjoyed most because they loved to talk about what mattered to them most. A few teachers noted that children had grown in confidence in presenting and expressing their ideas and thoughts.

Task 9  
I am creative (CREATIVITY)

Objective: To help develop the child's ability to use images or words to convey meaning

*Reflections of teachers for Task 9:*

Some children did not understand the word 'invention'. With examples given they were able to understand and provide examples. The teachers found the children to be very creative. The children enjoyed drawing their inventions and could talk a lot about them. Many of the children invented things to help themselves and others. They used images and words to describe their products. One teacher shared that she involved the parents in planning and discussion, and she was amazed by the products that resulted. Another teacher in her

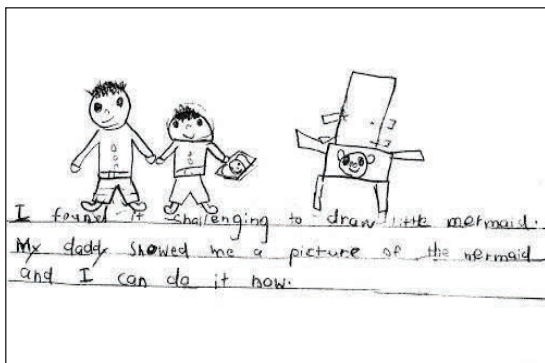
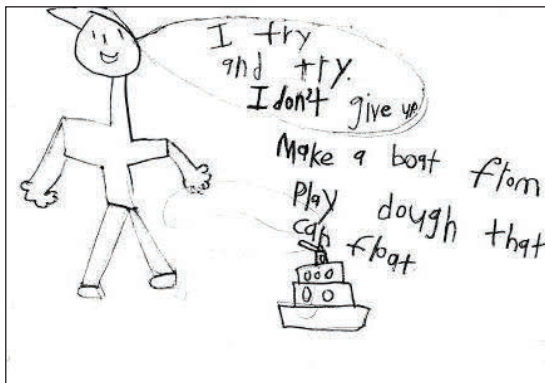


reflection noted that unlike adults, to children the things that they create are things that they can be very proud of.

#### Task 10

I can persevere (COMMITMENT)

Objective: To help the child persevere at tasks



#### Reflections of Teachers for Task 10:

Children were noted to show a sense of satisfaction when they could complete a challenging task. During the challenging tasks planned for the children by the teachers in the different settings, the children were noted encouraging their peers and themselves with expressions like 'Don't give up', 'You can do it' etc. With encouragement, children were noted to be able to persevere in tasks until they completed them. In one context, children asked the teacher if they

could continue the next day and to try again. The teacher was moved by the children's commitment in trying and not giving up. Another teacher noted that after the task, children were more willing to persevere, and they were more willing to render help when others faced difficulties.

#### Research Findings

##### *Learning for the teachers*

The teachers shared that the project has benefitted them in the different ways. Firstly, for some teachers it has reinforced their belief on how they should work with children. The teachers shared that they could understand their children better. After allowing the children to share their hidden thoughts and taking time to listen to them, a closer relationship was fostered between them. Teachers felt that they could understand what was affecting their children, and it was as if they took a peek into the children's inner self. Discovering their motives and purposes behind their actions and reactions helped the teachers to be more effective to catering to the children's needs.

According to the teachers, the inquiry based project has helped boost the children's self esteem and confidence. They thought that by helping the children to feel good about themselves the children would believe that they were capable of accomplishing anything.

Another teacher shared that she was more aware of the types of activities she could conduct to help build children's confidence and well being. Giving

children skills to resolve conflicts was also essential. Upon diligent documentation and deliberate reflection, teachers have become aware of the importance of resilience. Understanding how to be resilient was important even for children transition to Primary school.

One teacher concluded her reflections by stating that the project had helped her personally, as well as the children, to improve resilience and well being.

#### *Learning for the children*

The teachers noted that the children developed in the following areas from participating in the project. Children had gained more confidence from participating in the project. They were more aware of their strengths and knew that they were unique and competent. Some children were aware that they could do more than they expected. In terms of relating with others, the children had grown closer to their teachers in the research. In addition, they had learnt to resolve conflicts with others and showed that they were more appreciative than before of the people around them. Children were noted to be more willing to try when faced with challenges.

The scrapbook allowed children to acknowledge their own feelings and provided opportunities for the children to share more about themselves. Children had gained confidence in *Show and Tell*. By drawing on the scrapbook, it provided children with a platform to organise their thoughts and ideas and have their voices heard.

Teachers noted that many of the children enjoyed doing the tasks and were not stressed when completing the tasks. They were proud of the special book and asked their teachers when they could take their books home to share with their family members.

#### *Challenges faced by teachers*

The teachers felt that the time constraint that they faced was a challenge for facilitating the project. Teachers needed time to complete the curriculum, accreditation and other administrative tasks. Teachers shared that it would be beneficial if the duration for the project could be extended.

Another challenge was that the teachers felt that they needed more experience to be able to ask open-ended questions to help encourage children to share the relevant information to the inquiry based project.

The concept in the project was challenging for some of the children. Teachers had to spend time explaining the concepts to the children. They provided additional related activities to help children to understand the concepts better.

The recent bad weather in Singapore had caused many children to fall ill. Teachers found it challenging to complete all the tasks within the deadline and to help children make up for the task they had missed.

Children with additional need had difficulty completing their tasks. They had difficulty understanding. The teachers were advised to simplify their tasks for these children and to allow them to

complete only what they were capable of doing.

### **Recommendations for Improving the Project**

The teachers interviewed made the following recommendations for improving the inquiry-based project. The time frame for the project should be extended. Another suggestion was to integrate the project into the curriculum instead of facilitating it separately from the curriculum. It would provide children with more time to explore the topic on resilience in depth and time to apply and to reinforce the concepts learnt. In addition, the teachers felt more activities could be conducted prior to having the children complete their task in their scrapbook. This would help the children to understand the concepts better. One teacher suggested that activities could include parent involvement.

### **Conclusion**

The inquiry based project was helpful in providing teachers with an opportunity to understand resilience and explore how it could be taught to children. The teachers' reflections on the tasks were helpful in allowing the teachers to reflect on their practice and to explore ways to enhance children's understanding of resilience.

It was rewarding to note that many of the children have shown progress in their confidence, ability to interact with others and to persist in their learning. There were challenges faced by the teachers, but their commitment to the project has reaped positive outcomes.

Learning to be resilient is important for children, and providing them ample time for them to learn about it, is significant. It is only when children are aware of who they are they develop the spirit of *I CAN* as they engage in the process of resilience building. Besides academic pursuits, preschool should be a time for acquiring skills and dispositions for life. It is only when children say *I AM* and *I HAVE* that they can confidently say to themselves *I CAN* to the future challenges in their lives.

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If you are interested to engage in the same inquiry, please write to [chanyy@seedinstitute.edu.sg](mailto:chanyy@seedinstitute.edu.sg)

## **Combining Echoic behaviour with Picture Exchange Communication System to Support Verbalization in Child Diagnosed with Autism**

Naomi Lee Shi En  
Ngee Ann Polytechnic

### **Introduction**

The voluntary welfare organisation (VVO) I am working with provides programmes and services for children who have special disabilities. The students I work with vary in their severity across the autism spectrum. Some have speech, while others have difficulties expressing themselves clearly. Some adapt but some face difficulties in regulating themselves when faced with unexpected situations. Autism has been identified as a shortfall in communication and social skills among the other many deficits (Benedict, 2007).

### **Issue Encountered**

My class is a high support needs class which caters to students who need additional guidance and support. Alex is one of them. He is a five year old boy diagnosed with autism. Alex does not have speech and fails to exhibit social interaction and responsiveness when spoken to by others. Alex's main mode of communication is gesturing, such as pulling, pointing or even leading a familiar adult by the hand to what he wants. When he does not get what he wants or when others do not understand him, Alex would bang his head on the wall. His parents constantly asked me when he would start talking, and when the situation would get better.

### **Focus of study**

Occasionally, Alex would make sounds, imitating what I said. After working with him for six months, he has become more confident around his peers and communicates via Picture Exchange Communication System (Phase IV: Construct a sentence with gestural prompts). Although he still did not verbalise any word, he did not show much of inappropriate behaviours. This prompted me to investigate if I was able to get Alex to verbalise. I looked into the Picture Exchange Communication System, would this also help Alex to express himself better? I was curious and wondered whether a combination of echoic behaviour with the Picture Exchange Communication System could support verbalisation. These were two separate tools that encouraged and supported communication skills. By combining them, I postulated that they would help Alex to be spontaneous in verbalising independently when communicating.

My central question for this action research was: "How can the use of echoic behaviour complement the Picture Exchange Communication System to help Alex to verbalise?" My aim was for Alex to use echoic behaviour to imitate language, and the Picture Exchange Communication System was to help him

organise his thoughts so as to communicate through verbalising.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Autism Spectrum Disorder and Communication Challenges**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects children in many ways. It is a neurodevelopment disorder that is characterized by profound deficits in communication skills, socialisation, cognitive abilities and repetitive behaviours (Levy, Mandell & Schultz, 2009). Each has different levels of severity.

Some children with autism are delayed in speech and language skills or have totally no language skill (Charlop-Christy & Carpenter, 2000). Without the ability to develop functional communication, these children fail to have appropriate social interaction and emotional attachment toward others (Schreibman, 2000). It can be problematic as communication skills are necessary for the developmental domains.

#### **Strategies to improve verbal skill**

It is thus important to plan for intervention and to teach communication skills to these children, from a tender age, because research has shown us that there are significant benefits of early intervention on language development in children with autism (Sundberg & Partington, 1998).

**Echoic behaviour** is stimulated by auditory responses. Skinner wrote that “behavior generally stimulates the behavior” (Skinner, 1957, p. 138). Verbal behaviour is derived from the concept of

Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), behaviour that is “reinforced through the mediation of other persons” (Skinner, 1957, p.2). It is identified on the foundation of a four-term contingency that involves stimuli, verbal responses, listener responses and the reinforcing effects of listener responses (Michael, 1982).

#### **Picture Exchange Communication System**

**(PECS)**, developed by Bondy and Frost (1994), is an augmented alternative communication (AAC) system designed to teach functional communication to children with limited speech and communication skills. PECS consists of a structured model, the participant exchanges a photograph or a symbol card for a desired item. It can be gradually expanded to multiple words and used for labeling and commenting. This intervention is supported by ABA. Its emphasis is to encourage the participant to communicate spontaneously (Bondy & Frost, 1994).

**Reinforcement.** Miltenberger (2008, p.73) mentioned that “reinforcement is the process in which a behaviour is strengthened by the immediate consequence that reliably follows its occurrence”. It is used to “strengthen” behaviour and to make it happen more frequently on a consistent basis. Reinforcement can be termed as “positive reinforcement”. It uses motivators which encourages and prompt frequent performance of the behaviour (Cooper et al, 2007).

### Methodology

Baseline data gathering focused on how Alex communicated with others, his communication level and comparing it with his language developmental

milestones. This was done through interviews, observations and a checklist (Fig 1). Alex’s strengths and gaps were identified so that a concrete plan could be formulated and put into action.

Baseline data			
Information	Method	Source	Place
<b>Communication at home</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>communication method</li> <li>Who he communicates with</li> </ul>	Interview	Parents	Phone
<b>Language milestones</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>speech and communication skills milestones</li> </ul>	Checklist	Alex	Classroom
<b>Communication in school</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>communication method</li> <li>speech and communication skills benchmark</li> </ul>	Journal observation notes	Naomi (me)	Classroom

Fig 1: Triangulation table

### Findings

**Interview** with Alex’s mother was conducted over the phone. She talked about a large chart board fixed on the wall of their living room. The chart was filled with PECS (Fig 2). They had learnt about PECS and were practising it.



Fig 2

Alex used the symbol cards for a one-to-one exchange. He would scan the board for what he wanted, pick the card and pass it to his mother. This type of exchange and request was spontaneous and occurred only for his preferred items

or activities (e.g. crayons, durian, milk, art, and puzzle). Throughout the exchange and request, Alex would not open his mouth to verbalise. Occasionally, he may pull or gesture to his parents to get what he wanted.

**A checklist** was used as a pre-intervention evaluation to benchmark and identify Alex’s competence in the language domain. This checklist was taken from the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorder. It is based on typical children’s development of speech and language skills and categorised by age. With the specific age identified, it provides a clear analysis and highlights whether the child is on track or may have delays in certain areas.

Findings from this checklist showed that Alex had not achieved the milestones of a 4-5 year old for speech and language skills:

1. Alex did not speak in sentences and he could not verbalise items spontaneously. He needed verbal prompts from a communicative partner.
2. He showed interest in wanting to verbalise, however no words came out from his mouth.
3. He would gesture by pointing to the symbol cards that the teacher was reading from.
4. He has good receptive skills. When told a familiar story, Alex was able to predict the story sequence by participating, through gestures and making sounds.

**Observations** were done over the 3 days that Alex usually attended school. It was conducted in specific settings, viz working with teacher and snack time which were Alex's favourite activities. They also provided conducive one-to-one interaction with him. The settings were in a natural environment.

In school, Alex used his own PECS communication book (Fig 3).



Fig 3

We observed that PECS provided Alex with a structured and organised frame of

mind, it helped him put his thoughts in order. Occasionally, Alex made sounds, imitating me when I read words, or when I showed him his favourite toys like animal sets, crayons and the bubbles kit. But he did not produce words. He would try to fill in the blanks of sentences of familiar story lines/songs with gestures and movements, such as knocking, or by making sounds.

### Action Plan 1

It was evident that Alex was strong with PECS, in school and at home. Hence, the action research was to determine the possibility of increasing Alex's verbalisation by introducing echoic behaviour to compliment his PECS.

### Sessions identified for the Action Plan to take place

I chose three allocated sessions - working with teacher, snack time and the music period. These were chosen because I had one-to-one direct teaching and interaction with Alex. When Alex used PECS to communicate, I would use reinforcement, verbal and immediate, to motivate Alex to verbalise and to give him the confidence to try.

Duration of each interaction was set to two minutes.

**Working with teacher.** For each working session with Alex, I used a motivator. To find out what that motivator could be, I used toys that he liked. I showed him 5 toys and he was allowed to choose his top three desired toys. After three sessions, his top 3 turned out to be the car, a musical toy and bubbles (Fig 4).

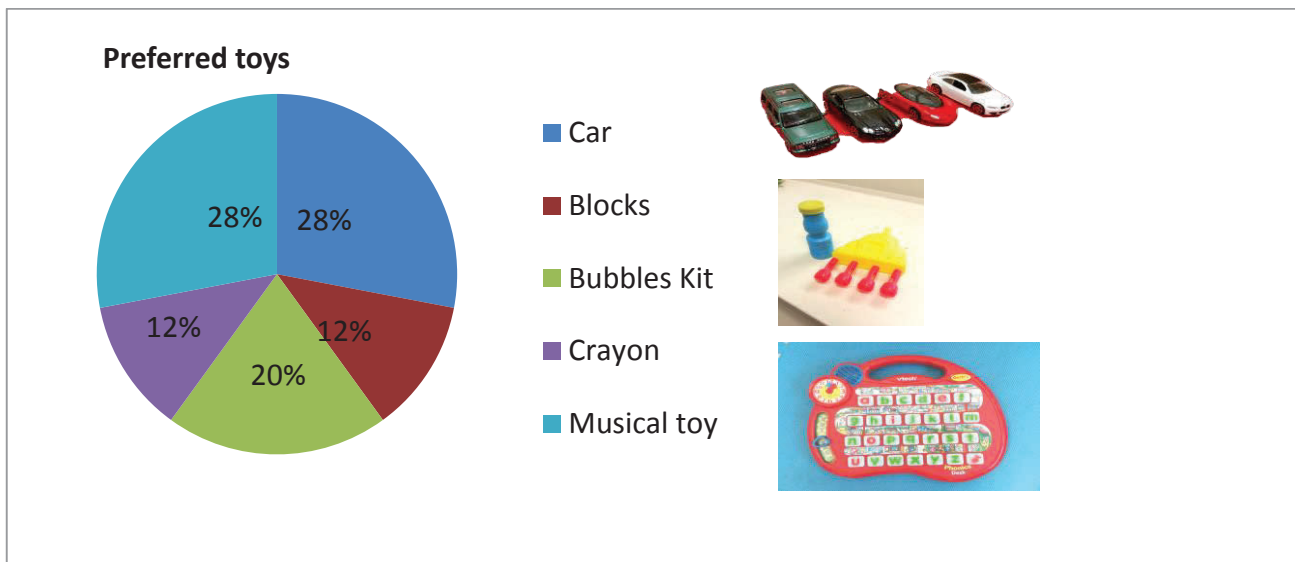


Fig 4: Alex’s top 3 motivational toys

During a working session, I would present the 3 toys for Alex to choose one. After 2 minutes of an interactive session, I would say ‘finish’ and provide him the 3 toys again, it was three tries per session.

**8-step implementation strategy** used in each session:

1. Teacher to present favourite item.
  2. Alex to go through communication book, to scan and pick the PECS cards to represent what he wants to communicate.
  3. Alex to place the card on the sentence strip and pass this strip to the communicative partner (teacher).
  4. Alex to point to each card in sequence “Teacher Naomi” + “I want” + “item” to communicate.
  5. Teacher to verbalise the picture card he points to.
  6. Alex to imitate using echoic behavior.
- If Alex was successful with steps 1-6, it would progress to 7 and 8:
7. As Alex points and gestures, the teacher would not say anything but

would wait for 5 seconds for him to verbalise.

8. Teacher would vocalise after 5 seconds if he did not vocalise.

### Findings

The intervention strategies produced significant results within two weeks of execution.

**Working with teacher.** It was observed that Alex had difficulties pronouncing “I want”, he would say “ir”. Alex was able to say the word ‘car’ independently as it was one of the motivating toys that he requested for most frequently. Snack time was one of Alex’s favourite activity, his favourite food was a “positive reinforcement” (Cooper et al, 2007). It encouraged echoic behavior. In order to obtain the food he wanted, he imitated when given verbal prompts. Echoic behaviour and PECS continued to be used together throughout the whole session. With practice, he was able to verbalise ‘corn’ independently and within five seconds.

**Music period.** I used “Old MacDonald had a farm” to conduct this session. I sang the song and Alex would fill in the blanks to the song. Alex would be verbalising the name of the animals (e.g. dog, cow, cat, sheep, horse) by saying “Teacher Naomi” + “I want” + “animal name” with PECS. I would pass Alex the animal figure named so that he could play with it as the song continued.

Alex responded well to this. Although some words were not clear, he was able to imitate and verbalise certain words when I used immediate reinforcement and motivators. As Skinner (1957) indicated, the student did not have to say the actual word.

### **Action Plan 2**

Because of Alex’s progress in the 2 weeks, I decided to take it one step further by including Alex’s parents. They introduced the same 8-step implementation strategy at home as they had expressed their interest in wanting Alex to verbalise. This would ensure generalisation and consistency of skills learnt as children with autism learn better through a consistent work flow (Benedict, 2007).

### **Implementation**

Alex’s mother picked work time and meal time as these were frequent activities that gave her the opportunity to carry out the PECS exchange. For his motivator, or “positive reinforcement” (Cooper et al, 2007), milk was chosen as it was his favourite food. Alex’s mother learnt how to rate him using the rating

scale I provided. She used it for four weeks.

### **Findings**

**Home setting.** He was able to verbalise some words and even those that were not on the list. His mother noted that she now only had to wait for five seconds or less for him to verbalise with PECS. This indicated that Alex understood the concept of verbalising his request. Similar favourable results were obtained for meal times at home.

Alex’s mother shared a video of Alex during work time, showing him verbalising the names of shapes and number puzzles as he dug it out of a pot of sand. He did this spontaneously and independently. His pronunciation was not clear, but I could hear him as he tried to make sounds to represent the words he could not say.

**School setting.** Throughout the course of eight weeks, journal entries were kept. The results were promising:

- It showed that Alex verbalised in all the sessions using PECS and echoic behavior. He verbalised words that motivated him more and those that were easy for him to articulate, such as ‘ir’ and ‘car’, independently and the most number of times. He was more responsive and willing to imitate when he scored well in verbal prompts (echoic behaviour) and independent verbalisation.
- Alex still needed echoic behaviour support for his bubbles kit and music as he faced difficulties with articulation. When he found it hard to verbalise ‘teacher omi’, and other

difficult words, it was deemed as not verbalising.

- At snack time, there was positive feedback on Alex. He was able to indicate and identify the food that he brought. He verbalized 'corn' independently and frequently as that was the snack he usually brought. When it came to 'banana', it was more difficult because the word has three syllables. It was also a snack he seldom brought to school.
- For the music period, the data was the most interesting. Before implementation, Alex did not verbalise any name of the animals. But with consistency and emphasis placed across the setting, Alex understood the concept and transferred that knowledge and skill to eventually imitate and model the names of the animals. At the end of it, he was able to name animals such as cat and cow, independently and within three

seconds. The song, Old Macdonald had a farm, and the animal figures motivated him to verbalise the animal names. He made the request and got to play with the animal toys. 'Horse' was one word he still needed help with.

### Discussion

The action plans proved to be highly achievable and satisfactory. Echoic behaviour with PECS did support Alex to verbalise. Alex not only imitated but he spontaneously verbalised certain high frequently words. Assessing his speech and communication skill milestone, he was able to qualify "yes" in some areas. By modifying the combination of echoic behaviour and PECS, he was able to partially meet in other areas, for instance, he could name some letters, numbers and he could communicate better

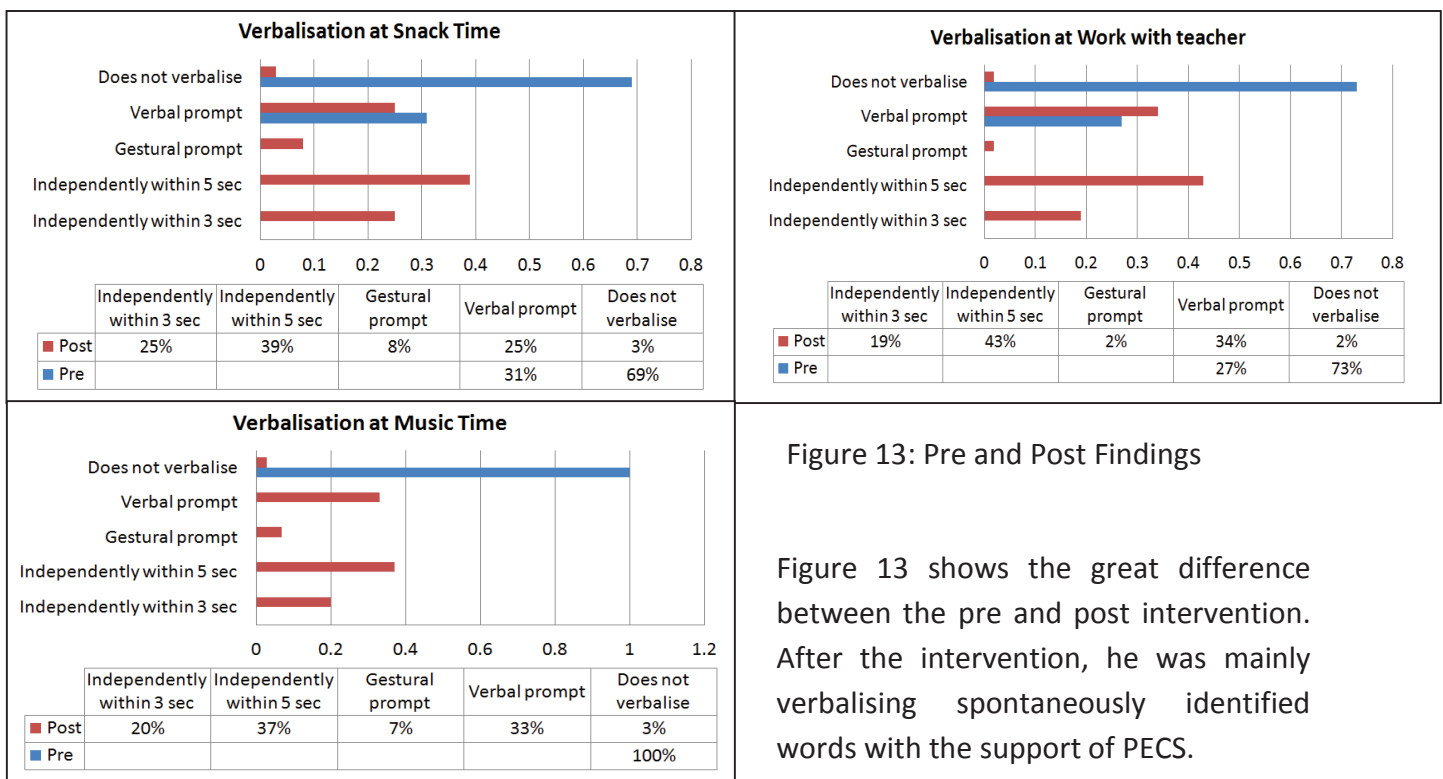


Figure 13: Pre and Post Findings

Figure 13 shows the great difference between the pre and post intervention. After the intervention, he was mainly verbalising spontaneously identified words with the support of PECS.

### **Strong PECS foundation**

Returning to the root of Alex's deficit, it was not good enough to just teach him to verbalize. Alex needed concrete or visual prompts. PECS is a system that did not need initial engagement in imitation, joint attention or clear communication motivator. It acted as a prompt that guided Alex to put his thoughts into sentences. Like all behavioral approaches, with the increased number of repetitions of the behavior, it can lead to trained behaviour which sets the foundation to routinely master the skill being taught (Bondy & Frost, 1994). Similarly, it was used for practice in echoic behavior and for Alex to understand verbalising. Alex's strong knowledge of PECS exchange (Phase IV) was an advantage to move the action plan forward. The visual prompts helped him to focus his thoughts which then supported and translated it into speech through echoic behaviour.

### **Consistency in implementation**

At home and in school, the 8-step strategy was constant. Children with autism learn best in a consistent work flow because they seek reassurance and predictability as both give them confidence in what they do (Levy, Mandell & Schultz, 2009). Alex's mother and I worked very closely together in implementing the strategies in a consistent manner.

### **Value of modeling**

The sequence of modeling-imitation-reinforcement is effective in establishing echoic behavior as it may be shaped either into more complex responses of

gesture, behaviour or other classes of speech and communication skills (Hedge, 1998). His mother and I modeled and encouraged echoic behaviour by verbalising and getting Alex to imitate and repeat; there was no doubt that Alex understood the connections and used the words appropriately. We provided immediate and frequent verbal prompts of echoic behaviour. These verbal prompts became less and less intrusive until Alex needed less or none of it at all (Skinner 1957). The aim of modeling for Alex was to demonstrate to him that he could verbalise to others so that they could hear and understand him.

### **Reflection and Recommendation**

I discovered that while this combined approach was useful in teaching children with autism, it required the child to have the fundamental skill of PECS exchange and the ability to blabber. Alex had both, so it was easier to achieve a favourable outcome for this action research. Throughout this journey, I kept thinking of ways to do better and of how to get the words out of Alex. He amazed me when he was able verbalise much more than what was planned.

I thought of other action researches to continue to help Alex:

1. How to get Alex to verbalise spontaneously without an adult facilitating.
2. How to expand Alex's speech and communication skill and vocabulary.
3. Explore how the results of this action research have implications on the role of the teacher and home/school partnership?

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If you are interested to engage in the same inquiry, please write to [naomilee@rainbowcentre.org.sg](mailto:naomilee@rainbowcentre.org.sg)

## Connecting Children with Nature

Kidz Meadow Early Childhood and Development Centres

### Introduction

More than 40 years ago, environmentalist Rachel Carson wrote, “If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in” (Carson, 1998).

Can teachers be that adult?

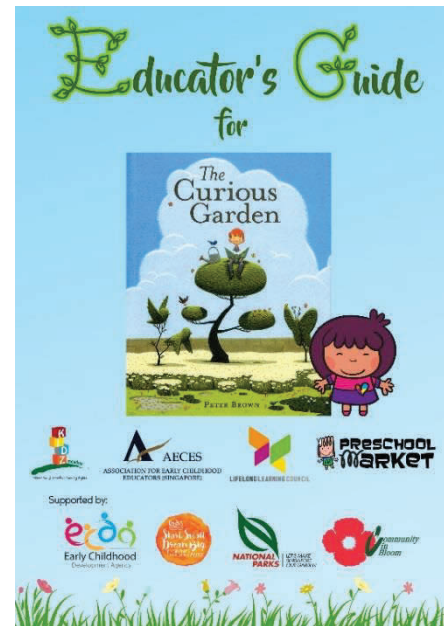
With this in mind, the teachers at Kidz Meadow Early Childhood and Development Centres set off to develop a series of nature related activities suitable for preschool children, as they embarked on the *A Garden in Every Preschool* project.

This project is in partnership with Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore) (AECES), Preschool Market and Lifelong Learning Council, and supported by Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) and National Parks Board (NParks).

In conjunction with ‘Start Small Dream Big’ (SSDB) 2017, the preschool teachers from Kidz Meadow Early Childhood and Development Centres conceptualised and developed an Educator’s Guide.

The aim of the Educator’s Guide is to instill interest among educators and preschoolers to care for nature and to encourage them to set up their own garden in their schools.

### The Educator’s Guide



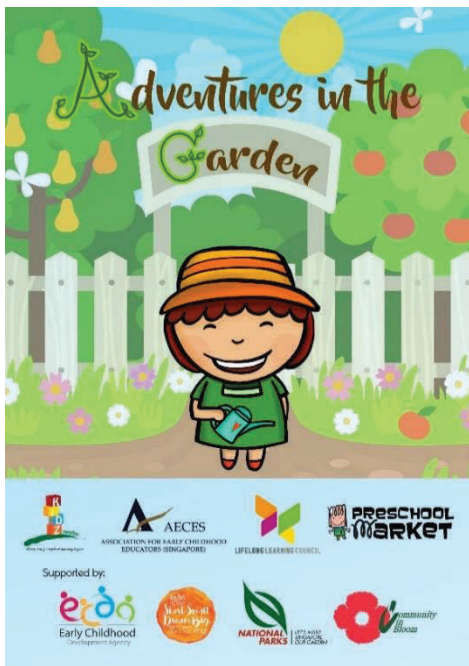
The Educator’s Guide is conceived from a children’s book entitled “The Curious Garden” written by Peter Brown, a nature enthusiast. It is a story about a young boy, Liam, who saw the sad state of plants on a deserted railway and decided to take care of it. Soon, his little garden began to spread to all parts of the city. His dedication to beautifying the environment with nature, united the community and created awareness about the importance of caring for Mother Nature. Through this guide, we hope that Liam’s spirit of kindness and perseverance will live on.

The experience that children acquire through connecting with nature complements and support the six core domains of the early childhood Nurturing Early Learners framework: social and

emotional development, language and literacy, numeracy, discovery of the world, aesthetic and creative expression and gross motor development.

### Adventures in the Garden

Once the garden has been set up, there should be a continuity plan so that teachers can keep their gardens alive. With this in mind, the accompanying activity book called *Adventures in the Garden* was developed.



Teachers can gain ideas on integrating ‘Garden Time’ into their daily curriculum. There are many simple-to-do, practical, fun and age-appropriate activities to engage the preschoolers in maintaining, exploring and having fun taking care of their gardens.

Some of these activities are games such as the Caterpillar Hunt, weed pruning, Mozzie Wipeout checks, landscaping, adopt a plant and tea picnics in the garden. The children will certainly have something to look forward to everyday!

### Learning Journeys

Let us take a look at the journey of the children at Kidz Meadow Early Childhood Development Centres since they embarked on the *A Garden in Every Preschool* project.



Picture 1: A teacher reading to the children, “The Curious Garden” book, outdoors.

### Trash to Treasure

In May 2017, in conjunction with Mother’s Day, the teachers at Kidz Meadow Childcare Centre at Yishun held a meaningful event, “Trash to Treasure”. The aim was to use recycled materials for gardening. Parents contributed recycled materials that were converted into gardening essentials such as shovels and pots for the plants.

The learning points were bountiful as children embarked on water babies planting, dragon fruit planting and terrarium making.

As the children were very much involved in the whole process, there was a sense of ownership and responsibility for them to take great care of the plants in the garden. Children would peek into the dragon fruit plants, every now and then, just to ensure that they were growing. When the seeds started to sprout their leaves, the children

were very excited and felt a sense of achievement!

Wei Lin exclaimed in delight, “Look, it’s a leaf!” Haziq, an inquisitive child, reached out to grab the leaf. “Be careful!” Wei Lin cautioned softly. Haziq hesitated and then stroked the baby leaf gently. Wei Lin smiled.

Teachers shared that not all children liked to work with garden soil. Initially, they were mere observers, looking on apprehensively at what their peers were doing. After much encouragement and witnessing the joy on their friends’ faces, they joined in the activity and asked many questions such as why seeds were so small and why the dragon fruit was ‘slippery’.

What made it more memorable was that the plants were given to their mothers as part of the Mother’s Day gifts. These plants were then placed in the school’s indoor garden for the children to care for.



Pictures 2 and 3: Children extracting the dragon fruit seeds before planting them.



### *Playing Nature Detective*

K2 children played nature detective at Pasir Ris Park in May.

Calling themselves the “ABC Detectives”, the children were tasked to search for the 26 letters that were hidden within the park, using only nature elements such as leaves, bark and twigs.

Apart from introducing children to the alphabet in a creative way, several learning elements were intentionally included to encourage them to pay attention to nature’s details. Mathematical concepts such as patterns, geometry and sizes were also introduced. Through their conversations about nature, the children learnt new words too.



Picture 4: Children spotted the letter ‘X’.

### *Exploring Sizes in Nature*

Children at Yishun centre went on a ‘leave-hunt’ during their weekly nature walks. Their task was to ‘hunt’ for five leaves of increasing sizes.

Armed with gloves and Ziploc bags, the children looked for leaves around the neighbourhood. They were seen discussing about the leaves they had collected. Some even engaged in negotiations where they exchanged the leaves amongst themselves to ensure they had collected 5 different leaves of increasing sizes.

Back in the classroom, the teacher instructed the children to arrange the leaves from smallest to biggest. The children labelled their leaves from 1 to 5; 1 being the smallest leaf and 5 the biggest (Picture 5 below).



Picture 5

The activity enhanced their understanding of numeracy concepts. It also provided opportunities for children to practise expressive and receptive language skills. “Contact with nature may be as important to children as good nutrition and adequate sleep.” (Gill, 2005)

### Conclusion

In today’s digital age where gadgets have taken over most of our lives, children and families often have limited opportunities to interact with nature. Adults need to think more carefully about strategies to ensure that nature-child connections can be made everyday. Having a garden in the preschool is one way to allow for daily engagement with nature.

As preschool educators, we need to think beyond traditional playgrounds and envision to create nature-based outdoor classrooms. The project has reminded us that no matter where we live, we all have the chance to enjoy nature’s endearing

beauty and goodness. We must ensure that the next generation will not be deprived of that same opportunity.

It is our hope that through this project, more children will develop a sense of love and care for the world they live in and have the awareness that they can do their part to save the environment for generations to come.

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## Unfolding Creative Minds

Eileen Chia Ming Xiu

Nurul Amalina Omar

Tan Xin Yi



Emma, a toddler who has just turned two and a half, waddles across the room as she approaches the new set of crayons and stack of blank papers sitting on the low table. She grabs hold of a crayon and without any hesitation, begins making marks all over the paper. In the brief moment that Emma is focused on the activity, she creates lines, circles and overlaps colour after colour on the same area of the paper. At the same time, Trevor, a six year old preschooler, approaches the same table and takes a moment to stare at the fresh sheet of paper set out in front of him. He then proceeds to draw short green straight and zig-zag lines at the bottom end.



Picture 1: Trevor's grass

He comments "I don't know how to draw a horse". He picks up a brown crayon, pauses and then turns to ask "can you show me?" If this scenario sounds familiar to you, then we are sure you will agree it can raise quite a concern. Often we may think, how do we teach children to be creative thinkers? But the real question is how do we keep them growing up as an artist.

### Art for Young Children

In its truest form, art is an expression of our feelings, ideas and emotions. Art offers opportunities for thoughts to be recreated, represented and reflected. Therefore, art is unique to the individual. Engagement in the arts encourages children to connect their thoughts and action to "create personal, invested understandings about themselves and their places within the

world” (McLennan, 2010, p. 84). Children are naturally curious and innovative explorers who learn through hands-on experimentation. As educators, we should encourage opportunities for children to be in touch with their natural instincts and value the ideas that drive their enthusiasm.

### What is Process Art?

The essence behind process art experiences is to emphasize on the processes children go through, more than the product outcome. Through art, children experiment with colours, paints, patterns, textures, shapes and lines.

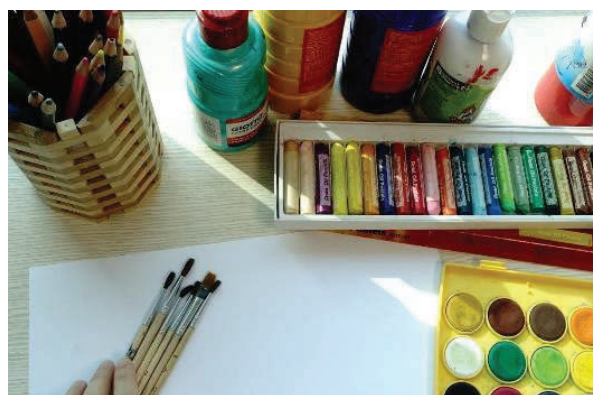


Taking a process-approach in art empowers children to engage in the art activity without any pressure or expectation to model after a certain product sample. According to Atkinson (2014), art should be thought of as “an encounter, as a language of expression and inquiry” (p.35). It should be about discovering the sounds made by our hands in the course of material exploration, the stickiness of glue on our fingers, the unexpected ways of seeing and using materials, and the varied possibilities of thinking and interpretation (Atkinson, 2014). Just like with our toddler, Emma, art should invoke feelings of freedom to

explore and enjoy the emotions involved without being concerned over the final outcome or product. In essence, process art is creating something that speaks of you, and not a copy of someone else.

### Implementing Process Art in the Preschool Classroom

Early childhood educators in the classroom need to shift perspectives away from ‘what the children will make’ in art activities, and instead reframe our minds to think ‘what will the children do’ through the art experience. Intuitively, when we focus on what the children will *make* by the end of an art activity, we restrict our vision to only seeing the end-product, in which Atkinson (2014) questions how much is missed out on when only the outcomes are considered. These lens limit our observations of the children’s encounters, and authentic reactions to the materials, and also stifles the initial ideas of curiosity and enthusiasm children bring with them to explore the techniques and materials presented (Atkinson, 2014). In process art experiences however, specific art skills are still introduced, but children are presented opportunities to make their own associations with the techniques, and pursue decisions on how they would like to interact with the art mediums. When



children see the world of possibilities, they begin to understand that there are many 'rights' (corrects) to approach the same experience, and their interpretations, although may differ from their friends, are all valued.

### Positive Outcomes of Process Art

Art experiences that are process-oriented encourage open-ended thinking, and creative problem solving. The key is in guiding children to become self-aware and intentional with their own cognitive thinking of what they are doing while they are doing it (Edwards, 2010). Dictating that children create identical copies of another's work not only causes the lost in meaning of self-expression, but also the opportunity to communicate their feelings and ideas through an assortment of means entirely. As children bring in their sensory impressions, imaginations, and personal feelings into the artistic experience, they are immersed in the art making process in ways that are "unique, different and right for them" (Edwards, 2010, p. 16). Process art involves trial and error with art materials, and helps children acquire analytical and investigative skills. It encourages children to be directors of their own learning through setting personal artistic goals, and persevering through the artistic process. In addition, allowing children to appreciate multiple ways of approaching a problem invites opportunities for perspective taking and choice making. When children grow self-assured that all interpretations are welcomed, their confidence to express themselves increases, thus leading to higher creativity and self-esteem.

### Extending Children's Experiences through Art Discussions



Often we may overlook on art conversations, however how we talk to children about their artwork conveys more than any of the preparations we make for the activity. Are we placing more value on a certain type of art as opposed to another? A rule of the thumb is to focus your comments on the experience and the process. Refrain from asking about the product such as "What is it?" or "What are you making?" as these questions assume that the art created is intended to be something (Atkinson, 2014). Instead open the floor for discussions about the artistic process like "Tell me about how you created this pattern of shapes". Interestingly, the thoughts and preferences expressed may surprise us and even lead us to new questions, or insights about children and art.



### Helping Parents to Understand Art

As educators, a vital part of our job is to educate parents and caregivers about the importance of process art for young children. One way around this is to display children's process artwork, but more importantly, we should initiate to speak with parents about their child's work. Parents may miss out on knowing the reasons and decisions that have led to the actions made, and hence it is our role to help build those bridges of understandings and help them develop an appreciation towards their child's creations.

McLennan (2010) urges educators to consider the influence we hold today in empowering children to be innovative thinkers and bold experimenters of tomorrow. By ways of respecting children and providing regular opportunities for aesthetic exploration, questioning, discussion and reflection of their own art experiences, we encourage our toddlers to grow into driven individuals who feel good

about themselves and who value the diversity in their own and others' ideas (McLennan, 2010). Helping children to appreciate their own points of view forms the foundation for greater confidence and creativity, and in our opinion, one of the best places to start is through experiences in process art.

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## A Teacher's Journey to Mindfulness: Opportunities for Joy, Hope, and Compassion

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Many mindfulness techniques and goals have natural connections for teachers, especially teachers of young children. Helping students expand their awareness beyond themselves, focus their attention, visualize, and be kind to one another are key aspects of a teacher's responsibilities. Mindfulness supports teachers as they focus on positive emotions and making the most of opportunities to connect with children, and consequently increases the positivity of the classroom. Teaching mindfulness practices in early childhood classrooms allows young children to be creative, live in the present moment, and develop the positive, winning attitudes they need for success in the future.

When I taught prekindergarten in an inclusive early childhood setting several years ago, I always tried to steer thoughts in positive directions. During our days together, I focused on joyful energy to guide the children in appreciating and treasuring the small joys in life, which helped them expand their awareness outside themselves. For example, during circle time each morning, we gathered to welcome one another with daily rituals,

such as singing, calendar time, morning meditations, and a kind thought for the day, to establish a true caring community. During story time, we brought picture books alive, touching children's hearts as we used puppets, a reader's theater, and props with costumes to portray characters who displayed kindness and citizenship skills. The dramatic play area centers promoted creativity, imagination, and wonder, with peers helping one another. Math, science, and social studies learning centers often focused on children's abilities, interests, and strengths. Throughout the day, children were encouraged to share personal stories with drawings and writing and notes about kind deeds, placing them into imagination jars made of clay. During neighborhood walks, I would invite them to notice beautiful moments in nature, such as the first snowfall, a rainbow after a thunderstorm, baby ducks who found a new home behind our sandbox, or birds at a feeder. Just before rest time or when the class became restless, I would play soft music while our class relaxed together. During this "joy break," we would practice breathing exercises and visualizations using wordless picture books about nature.

Currently, I teach undergraduate early childhood education students at a liberal arts university, where I introduce mindfulness—the techniques I used so

naturally and passionately many years ago. In this article, I discuss the origin and benefits of using mindfulness with young children. In addition, I examine qualities of a mindful teacher as well as several environmental practices and curriculum strategies for teaching and promoting mindfulness in an early childhood classroom.

### **Mindfulness: Enrichment for Life and Teaching**

Until recently, mindfulness with children had been a virtually unexplored area of research (Coholic, 2010). Mindfulness is a quality of attention, the process of paying attention, moment to moment, to one's thoughts, surroundings, and actions without judgment but with gratitude and joy (Daleo, 1996). Mindfulness, which is fundamentally a way of being, a way of inhabiting one's body, mind, and moment-by-moment experience with openness and receptivity (Shapiro & White, 2014), invites the individual back to the preciousness of the present moment (Rechtschaffen, 2014). In addition, mindfulness depends on the ability to see clearly (Shapiro & White, 2014). As this happens, a person moves closer to being more authentic. Thus, practicing mindfulness is purposeful and intentional (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freeman, 2006). Mindfulness is considered "heartfulness," which promotes both an open-minded and open-hearted appreciation of the world for its intrinsic beauty and good (Jennings, 2015).

### **Origins of Mindfulness**

The concept of mindfulness has been

attributed to Gautama Buddha, who lived about 2,600 years ago (Coholic, 2010). Initially, mindfulness meditation was developed as a holistic teaching method, the purposes of which were to relieve suffering, increase compassion and kindness throughout a culture, and support individuals in attaining the peace of enlightenment (Armstrong, 2001). Weiss (2004) explains that mindfulness was meant to support people in seeing themselves clearly and understanding themselves and others better so that they could live more fulfilling and joyful lives. Kabat-Zinn (1994), a pioneer in the development of mindfulness in North America, practiced mindfulness meditation to encourage (1) awareness by paying purposeful, nonjudgmental attention in the present moment and (2) the unfolding of experience moment by moment. Kabat-Zinn (1994) stated that through mindfulness, people examine who they are and question their views of the world and their places in it. Other aspects of mindfulness include conscious breathing (Nhat Hanh, 1991) and mindfulness-based stress-reduction program (Kabat-Zinn, 2009), which combines sitting and walking meditation, light yoga, and body awareness that emphasizes a nonjudgmental acceptance.

Grossman (2008) noted that mindfulness is a difficult concept to define, let alone operationalize. Every discipline has a unique definition of mindfulness. For example, social workers are interested in how mindfulness can support the development of the professional self as well as contribute to community work. In the fields of psychology and medicine,

practitioners take holistic views of mindfulness. In education, mindfulness often involves the idea of creating space for children to make sense of their experiences in a holistic manner. Finally, in cognitive behavior programs, mindfulness has been found effective in helping with anxiety, chronic pain, stress, and mood disturbances (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Sagula & Rice, 2004). Research and practice have demonstrated the potential of mindfulness to benefit people of all ages, abilities, needs, and developmental stages.

### **Benefits of Mindfulness**

Mindfulness comprises three essential components: intention, attention, and attitude (Shapiro & White, 2014). Intention involves individuals knowing why they do what they do or their ultimate goal or vision. Attention includes focusing fully on the present moment instead of thinking about the past or future. Attitude provides the ability to stay kind, open, and curious. All three elements are interconnected and interwoven during mindful activities.

Benefits from practicing mindfulness include the support of children's immune functions, cognitive development, attention skills, and emotional regulation (Rechtschaffen, 2014). In addition, mindfulness promotes happiness and can increase empathy in some children. Practicing daily mindfulness exercises can help develop a sense of balance and a calm, concentrated mind capable of creativity, imagination, happiness, tolerance, and compassion (Greenland, 2010). For example, when children have the opportunity to practice mindfulness in a classroom, they may have a better

chance of achieving a specific goal and defining their target skills or identifying content areas on which to focus by being more motivated and engaged.

In many cases, taking action mindfully builds confidence to contribute in a meaningful way to a classroom community (Hawn, 2011). Additional benefits may include improved attention, interpersonal relationships, and stress management; strengthened resilience; increased enthusiasm for learning; infused joy in the classroom community; and raised self-esteem (Hawn, 2011). With such mindfulness, children may be ready to change the world for the better (Greenland, 2010). Taking action mindfully builds confidence to contribute in a meaningful way to a classroom community (Hawn, 2011).

### **Teaching with the Heart: Qualities of a Mindful Teacher**

Mindfulness can play an important role in effective teaching. Mindful teaching is enlightened by contemplative practices and teacher inquiry attending to emotions (MacDonald & Shirley, 2009). When teachers practice conscious mindful teaching, they do not memorize what someone else has already discovered; instead, they use direct experiences in their own minds, bodies, and hearts (Rechtschaffen, 2014). Mindful awareness and behaviors such as attention, understanding, and authenticity help teachers maintain composure, compassion, and sensitivity to children's needs and interests, while supporting and building the resilience required to maintain

well-being in a highly stressful work environment (Jennings, 2015). For example, during the day, teachers need to attend to many issues and juggle several roles simultaneously in the classroom, which can leave them feeling overwhelmed. Daily mindfulness practice and reflection promote self-regulatory skills so teachers can better manage these daily classroom demands (Jennings, 2015). In many cases, the process of mindful teaching and reflection can help a teacher consider the many different ways children demonstrate engagement, develop mindful relationships with children and their families to support learning, and create culturally and linguistically supportive learning communities that celebrate individual differences (Dray & Wisneski, 2011).

When teachers are mindful of the social and emotional dynamics in their classrooms, they can apply this practice to creating situations that promote positivity (Jennings, 2015). An environment of positive emotions supports connections and positive resonance for children. As teachers become more mindfully aware of opportunities to connect with children, the positivity in the classroom can increase (Jennings, 2015). Five positive emotions teachers can promote while teaching are: (1) joy, (2) appreciation, (3) engagement, (4) hope, and (5) pride. When teachers enjoy their work, joy flourishes in the classroom. Most children are drawn to teachers who are joyful and who appreciate their hard work and effort (Dweck, 2007). Teachers can also instill hope in children that they can succeed and help them feel pride in their

accomplishments as they engage with them through genuine praise, compliments, and acts of appreciation. The heart of a mindful teacher projects a caring presence in the classroom. Heartfulness practices can enhance compassion toward both teachers and children (Rechtschaffen, 2014).

The essence of mindful teaching cannot be packaged, achieved by following a formula, or bought online. When beginning this practice, teachers should explore their own biases and embrace the awareness of who they really are as educators. Mindful teaching involves



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Compassion, authenticity, joyfulness—all of these qualities can be cultivated in the early childhood environment for creating a community of mindful young learners.

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recognizing and nurturing children's talents, unique personalities, and strengths in a calming and compassionate way. When teachers are able to acknowledge their own humanity, they are better able to create a classroom where children feel safe being themselves (Rechtschaffen, 2014). In order for children to become emotionally secure, they need their teachers to see and support their individuality (Hawn, 2011).

### Inspiring Mindful Early Childhood Environments

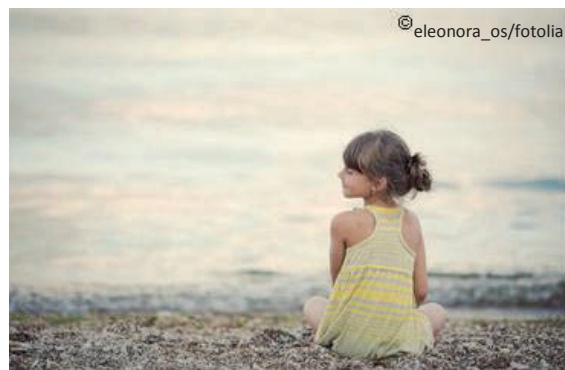
A large part of the work of teaching involves constructing a laboratory for learning that is broad and varied enough to challenge a range of interests and abilities and yet focused enough to offer children some coherent rituals and goals. The learning environment is a complex, living reflection of a teacher's values (Ayers, 2001). When considering and setting up the classroom environment for mindfulness, teachers should first make sure the environment is safe and feels supportive. Then they should introduce mindfulness to the children as a new way of seeing the world, interacting with one another, and knowing themselves. Mindfulness has great potential as the foundation for group work (Coholic, 2010), which may require a change in seating arrangement. For example, teachers may consider placing seats in a circle or in small groups, using inflated cushions for children with disabilities, and trying other configurations conducive to a sense of openness and community.

Teachers also may consider using different lighting options, providing comfortable chairs at varying heights, and placing a rocking chair near the literacy area of the classroom. Mindful spaces may include a peace corner with puppets and writing and drawing materials for conflict resolution between peers or a "Catch a Dream" corner equipped with a dream catcher in the classroom to invite stillness, solitude, and joy. Young children deserve beauty throughout the day, so it is important for teachers to have materials that are interesting and open-ended for

children to explore.

Children are especially open and receptive to the feelings and messages inspired by the arts. By exposing children to beautiful, uplifting artistic expression in the classroom, teachers provide opportunities for their hearts and minds to be filled with positive thoughts (Dermond, 2007). As children are incredible designers, especially when they use natural materials, centers with materials should provide opportunities for children to explore, take a break, reflect, and interact with peers (Friedman, 2005). For example, light tables allow young children to explore light, color, and shadows. Another addition to the classroom environment could be a loft where children can enjoy fantasy play, read picture books, use artistic apps on a tablet, play musical instruments, or relax and meditate. Such flexible spaces in the classroom environment provide a sense of security and comfort, allowing children to think, explore, and be mindful of their feelings and senses.

The classroom environment a teacher provides for mindfulness practices should



Meditations can awaken fantasy and imagination for young children by creating vivid scenes in their minds and motivating participation.

be respectful and allow for sharing of dreams, feelings, joy and laughter, and tears and hopes. When teachers envision and set up a mindful classroom environment, they may consider the following questions: (1) How can I provide opportunities in my classroom for children to relax and create? (2) What type of children's picture books can I provide in my reading center that can touch children's hearts? (3) Can I provide opportunities throughout the day for children to be compassionate and kind by offering dramatic play areas that are focused on the child's interests and motivating with open-ended materials? (4) How can I stay connected to families by offering documentation boards inside and outside my classroom with family posters and stories? (5) What type of sensory play and art materials should I have to stimulate children's imagination and creativity?

Finally, for teachers to embrace mindfulness and introduce it to all learners in their classrooms, all children, regardless of disabilities or needs, should enjoy full participation. One way to ensure full participation is to follow universal design with equipment, materials, activities, and curricula that allow access and learning goals to be achieved (CAST, 2014). For example, when buying furniture and materials, teachers must evaluate whether the materials can be used by all young children. Would the space in the classroom work for a wide range of competencies and abilities? With this in mind, teachers should also consider whether the classroom environment represents joy and security for all young children with multiple representations, engagement,

and expressions.

For children with autism, considering the behavior symptoms of autism and anxiety is important. Symptoms may include resistance to soothing, atypical attention, ritualistic behaviors, and repetitive movements (Lytle & Todd, 2009). As a result, a teacher may consider including the following activities and materials in a mindful corner of the classroom: headphones for a child with autism to listen to music or a storybook, a rocking chair in a library area that allows a child with autism to obtain needed vestibular input while looking at a book, a lava lamp near a sensory center to offer calming visual effects, and a visual picture script or social story illustrating a variety of yoga poses so a child with autism can model them with peers in the classroom. One of the major goals of a mindful teacher should be to ensure all children feel secure, safe, joyful, and included as part of the classroom community.

### **Building Classroom Community and Peer Relationships**

Compassion, authenticity, and joyfulness all can be cultivated in the classroom environment to create a community of mindful learners. When teachers envision their classroom environment for a community of mindful learners, they may consider opportunities for collaboration and helping one another. Mindful ways for developing and encouraging participation could include the following: giving children opportunities to support one another using a peer-buddy program, empowering children by engaging them through classroom jobs, establishing collaborative

learning approaches in which children help one another and reflect upon the needs of others, and becoming involved with service learning projects. Children can be involved in collecting of coloring books and crayons for the children's play room at a local children's hospital or visiting each grade level to collect a variety of canned goods for a food drive; such activities have the potential to foster a sense of community and other prosocial behaviors.

The bonding of the teacher, class, and school can cultivate a classroom community in which all members are cooperative, helpful, and concerned for others (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997).

#### **Mindfulness-Based Strategies and Teaching Practices**

Mindfulness differs considerably from early childhood content like math, reading, or science, so introducing a mindfulness curriculum into an early childhood classroom involves creativity and innovation; there is no cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all approach (Rechtschaffen, 2014). For example, while several early childhood content areas involve many parts of the mind, mindfulness targets the source and deals with the mind directly. As a result, mindfulness is an invitation to authenticity, not a behavioral modification (Rechtschaffen, 2014). During the early years, children are naturally eager, curious, and open to learning and playing. Children at this age develop the habits, values, and beliefs they will carry for the rest of their lives (Rechtschaffen, 2014).

Several mindfulness-based strategies and teaching practices are available for use

in early childhood classrooms to encourage children's natural curiosity. For example, chants, songs, rhymes, drama and creative dance, holistic art activities, relaxation games during circle time, and storytelling with puppets can provide mindfulness and positive energy in an early childhood classroom. Additional mindful strategies that may teach children joy, gratitude, optimism, and happiness include mindful breathing, mindful sensing, meditation, and guided visualization using nature picture books for young children.

#### **Mindful Breathing**

The benefits of mindful breathing have been recognized for centuries and across all cultures (Hawn, 2011). For young children, it promotes brain integration, strengthens self-awareness and attention, and creates a calming effect to decrease stress (Hawn, 2011). Children's breathing is the swinging door between their inner and outer worlds (Greenland, 2010). The relaxing process of mindful breathing is easy to teach. When teaching young children mindful breathing, the teacher may have them sit comfortably with their hands in their laps and eyes closed. Children who don't want to close their eyes can focus on a specific object in the classroom, such as a picture. They start breathing easily, feeling the rise and fall of their stomachs as they breathe. When they take slow, deep breaths, they can relax and focus. Practice while using a puppet or a snow globe for the children to watch as they breathe long breaths slowly out through their mouths a few times. After each breathing session, the teacher may

discuss with the class what it felt like; mindful breathing breaks can happen throughout the day. Teachers should use gentle voices when giving instructions and anticipate that time may be needed to eliminate noise distractions from the hallway or outside. At the end of a breathing session, the teacher may lead a few relaxing stretches, such as rotating the head from side to side and reaching to the sky on tiptoes.

### Mindful Sensing

Mindful sensing involves taking time to pay attention to all the senses by appreciating what one sees, hears, smells, tastes, and feels. Young children need to know that they can focus on their senses if they simply learn to center themselves and become fully aware of the sensations around them (Hawn, 2011). Examples of mindful sensing include focusing on nature during a nature walk around a neighborhood or on the playground; taking pictures outside using a digital camera or iPad and then taking time to examine the colors, shapes, and forms captured in each picture; focusing on a piece of fruit by examining the texture and taste; adding a variety of textures to a sensory table, such as sand, dirt, shells, pebbles, cornmeal, and snow; and exploring a variety of scents on cotton balls during a science experiment about the five senses. Another way to focus on the five senses during mindful sensing is to create a classroom garden. For example, oregano, rosemary, sage, and mint are herbs that are easy to grow in a sunny place in the classroom. All have scents that may appeal to children and the herbs can be used during snack

time and classroom cooking. Flowers and plants, such as marigolds and pansies, also do very well in small window gardens. These flowers come in gorgeous colors and can add Mother Nature’s beautiful touch to classrooms. Considering all of the above activities, teachers should encourage setting up classroom rules with clear structures and boundaries to ensure every child is safe, has fun, and enjoys learning.

### Meditation

Meditate means “ponder,” and meditation is a form of holistic practice to cultivate and quiet the mind (Hawn, 2011). Its benefits include lowering blood pressure, decreasing stress, and enhancing the immune system (Dermond, 2007). Meditation, which is a soothing, relaxing way to cope with the stress and anxiety of everyday life (Garth, 1992), helps to enhance mindfulness, heighten self-awareness, and promote tranquility (Garth, 1992; Greenland, 2010). Training young children to meditate at an early age

- *When the Forest Meets the Sea* (Baker, 1991a)
- *Window* (Baker, 1991b)
- *Rachel Carson: Preserving a Sense of Wonder* (Bruchac & Locker, 2009)
- *Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf* (Ehlert, 1991)
- *Miss Emma’s Wild Garden* (Grossnickle, 1997)
- *Mountain Dance* (Locker, 2001a)
- *Sky Tree* (Locker, 2001b)
- *Water Dance* (Locker, 2002)
- *Cloud Dance* (Locker, 2003)
- *Tell Me a Season* (McKenna-Siddals, 2001)
- *Fireflies for Nathan* (Oppenheim, 1996)
- *The Chipmunk Song* (Ryder, 1989)
- *Where Butterflies Grow* (Ryder, 1996)
- *Lost in the Woods* (Sams, 2004)
- *Loons in the Mist* (Sams, 2013)

Table 1. Children’s literature and nature: Picture books to inspire visualization for young children.

has the potential to benefit them, not only during early childhood but also during their adult lives (Garth, 1992).

A meditation can sometimes take the form of a story. The length of a meditation will be determined by the age of the children and their attention spans. Most meditations for young children can be between five and 10 minutes. When reading a meditation, the teacher's voice should be gentle, slow, and relaxed. The way a teacher uses his or her voice is very important. Reading a meditation differs from reading a picture or chapter book.

Each meditation has a theme; for example, a child might visit a fairy in a firefly forest, go to the moon, dance with elephants and bears at a circus, swim with a dolphin, or visit a secret garden. Adventures like these can awaken fantasy and imagination for young children by creating vivid scenes in their minds and motivating participation. One book teachers may consider for early childhood meditations is entitled *Moonbeam: A Book of Meditations for Children* (Garth, 1992).

As a teacher facilitates meditation with a class, the children may be encouraged to sit quietly either in a circle or at their desks. Soft music may be played in the background. Each meditation begins with an object on which to focus, such as the moon, a star, a garden, or the "wisdom tree" outside the classroom window. The teacher may encourage children to be very quiet while she or he tells them a story and leads them into their meditation. It is important never to force a child into any mindful meditation. The children also must be assured that the teacher's eyes will be open during the meditation, so they may

close their eyes if they wish to do so.

After the meditation, the children may be given opportunities to share their thoughts and be mindful listeners demonstrating kindness as other children describe their meditation experiences.

Class conversations and reflections can continue as children draw pictures or dictate stories to teachers or family members to be written in their own meditation journals to share with one another. The reflections and stories contained in the meditation journals can be springboards for additional classroom meditations. Daily meditations have the potential to bring inner peace, joy, and insight.

#### **Guided Visualization with Picture Books**

Visualization practices, seeing in our minds places or events we would like to experience, can be comforting and transformative for young children (Greenland, 2010). Because children are very good at imagining pictures in their minds, using guided visualizations with wordless nature picture books is one way teachers can increase creativity in the classroom (Bartlett, 2004). Table 1 lists picture books that can be used to inspire visualization.

Teachers can establish guidelines for using guided visualizations with picture books. First, they may show the illustrations to the children by doing a picture walk through the book to familiarize the class with it. Second, children may be invited to close their eyes and imagine they are present during one of the key scenes. They can be asked to imagine what it looks like and state what they can hear or smell. Children can be

asked to respond to open-ended questions when exploring meanings, sharing their own interpretations of what they imagine. A breathing or stretching exercise can end the guided visualization. Wordless picture books offer children opportunities to develop and extend their imaginations, reflect upon experiences, consider others' perspectives, and progress in their own social development (exploration of human




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Mindful sensing for children during nature walks involves taking time to pay attention to all the senses by appreciating what one sees, hears, smells, tastes, and feels.

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relationships) and intellectual development (Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 1996).

In addition, with the use of carefully selected nature picture books, children can have opportunities to observe and practice conversational turn-taking skills with peers during guided visualization, which has the potential to reveal children's dreams and desires.

### **Transforming Early Childhood Education by Cultivating Mindfulness**

Mindfulness promotes a wholesome way of living for young children (Jennings,

2015). Described as a developmental resource for the understanding of the inner life, mindfulness is the engine that directs spiritual development in the secular sense of the word (Jennings, 2008). Teaching mindfulness in schools is deeply gratifying and has the potential to make a positive impact on society (Greenland, 2010). Research shows that teaching mindfulness has a positive effect on students' academic performance (Payton et al., 2008). For example, Thompson and Guantlett-Gilbert (2008) demonstrated that mindfulness has shown clinical promise for young people. Other researchers have found that mindfulness can be taught as an intervention for anxiety (Semple, Reid, & Miller, 2005) and that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy supports children in reducing internal and external symptoms (Lee, Semple, Rosa, & Miller, 2008). Research and observation have demonstrated that regularly engaging in practices that generate a sense of care and compassion for others can improve lives (Jennings, 2015).

Mindfulness offers hope (Greenland, 2010) because mindful children often exhibit optimism, happiness, gratitude, empathy, kindness, and compassion. A child's true being is peaceful, considerate, and joyful. A desirable goal in life is to be true to one's self and to express that self in every moment. Teaching mindfulness practices in an early childhood classroom allows young children opportunities to be creative, live in the present moment, and develop the positive, winning attitudes they need for success in the future.

I had not seen the young children I taught in preschool for several years, but I was recently surprised by a letter from a student I had taught 15 years ago. As I opened the letter, I recalled treasured family meetings with my classroom puppet Zippy, guided visualizations with a picture book about nature written by Rachel Carson, open-ended creative art projects, meditations about meeting a fairy in a secret garden, and the warm giggles after doing “A Tooty Ta Ta” during circle time. I smiled as I read, “You’ll always be such a happy part of my memories, and I’ll never forget my two years at preschool. Thank you for all your love and support. I cannot wait to see what the future holds!”

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## Being an ECDA Fellow

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ECDA Fellow

In April 2015, fourteen leaders in the Early Childhood Care & Education (ECE) Field were appointed as “**ECDA Fellows**” by Mr. Tan Chuan Jin, Minister for Social and Family Development. It was a simple but meaningful ceremony as it was a proud and prestigious moment to be recognised as one of the experts in our field.

The fourteen of us have differing backgrounds in ECE, however the commonalities are our passion, foresight, a readiness for continuous learning and a strong desire to serve beyond our centres. We are the pioneering team of ECDA Fellows. Over the past two years, ECDA has been walking alongside us as we explore our leadership journey. We have had various opportunities to contribute ideas to improve the quality of the sector. We continue to expand our thinking beyond our own centres and to take a broader perspective of the sector, its needs and how we can collectively and individually contribute, based on our strengths and preferences.

### The Objectives

The ECDA Fellows programme has two key objectives.

1. To bring together a team of ECE Leaders and nurture them into pinnacle leaders beyond their current roles and responsibilities.

2. To serve the sector through sharing and involvement in various projects, engagements and programmes with the intention of building a fraternity and uplifting the sector.

A tall but achievable order. The ECDA Fellows needed guidance and preparation.

### Guidance and Preparation

We participated in team building sessions to align fourteen individuals into a cohesive group with a common ethos. We were introduced to the sectors through ECDA Fellows Talk Series videos, Meet the Fellows sessions for pre-service EC students, IBAP (Inquiry Based Action Plan) and other avenues.

We went through a 10-day Executive Training Programme at the National Institute of Education. We acquired new knowledge and our assumptions were challenged. The Executive Training culminated in IBAP – Inquiry Based Action Plan. Either individually or in small groups, we identified our areas of interest. With guidance, we planned and piloted our projects in the sector. In total, there were eight projects, ranging from parent engagement, appreciating art works to infant care training. This was followed by a showcase of the individual projects by the ECDA Fellows and their participants to 300 ECE leaders, on 15th February 2017. It attracted a lot of interest.

We also went on a study trip to Korea during which we visited different centres and met government and research institute officials. Our learning was shared with the sector during the 2016 ECE conference.

Our learning journey to ECE centres in Singapore gave us a better understanding of the different settings and approaches that are practiced locally.

There were many opportunities for us to learn, build bonds between ourselves and serve the sector.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

Each ECDA Fellow has strong values, a sense of purpose and is ready to advocate for our beliefs. We have taken up different roles which include facilitating at workshops, mentoring and coaching, guiding centres in curricula and teaching and learning strategies, sharing our SPARK certification journey and others.

### **My Journey**

Over the last 2 years, I have taken on tasks that I had never dreamt of. I have been challenged beyond my comfort zone and the learning curve was steep.

An example was when I moderated for guest speakers, Dr. James Spillane and Dr Nirmala Rao, at the 2015 ECE Conference in front of an audience of 2,000. Even though it was initially nerve wrecking, after a few minutes into the session, I was at ease.

In sharing my experiences with the ITE, Poly and degree ECE students, I felt that I had given them a peek into the real world of ECE – the challenges and satisfaction. One student said, “Tell us one mistake you

made”. I told my story and their jaws dropped. At the end of the sharing, we all learnt that mistakes were inevitable, but we keep them few and far between. Learning from our mistakes also makes us stronger.

I am convinced that by sharing authentic experiences, we get the message across that ECE is a sector worthy of our effort and dedication.

One of my most enjoyable sharing was during my IBAP (Inquiry Based Action Plan). My IBAP focuses on Reflective Practice. I am a strong believer in reflection as the key to being an Intentional Practitioner or Leader. Reflection is also the pre-requisite to innovation and innovation is critical as it is the engine that drives the future. The Reflective Practice IBAP gave me an avenue to champion an initiative that was close to my heart and to spread this conviction to other ECE educators and leaders.

During the sessions, participants were introduced to different thinking tools. They practise using these tools during reflection, either individually or with their team. In the process, participants become more conscious of their metacognition.

As I meet different stakeholders in ECE, relationships are forged and bonds strengthened. This is a small but positive step towards building a fraternity.

I am confident that the ECDA Fellows can inspire others to aspire to be Pinnacle Leaders.

## Musings from a 4th year ProFLAiR

Dear Dr Chen,

How have you been?

Since the beginning of the year after FLAiR started, I have been wanting to write to you to tap on your expertise, regarding the little hiccups which I tend to face at the beginning of each year with new students. As always, the busy-ness of things got the better of me. Now as I am able to rest and recuperate at home after having caught the HFMD, I found the opportunity to reflect and take stock.

This has been an extra busy year for me as I have taken on an additional centre. What Joy had shared with me totally came to mind - with each new centre comes new challenges and these are the very experiences that really develop, challenge and nurture us professionally as ProFLAiRs. I could not agree more.

I felt my emotions thrown back to the level of a novice again as I was adjusting to the new environment and profile of students in the new centre. It was a humbling moment of realisation that a lot of my perceived competence and confidence had rested upon the familiarity of the external environment I had become accustomed to.

In a new environment, I needed to rethink a lot of strategies that had become an integral part of my practice. The tried-and-tested routines I had come to believe were foolproof, needed to be revamped. The way I utilised space and resources, needed to be reinvented.

There was much to adjust and adapt to with the new school culture/dynamics and

a student profile different from what I had been used to in my previous centre.

I could not help but wonder if I might have stagnated and become complacent had I not been challenged with a new centre. I think of the many ProFLAiRs out there whom I have never met, who have taken on different centres and proven themselves competent and apt, flexible and cool, in control and resourceful, under vastly different environments. They deserve my salute! I hope that some day, I can be confident enough to say that I am able to adapt easily and contribute effectively in a variety of situations.

Meanwhile, I would still appreciate words of wisdom from you about how to plan ahead and document things, particularly when the majority of the children turn up/are absent on random days. I have faced absenteeism as an issue before, but in the past it had usually been just one or two who would be late or missing. I am finding it hard to plan ahead and keep track of what had been covered with which child for each of the days he/she was present. I look forward to having you visit me in my new centre, to offer, like you always did, words of advice and inject new perspectives.

Thank you for believing in me through these years, even when self-doubt was strong, and for your constant encouragement. I look forward to meeting you some time soon. Take care!

Best regards

*E. Z. Lee Stressed*

(The writer has used a pseudonym.)

## The Journey of a ProFLAiR Reflections while Creating the Professional Portfolio

Ameliza Ahmad  
ProFLAiR

I left the session intimidated. A group of Master ProFLAiRs had been huddled together and encouraged to create our own Professional Portfolios. Despite the examples that were shown, exchange of ideas and reassurances that these portfolios were meant to be beneficial to us, I was skeptical. It felt like an assignment that would not be graded, but would still be judged – the Professional Portfolio is a summary of me as an educator.

I dived into the Pool of Portfolio Production. I felt like I was drowning – where do I start?

My first year as a ProFLAiR was in 2009. Unfortunately, none of my documents survived from that year. My laptop took them to their eternal resting place in the hard disk. Armed with multiple thumb drives, Dropbox and Google Drive, I began wading through folders from 2010 – 2016. It was a trip down memory lane, one that made me realize how I had transformed from a hawk to a dove.

I had a comfortable working environment, with supportive colleagues and ample space to teach the group of FLAiR students. My only worry was how to be an effective teacher. Despite my background in early childhood and experience in teaching bigger groups of up to 20 children, this was a unique programme. Small groups of up to six

children, resources were provided and no lesson plans to adhere to. I had the freedom to tailor the lessons according to the students' level of competence.

I had always been systematic and organized, and with such a small group, it was easy to be a hawk. I was always hovering in that small area. Behind them, beside them, face-to-face ... just circling around the group. Were they writing the letter 'p' the way I taught them? Were they holding the scissors the right way? Did they put the coloured pencils and pencils back in the correct containers? Aside from those, there was always a debate going on in my mind. In a group of six, if one child was lost in an activity, I could put it down to a lack of attention. If two were lost, I knew I was the one at fault. In such a small group, I should be able to engage with every child. Otherwise, the activity was not interesting enough, or too difficult for them, or they could not grasp my instructions. Either way, it was up to me to improve the lesson or my teaching method.

The group of children was not together all the time. Sometimes there were absentees, other times a few would return to their main classroom earlier. With two or three children, the time spent was not a formal lesson anymore. The children were free to engage in activities provided on the shelves, which included

language card games, art activities and puzzles. This 'downtime' was when I got to know the children better. They would tell me more about their likes and dislikes, their fears and what they wanted to be when they grew up. The barrage of information was useful. It helped me incorporate their likes into the lessons and plan group discussions about the reasons behind their fears and how they could overcome them.

As time passed by, I realized that the children themselves liked being organized and be in a peaceful environment, free of petty quarrels. They would remind one another to keep things neat, and shared items without being told. When I saw that, my goal changed from 'being there

for the children all the time' to 'I will be there when they need me'.

One day my mentor found me hiding behind the sliding door, watching my group of children.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I just want to see if they can be self-learners without me there."

They were busy and were being productive without this hawk overlooking them. They had blossomed, from caterpillars to butterflies, and I too transformed, from a hawk to a dove.

I now take each day as it comes, solving any surprises calmly. There is less anxiety when I step into the classroom now. The journey of this transformation is well documented in my professional portfolio.

## Families and Community Engagement in Early Childhood Settings An AECES workshop

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**Nor Aisha binte Noor Mohamed**  
**Skool4kidz @ Woodlands Crescent**  
**Meadow**

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Successful early childhood education depends on relationships and collaborations with children's families and communities. For this reason, it is critical to establish positive partnerships with children's families and to include families in the preschool setting. This 2-day workshop has helped me identify ways to establish and maintain positive relationships with children's families through the design thinking approach.

The *Gift Giving Experience*, introduced in design thinking, took me through the design process where I had to design for my partner, ideate and prototype a new solution to "redesign the gift-giving experience" for her. This process focuses on the importance of displaying empathy and the appropriate attending skills when gathering more information through conducted interviews.

Initially, I was sceptical of the process. With guidance and close facilitation by our experienced and knowledgeable facilitators, I was enlightened and was able to relate with the main objective of the course.

I learnt that family engagement has different meanings for different people. In many cases, it relates to an ongoing partnership between you and families. Early care and learning programs are

committed to engaging and involving families in meaningful ways, and families are committed to actively supporting their child's learning and development.

As an early childhood educator, I firmly believe that there is a need for:

- strong, trusting relationships between teachers, families and community
- recognition, respect and support for families' needs, as well as differences
- strength-based partnership where decisions and responsibilities are shared
- conducting meaningful activities, interactions, and supporting increasing family involvement in their child's healthy development
- two-way communication, whereby families take responsibility for their child's learning
- acknowledgment that family engagement is meaningful and beneficial to both families and the early care and learning programme.

Indeed, a most enriching and invaluable workshop that I can recommend to my colleagues as it is important to realise that family engagement can look different and take on many forms. What family engagement means and looks like depends on the unique characteristics and the individual comfort levels and understanding of each family.

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**Rajisvary V.**

**Tampines North SparkleTots Block 483**

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It was an amazing learning journey. I was so glad I had chosen the right workshop for myself and I want to thank AECES for this most extraordinary time I had at this course.

The workshop started with a gift giving experience and this gave me ideas on how to reframe questions, define problems and get a solution.

Through this workshop, I realised that we need to be good listeners and not to jump to conclusions. Every teacher should know and have empathy towards everyone and everything.

I also learnt the value and importance of collaborations and partnerships in today's world. Getting involved in partnerships requires common understanding of each other's value, culture, responsibilities, each others' vision, purpose and goals. But most important of all, it is to have open mindsets and effective communication.

Back in my centre, I have begun to make changes, in small steps. I am learning to be a good listener to my children's parents, communicating and working along with them. Bit by bit, I want to bridge the distance between us. I have also reached out to the community around my centre - to a primary school, seeking their permission for our Kindergarten 2 children to visit the school, to a policeman to come in to give a talk about his job and we visited the nearby All Saints Home where our children

performed and played games with the senior folks.

It is an exhilarating feeling, this new found confidence of mine, to see success in my attempts to bring families and community together, engaging them in our school activities. It has certainly narrowed the gap between the families, my school and I.

What I have learnt at the workshop, I have shared with my colleagues because I too want them to be inspired and benefit from this workshop like I did.

## 繁华落尽见真淳—上海·安吉学习之旅

Mei Wencong  
Odyssey, The Global Preschool



### 初见上海，阅尽繁华

行程匆匆的两天，我们参观了上海乌鲁木齐南路幼儿园和爱博果果幼儿园。园内环境优雅，设施一流，诠释了上海的早期教育者对环境的设计理念：一切的一切源于幼儿。

环境是幼儿的第三位老师。他们通过与孩子们的谈话和提问，把课改后的教材、幼儿感兴趣的知识添加到环境创设中，让幼儿与丰富的材料开展互动。

最让我印象深刻的是乌鲁木齐南路幼儿园的小厨房，幼儿使用操作台前播放

的烹饪步骤视频进行烹饪活动，同时，老师同步使用操作台上的摄像机进行记录，以第一手的资料更准确对幼儿进行评估和反思。

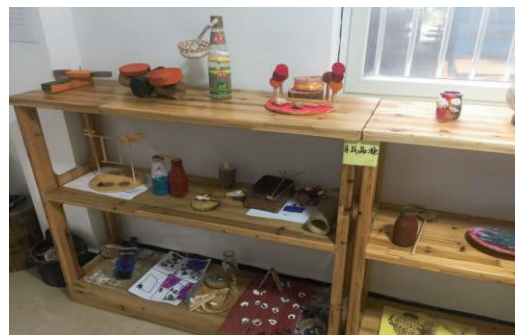




而果果幼儿园恍若一个童话王国，宽敞的活动场地上有许多符合幼儿年龄认知的器械：滑梯、秋千、转转椅等应有尽有。进入幼儿教室走廊，幼儿的绘画作品和不同的绘本故事人物充斥着每个角落，



到处是让幼儿释放表演才能的小舞台，幼儿的自信和对绘本故事的领悟，在这里表现得淋漓尽致。



### 再见安吉，返璞归真

于上海出发，三个小时的车程把我们带到了安吉县。

从一个国际化的大都会突然来到一个县城，你也许会想，这里会有什么值得参观的呢？然而，仅仅是参观安吉游戏在

政府大厅的展览，就颠覆众人的想法！还记得小时候最爱的游戏吗？那无忧无虑的快乐童年、那消失在记忆里的游戏，仿佛时光倒流，安吉游戏就像是一面充满魔力的镜子，让一切的自然本真的游戏，重现在安吉孩子的世界里。

皮亚杰把儿童游戏解释为“一种同化超过顺应的优势”。安吉游戏中的游戏就是幼儿最喜欢的游戏、最自主的游戏、最符合天性的游戏、最体现幼儿生命本质的游戏！要怎样才能把这样的游戏还给孩子？用安吉游戏的创办人程学琴的话说就是：闭上嘴巴管住手，睁大眼睛竖起耳，这对老师的要求：幼儿才是游戏的主宰者，老师只是游戏的欣赏者。

当你进入安吉游戏理念的学校，你会忘记自己的角色，尽情的和孩子们一起玩起游戏！用木板搭滑梯、搭积木、爬树、踩油桶，搭独舞桥、玩泥巴、在墙上涂鸦！这样的环境，这样一个释放自我的欢乐世界，孩子有什么理由不想上学呢？

这次游学，让我深深的体会到了早期教育者，应该站在幼儿的立场思考、站在幼儿的立场设置环境、站在幼儿的立场



创造生活。因为对于我们来说简单的木块，对于幼儿却是太阳、饼干、糖果、甚至是飞机，无限的想象力，放飞了幼儿的想象力、创造力、解决问题的能力，并让他们由游戏而终身受益。



## Anji and Shanghai Study Trip 2017

Patricia Teh

Peter & Jane Group of Kindergarten

[About the author: Patricia Teh is a new AECES member from Malaysia. She is an Executive Committee member the ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) Council Malaysia. Founder and Principal of Peter & Jane Group of Kindergarten.]

Hi All AECES members,

My interaction with AECES started with International Step-by-Step Association (ISSA) Conference/Finland & Lithuania Study Trip in October 2016. The Malaysian Early Childhood Community has heard a lot about Dr. Christine Chen and I had the privilege to have met her there as well as having a great time with members from AECES.

When Ivy Kok informed me of the Shanghai and Anji Play Study Tour, I registered myself immediately. I knew it was going to be something special. However, nothing prepared me for the MIND BLOWING approach at Anji. The ECCE community has been drilled with so much on child safety, scaffolding children's cognitive development, teaching problem solving, raising children's self-esteem, etc with so many dos and don'ts.

But with Anji Play Approach, it seems such a natural way for the children. It is about respecting their philosophy of non-instructed play whereby children interact with simple tools made of natural materials and other everyday objects to create their own playground govern by their own rules.

Teachers have to learn to not to intervene nor instruct but to only use our eyes and ears and to allow TOTAL DEVELOPMENT happening at the playground. Anji Play outlines the True Play philosophy between "Children's Rights" and Teacher/adult responsibilities" in Self-Determined Play, Time and Space, Reflection, Expression, Materials and Environments

Thank you to AECES for including me in this incredible trip.

Thanks & Regards

Patricia Teh

Peter & Jane Kindergarten

**Anji and Shanghai Study Trip 2018. Do register your interest with AECES:**

**<http://www.aeces.org/programmes-project/conferences-study-trips/>**