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## *From the Editor*

This is a bumper issue! We received so many articles, every one of them rich in knowledge, in sharing their experiences in the classrooms they teach; they were too precious not to put them out for you to read. It has been another exceptional year for *Early Educators* which has been growing steadily through the years to be what it is now – a wonderful collection of professional collaboration from the various professionals in our field. From the bottom of our hearts, a huge thanks to all our contributors and writers. Keep writing!

As usual, we have articles that give you very useful ideas for your classroom, they are easy and you can quickly turn them into learning experiences. Some could be areas you may never have thought of. Check out the articles on ‘Morning Message’ by two of our ProFLAiRs, Christina and Roxanne, the book review on ‘Karang Guni Man’ by Grace Victoria and Charmaine Teo’s discourse on being Reggio-inspired and how they got it to work for them in their environment. These are nuggets, lovely ideas you can draw upon or store for future use. There are also articles on leadership. We strongly believe that leaders learn from other leaders; they share and inspire one another to keep bettering themselves so that those they lead catch their vision and, in turn, produce good work with their charges. Recharge with Dr Sum Chee Wah’s ‘Leadership for Capacity Building’, learn what your role as a leader ought to be. Another very interesting read is ‘Brain Research as a Direction on Early Childhood Education Leadership’ by Prof Yoichi Sakakihara who is a paediatrician and child neurologist. If you think that ‘the sole difference between child and adult was their size’, then it is time to delve into Prof Sakakihara’s article.

Every year, AECES leads teams of early childhood professionals to various parts of the world. They attend conferences, workshops or go on study tours. Crissen and Dr Kaveri write about their various journeys and experiences, and why you should be going on them. More journeys have been planned for 2018; do register your interest with AECES.

With *Early Educators*, there will always be articles for the classroom teacher, for the principal, for the professionals in the field. If there is something you would like to read or to share, come drop us a message. For 2018, we look forward to more of you contributing your pieces and sharing your experiences.

Before I end, I would like to invite you to turn over this page to read a piece from our President Dr Christine Chen who was in Geneva recently.

From all of us in the AECES offices, we wish you a meaningful and bright 2018!

Ruth Wong  
Editor

## Before 2017 goes by ...

Dr Christine Chen  
President, AECES

I was nominated to represent the Asia Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) at the World Health Organisation (WHO) in Geneva, Switzerland. On 8 November 2017, the WHO convened the first meeting for the Guideline Development Group for physical activity, sedentary and sleep behaviour for children from birth to 5 years.



Everyone in the group coming from 11 different countries got along well and looks forward to our next meeting in Ottawa, Canada in April 2018.

The two days of hard work, deliberating on Guidelines for physical activity, sedentary and sleep behaviour, warranted some rest and relaxation. Geneva, being the home of many International

Organisations, became a playground for me. My first stop was at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum.

### Defending Human Dignity

Human dignity implies respect for the life and integrity of individuals. Long protected by texts from all cultures, respect for human dignity calls for constant vigilance: new challenges are continually arising.

Architect: Gringo Cardia

“Reflecting on human dignity, it gave purpose to our advocacy of engaging communities in valuing Childhood.” ~ Dr Christine Chen

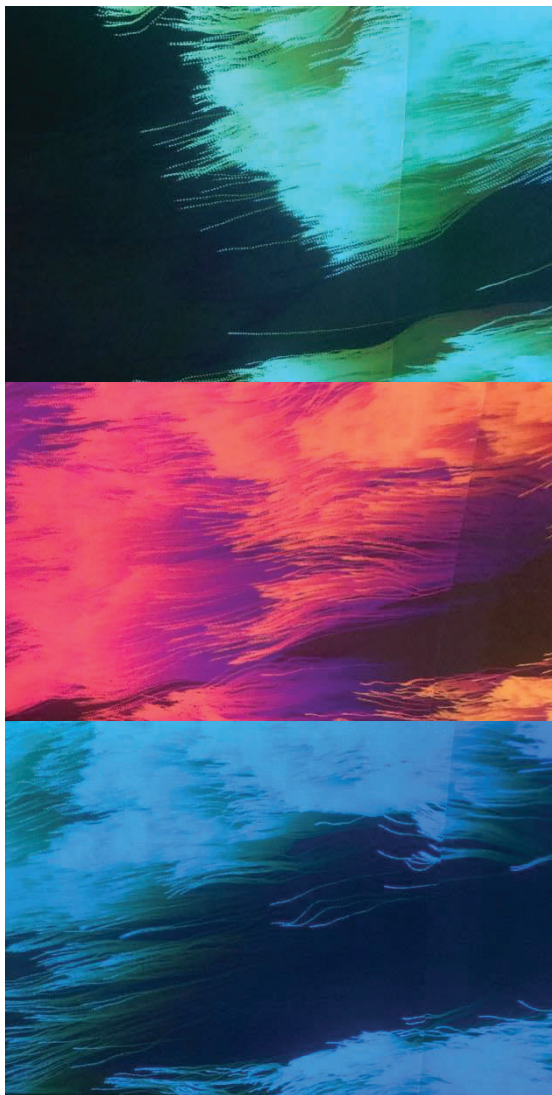
I learnt about the Red Cross being a humanitarian movement.



The two lasting impressions were first, the video of the man in the photo above telling the story of his life as a child soldier. His turning point came when he discovered rap music which brought

heaven to him. Eventually, he became a rap artist and gives back to society. I realized how music has a healing effect and how it can give hope to children for a better world. I encourage all educators of young children to include song, dance and music in their daily curriculum.

Next, was the amazing experience with a white wall. As I walked towards it, the instruction was to touch the wall; as soon as I touched it, lo and behold, different colours appeared, changing the wall into different shades.



As the wall turned colours, a voice commented. “A simple gesture can change the course of things“. That was stunning and I recalled the time when 5 volunteers started the AECES. Now we have two offices with 12 staff!

Across from the Red Cross is the side entrance of the United Nations. When I crossed the road and got there, I was told that it was closed to visitors for the next two days because of a big meeting. That was disappointing ... but I trotted down to the main entrance to take the photo of the icon for the UN; the broken chair which signifies the humanistic spirit of the city.



Made entirely of wood and standing 12 meters high, this imposing structure was created in 1997 by Daniel Berset as a tribute to the victims of anti-personnel mines.

So, with the doors of the UN closed, I started walking around the outside grounds and I found a gem!



**“MA VIE EST MON MESSAGE”  
“MY LIFE IS MY MESSAGE”  
MAHATMA GANDHI  
(1869 – 1948)**

Gandhi’s message : “My life is my message” has set me on track for 2018. I wish that each and every one of you will find your message for 2018. With a smug smile on my face, all equipped for 2018, I continued roaming in the playground and found Lake Geneva...



...and then up the lovely French Alps where I luxuriated in a profound and deep sense of tranquility.



**Wishing everyone peace and joy in 2018!**

# Brain Research as a Direction on Early Childhood Education Leadership

(Keynote Presentation, 4<sup>th</sup> Leadership Forum, Jakarta, Indonesia, 6 – 7 August 2017)

Yoichi Sakakihara, M.D.

Director, Child Research Net

Professor Emeritus, Ochanomizu University, Tokyo, Japan

In this paper, I would like to introduce current information and ideas of brain science that underpin the understanding of early childhood development.

It has long been believed that the sole difference between child and adult was their size. In famous books by Charles Dickens, the body proportion of a child was depicted just as the same as an adult. This means that people at that time believed differences between child and adult were only in their sizes.



Figure 1: an illustration for the novel "Oliver Twist" by Charles Dickens (1838).

Now we know that the very specific features of child as compared to adult are not only its size but also developmental nature of childhood.

Development encompasses several different domains and these domains are:

Motor	Sleep rhythm
Cognition	Memory
Sociability	Self-esteem
Emotion	Language

Figure 2: Domains of Intelligence

An American psychologist, Howard Gardner has proposed that human intelligence could be divided into 8 domains:

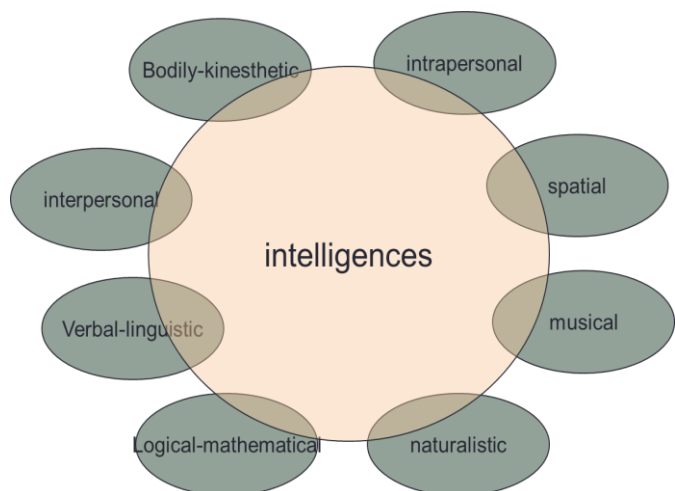


Figure 3: Multiple intelligence by Howard Gardner

Current neuroscience has proved that human intelligence is a product of the interplay among billions of nervous cells (neurons) in the brain.

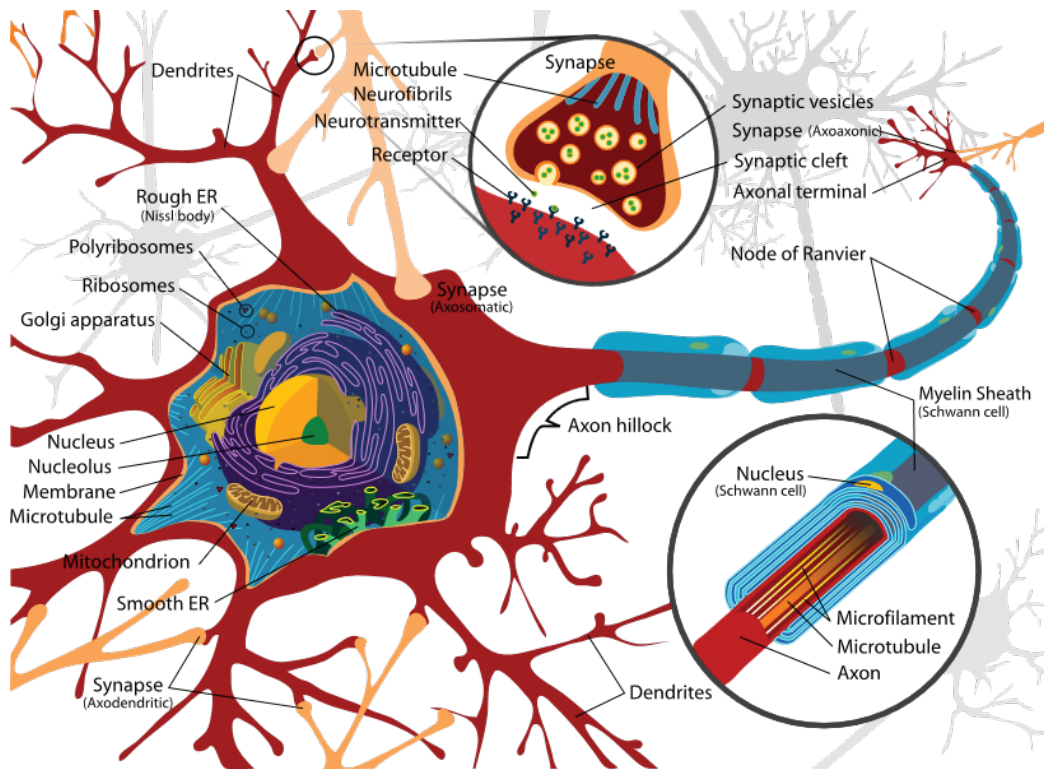
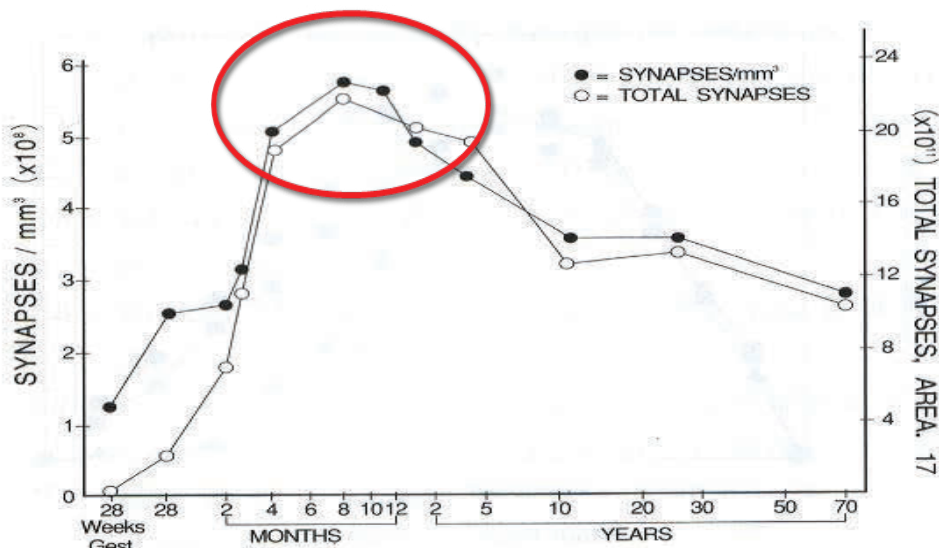


Figure 4: Neuron. Retrieved from Wikipedia

Neurons are communicating with each other through synapses. Huttenlocker found that the density (numbers) of synapses peaked at

around 12 months of age and his findings drastically changed the common belief that synapse number increases with age.



Huttenlocker

Figure 5: Synaptic density (Huttenlocker PR, Brain Research, 1979)

Myelin is a structure that covered the neural fiber and enhances the speed of electrical signals. It was shown that myelin synthesis is most significant during the first year of human life. These findings on synapses and myelin indicate the importance of early years of human life with respect to brain development.

We all know that there are milestones in motor development of children:

➤ Head control	3.5m
➤ Rolling over	5m
➤ Sitting	6m
➤ Stand by support	8m
➤ Walking	13m
Coordinated movement	3-5years
Nerve conduction velocity reaches adult level	5 years

Figure 6: Developmental milestones

Structural as well as functional maturation of the brain is prerequisite for the development of milestones.

### Cognitive Development of Children

A famous experiment by Albert Yonas indicated that even a small child could discern distance of an object. Figure 7 shows a 4 month old child touching the closer side of the object. This small girl can perceive the distance by her mono-ocular vision.

It was also demonstrated that a small infant could predict the trajectory of an object. This small infant was trying to catch an object by predicting its trajectory (Figure 8).

How can a small infant understand the nature of physical objects around



Figure 7: Depth perception (Yonas A, et al. Science, 1978). Picture from “How Children Develop” eds. Siegler R et al. Worth Publishers 2003.



Figure 8: Prediction of trajectory of an object (von Hofsten, Clae. From his homepage)



Figure 9: Rovee-Collier, C. Psychological Review, 1997. Picture from “How Children Develop” eds. Siegler R et al. Worth Publishers 2003.

him/herself? Modern developmental psychology has taught us that a contingent nature (contingence) has taught him/her the

roles underlining the nature of physical objects.

A famous experiment by Rovee-Collier shows the ability of an infant to recognize the relation between his/her body movement and the movement of a mobile hanging above the infant (Figure 9).

### Social Development

Then let's look at the social development of children on the developmental ladder of social development. Children are climbing this ladder from perception of gaze until they obtain the ability of theory of mind.

### Social development

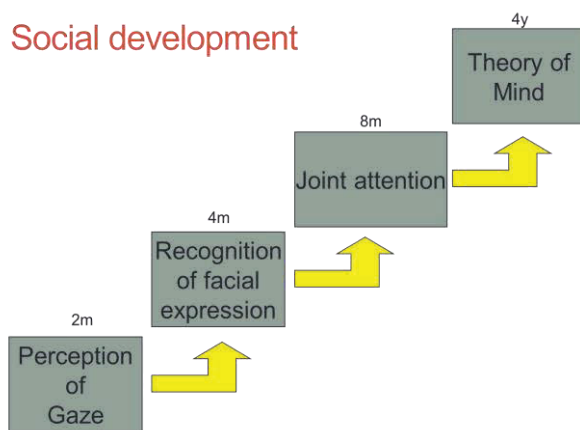


Figure 10: the ladder of social development

Joint attention is an important process by which small infant can perceive the mind of others. In this picture, a small child in the slide is watching both the object of interest

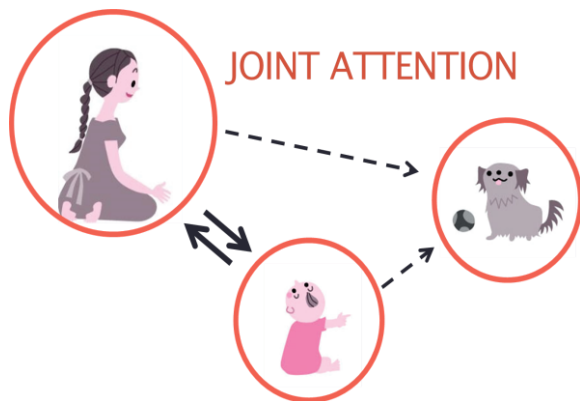


Figure 11: Joint attention

(dog) and the direction of his mother's gaze.

By watching both the object and his mother's gaze, this small infant understands the interest of the mother (Figure 11).

Katushika Hokusai, a famous painter in the Edo era, clearly painted a scene of joint attention between mother and child (Figure 12).



Figure 12: an Ukiyo-e by Hokusai in Edo era




Theory of Mind	
	A girl plays with a ball, which she put in the red box and goes out.
	A boy comes in and find the ball and put it in the blue bag.
	Then the girl comes back and wants to play with the ball again. Where will the girl look for a ball?

Figure 13: Cartoons of Sally and Ann task

Theory of mind (= mind reading) is an ability to understand the thought of other people. Brain science has proved that the frontal lobe of human brain takes part in the theory of mind.

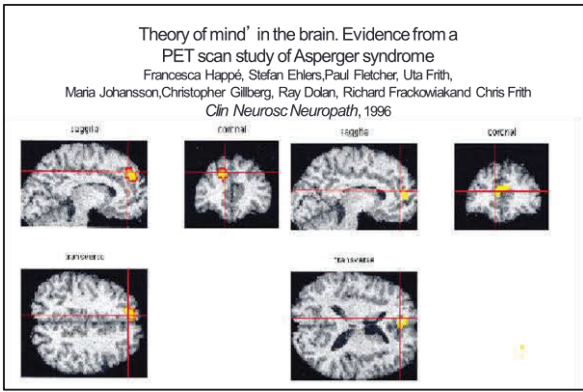


Figure 14: Happe F, et al. Clinical Neuroscience and Neuropathology, 1996.

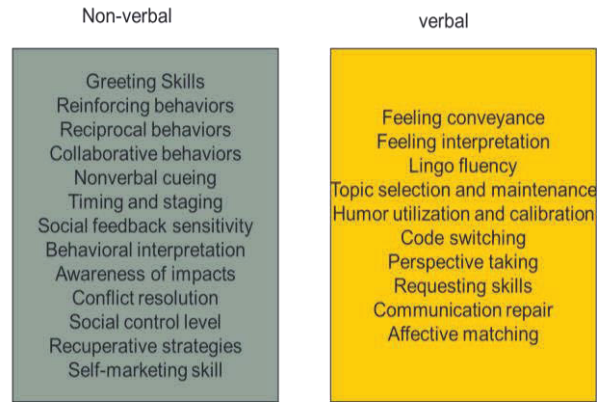


Figure 16: Social skills from "Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrics" eds. Levine M. et al. W. B. Saunders, 1999.

Brain regions responsible for social skills are mapped in the brain.

### Social Brain (Baron-Cohen)

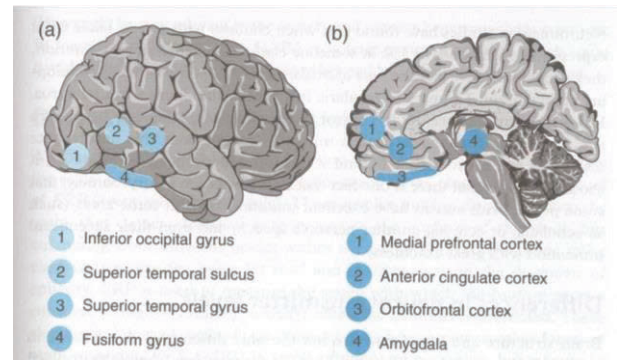


Figure 17: Social brain from "The Facts Autism and Asperger Syndrome". Oxford University Press, 2008.

Inquiry

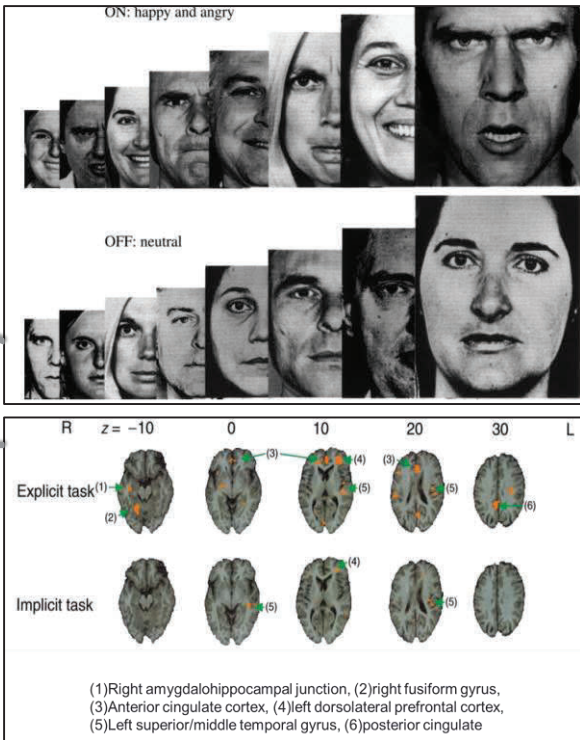


Figure 15: Clitchley, HD, Brain, 2000.

In discerning the facial expression of others, we make use of our frontal lobe and temporal lobe.

Social ability in daily life is further classified into many so-called social skills as shown.

### Toys and plays and skilled hand movements

Toys and plays are very important environmental factors for child development. While an infant is playing with toys, he/she is always using skillful hand functions. A child is reaching, touching and holding toys, and manipulating them. A child is also using hand as pointer and signer.

Toys: facilitator of mimicking and creation



Figure 18: Toys: facilitator of mimicking and creation

Function of hand

- reach
- touch
- hold
- manipulate
- point
- signs

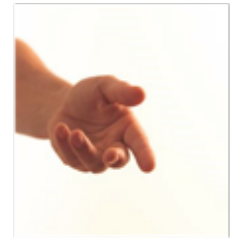


Figure 19: Functions of hand

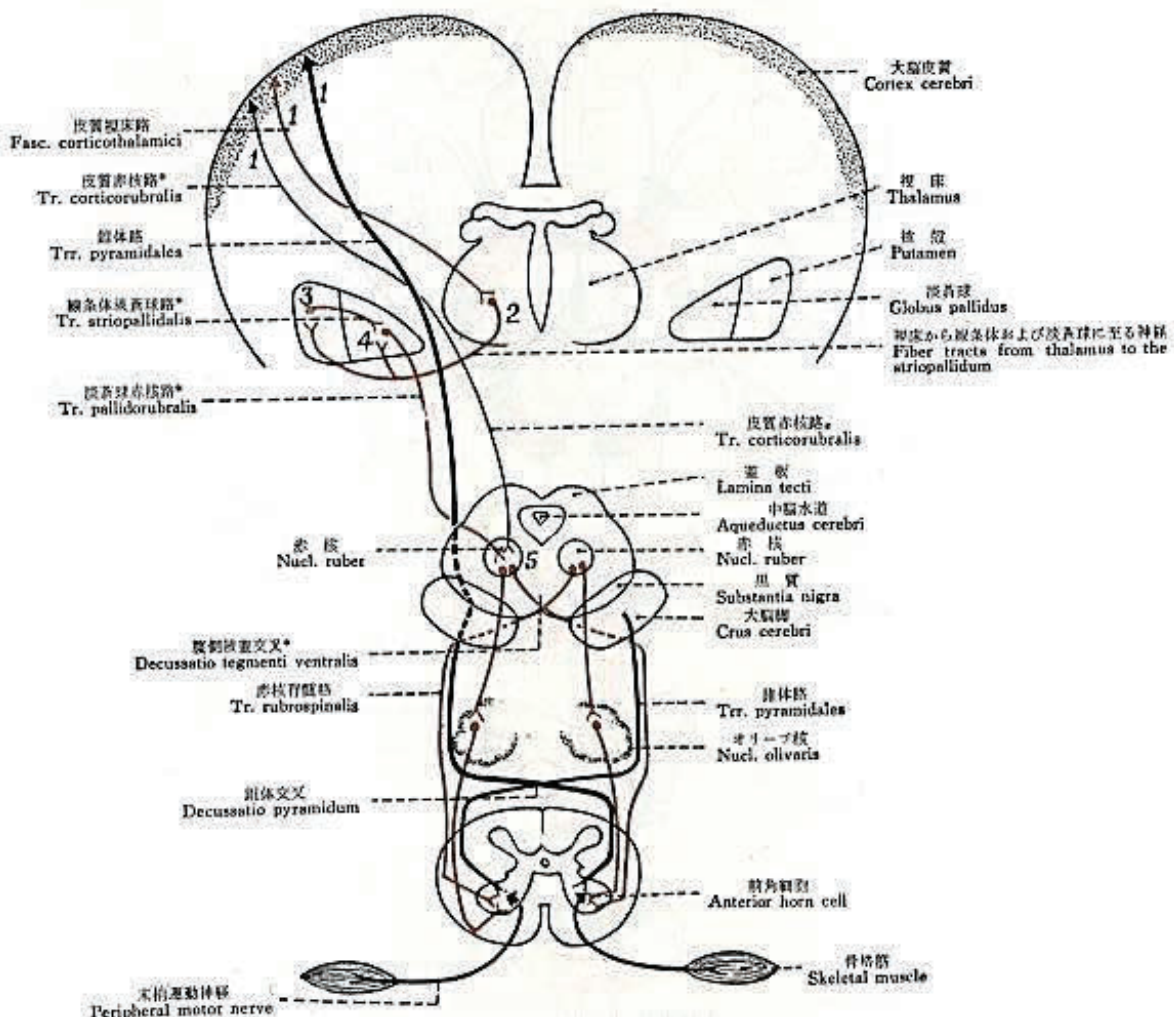


Figure 20: Scheme of pyramidal tracts

The brain pathways enable human movement; the finer the movements, the wider the brain areas responsible for those movements. Reaching (and touching) is the

most primitive movement of infants. The trajectories of hand movements are getting smoother as child grows.

Inquiry

### Brain areas corresponding with body movements

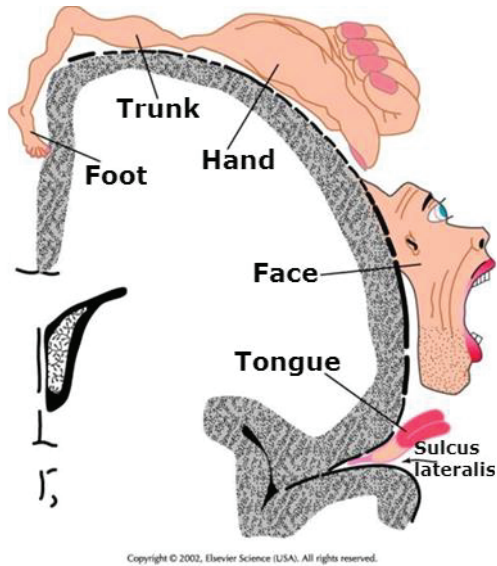


Figure 21: Brain areas corresponding with body movement. Cited from "Fundamental Neuroscience", Eds. Squire LR, et al. Academic Press, 2003.

### Development of smooth grasping

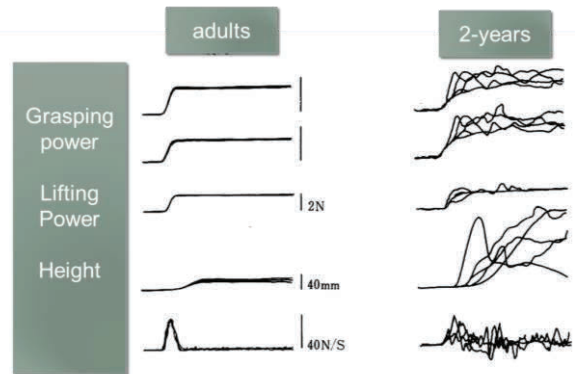


Figure 23: Development of smooth grasping by Forssberg H. et al. Experimental Brain Research, 1991

Interestingly, brain science has shown that smaller brain activities are needed for professional persons as compared with amateurs.

### Self-esteem

It has become evident that the social-emotional abilities (skills) are even more important for children to become competent adults. Self-esteem is among those social-emotional abilities.

Inquiry

### Development of reaching trajectory

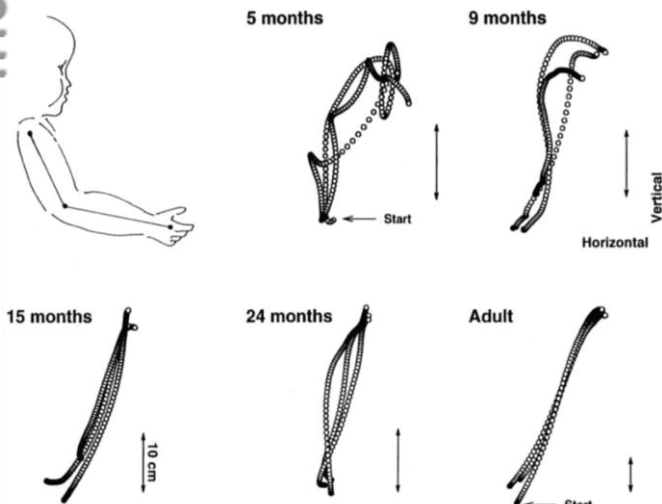


Figure 22: Development of trajectory movement

The same tendency is observed in the grasping movements of infant.

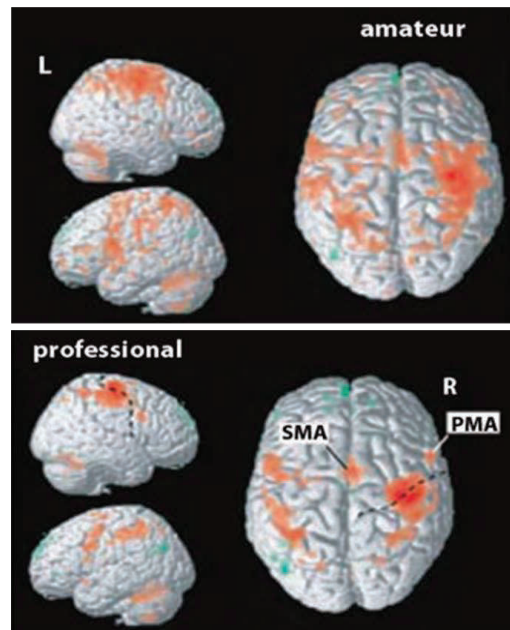


Figure 24: Less activated brain areas by professional person

A heart-warming picture by Van Gogh is a scene when an infant's self-esteem is just sprouting.



Figure 25: Painting by Vincent V. Gogh

Factors promoting self-esteem are two-fold; competence in domains of importance and approval support. Factors will change with age.

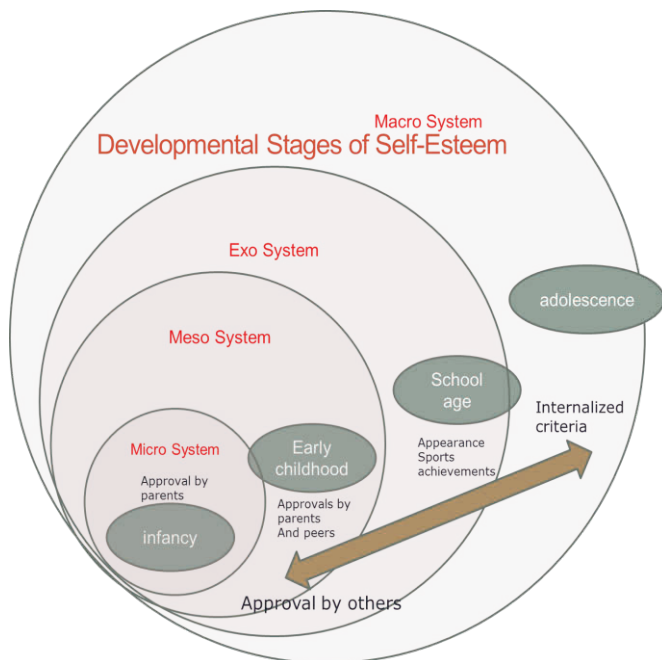


Figure 26: Developmental stages of self-esteem

In early childhood, approval support from parents, caregivers are more important. But with age, competence in domains of importance is becoming more influential.

## Biorhythm

Biorhythm has been attracting much attention among people in charge of childcare since it is crucial for sound development of children.

### Development of Rhythm

- Mediated by biological clock (supra optic nucleus)
- Sleep rhythm
- Hormonal rhythm
- Body temperature
- Autonomic nervous system
- Regulated by melatonin



Figure 27: Biological Rhythm

Biorhythm is regulated both by the biological clock and day-night time. The biological clock is located in a part of brain named supraoptic nucleus. Securing enough time for sleep is *sine qua non* for healthy development of small children. Disruption of sleep is known to be associated with poor memory, irritability and even diseases.

Inquiry



Figure 28: Circadian Rhythm

### Melatonin: regulator of circadian rhythm

- Secreted from pineal body
  - Increases during sleep
  - Regulator of sleep onset
- regulated by the amount of light to the retina



Figure 29: Melatonin

Depth of sleep changes shows a stepwise shift during night. Pattern of child sleep shows an ontogenetic changes.

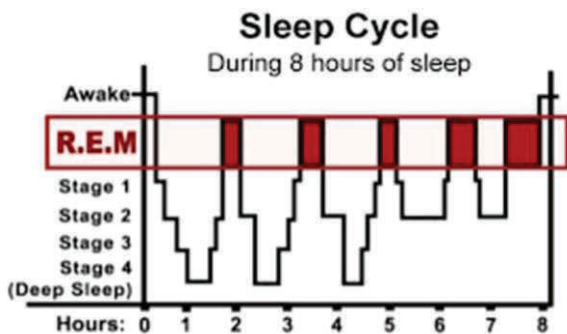


Figure 30: Sleep rhythm

### Development of sleep cycle

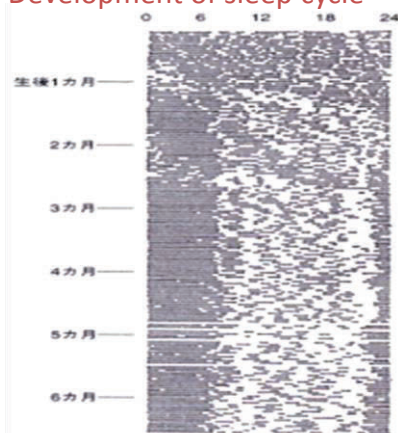


Figure 31: Development of sleep-wake cycle

Fragmental infant sleep pattern will later become regular bi-modal pattern, and average sleep time of small infant is 9 to 10 hours at night with 1 to 2 hours of daytime nap.

### Sleep Time of Children by Age

Age	night	nap
0	10:19	2:09
1	9:58	1:58
2	9:34	2:20
3	9:53	1:27
4	9:35	1:24
5	9:46	0:44



Figure 32: Developmental changes of sleep time in children

Sleep duration and nature of sleep will show an ontogenetic changes. Almost half of infant sleep is composed of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, whereas the proportion of REM sleep will decrease with age.

### Development of sleep (Roffwarg)

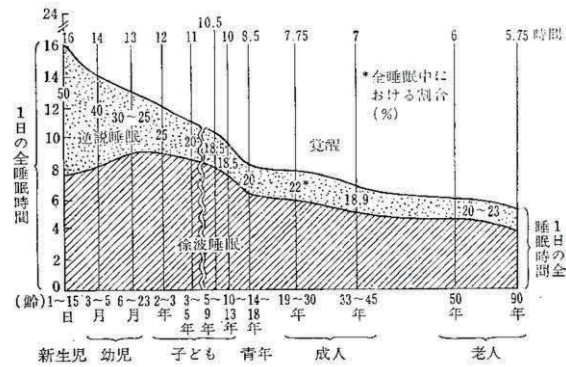


Figure 33: Development of sleep by Roffwarg HP. Et al. Science, 1966.

### Language Development

Language is unique to human. Chimpanzees are known to understand human words, but they do not understand syntactical rules of human language.

Language acquisition is through hearing. By hearing mother tongue, they will acquire a perceptive ability to specific sounds in mother tongue while such ability for foreign language will be lost. Both American and Japanese infants aged 6 to 8 months perceive "r" sound, which is not present in Japanese. At 10 to 12 months, Japanese infant's perception of "r" sound is lost since they are not exposed to "r" sound.

Directly talking to infant is critical for infant's acquisition of language. Even if an infant is exposed to video-recorded images and sounds of storytelling, his/her acquisition of language is inadequate. By hearing spoken words, specific regions of brain are known to be activated.

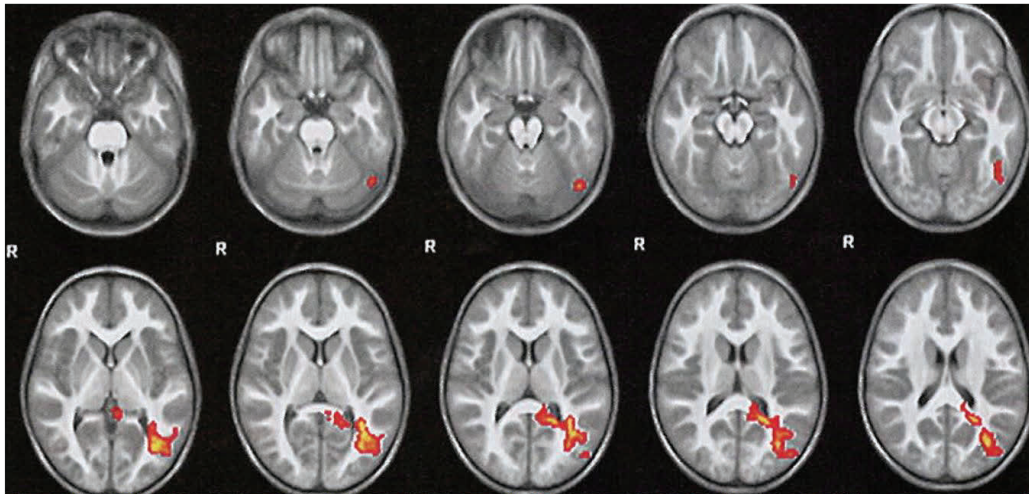


Figure 33: Brain areas related to reading and listening by Hutten JS et al. Pediatrics, 2015.

### Summary

Rapid development of various functions of brain and other biological systems occur during the first years in life.

Some developmental domains are innate or genetically determined, but most of them are much influenced by environments.

Too much attention has been paid to the

cognitive development in early childhood, but current studies have indicated that non-cognitive developments such as social and emotional developments are also necessary for the sound development in early childhood.

Leaders in ECEC need to understand the brain mechanism underlining early child development.

# Leadership for Capacity Building

(presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Leadership Forum, Jakarta, Indonesia, 6-7 August 2017)

Dr Sum Chee Wah

Advisor

for Pre-school Education at the Ministry of Education and  
the Early Childhood Development Agency, Singapore

## Introduction

It is well documented that leadership is critical to the functioning of schools. Summarising the findings of a systematic study of research on leadership in primary and secondary schools across countries, Leithwood et al. (2008) concluded that:

*“...leadership has very significant effects on the quality of school organization and on pupil learning... there is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership. One explanation for this is that leadership serves as a catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in the organization.”* (Leithwood et al., 2008:29)

The impact of leadership on student learning is indirect (Leithwood et al., 2008) and largely mediated by teachers. The principal’s leadership accounts for about 25% of school factors linked to pupil outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004; Hallinger et al., 2008, 2010). Even though the combined direct and indirect effects of school leadership on pupils’ learning are small, the effects are educationally significant (Leithwood et al., 2008:28).

Although research on leadership in early childhood is scarce, researchers have written about its importance in the early childhood sector (Ang, 2012; Jones, 2007; Muijs et al, 2004; Rodd, 2011; Thornton, 2009; Wise and Wright 2012).

In this essay, I will be referring to leadership literature from businesses, as well as from schools, preschools and early years centres. The term ‘schools’ will be used interchangeably with the term ‘early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres’ as there is much convergence on the findings for school and centre leadership.

Having made the point that leadership is important and having outlined what this article is taking reference from, I will proceed to do the following:

- explain what leadership for learning is;
- make the link between leadership for learning and capacity building; and
- propose a model for building capacity of centres.

## Relationship between Leadership and Capacity Building

### Leadership

The definitions of leadership found in academic literature have a common

thread running through them. The leader's key roles include

- decoding of the context,
- articulating a vision,
- unifying members of the organisation to work towards this vision, and
- nurturing or sustaining a culture that is supportive of achieving this vision.

As leadership is associated with a vision, an aspired future, it is always linked to development and change (Day et al., 2001). Leadership is distinct from management which is related to routines, maintenance (Day et al., 2001; Dimmock, 1998) and efficiency (Starrat et al., 2010). It is also different from administration which is connected to activities feeding into the bureaucratic machinery.

In line with the notion that leadership is about change and development, the purpose of leadership is thus to improve the ability of the organisation to change and develop. In short, the purpose of leadership is to build the capacity of the organisation to bring about the changes and developments necessary for the attainment of the vision.

### Capacity Building

What does an organisation that promotes capacity building look like? The literature on capacity building of organisations proposed that capacity building takes place when efforts are made to enhance or more effectively utilise skills, abilities and resources, when understandings and relationships within organisations are strengthened, and when values, attitudes, motivations and conditions to support sustainable development are examined (Bolgar, 2000;

Lavergne and Saxby, 2001). Coppieters (2005) described an educational setting which focuses on building learning capacity as one where all members learn together, share insights, knowledge and mental models, where there are efforts to build on past knowledge and experiences, and where members continually expand their capacity to create the results they desire. Agreeing, Easton (2008) asserted that capacity building is happening where learning takes centre stage, teachers are constantly questioning and searching for answers; teachers are often in one another's classroom; no teacher waits for orders as all would take the initiative to make changes to matters as needed. In such a setting, improvements come about from the constant search and learning, based on solid study, observation, data and conversations.

The literature on capacity building and leadership for learning of early childhood care and education (ECEC) centres and schools seem to converge on three broad themes:

- Focusing on the skills, knowledge and disposition of teachers,
- Nurturing a culture that is supportive of learning, and
- Managing the children's programme.

Apart from the three common components, Youngs and King (2002) reminded us of the importance of two other components – leadership of the centre and resourcing for the programme. The latter was also supported by Robinson et al. (2008).

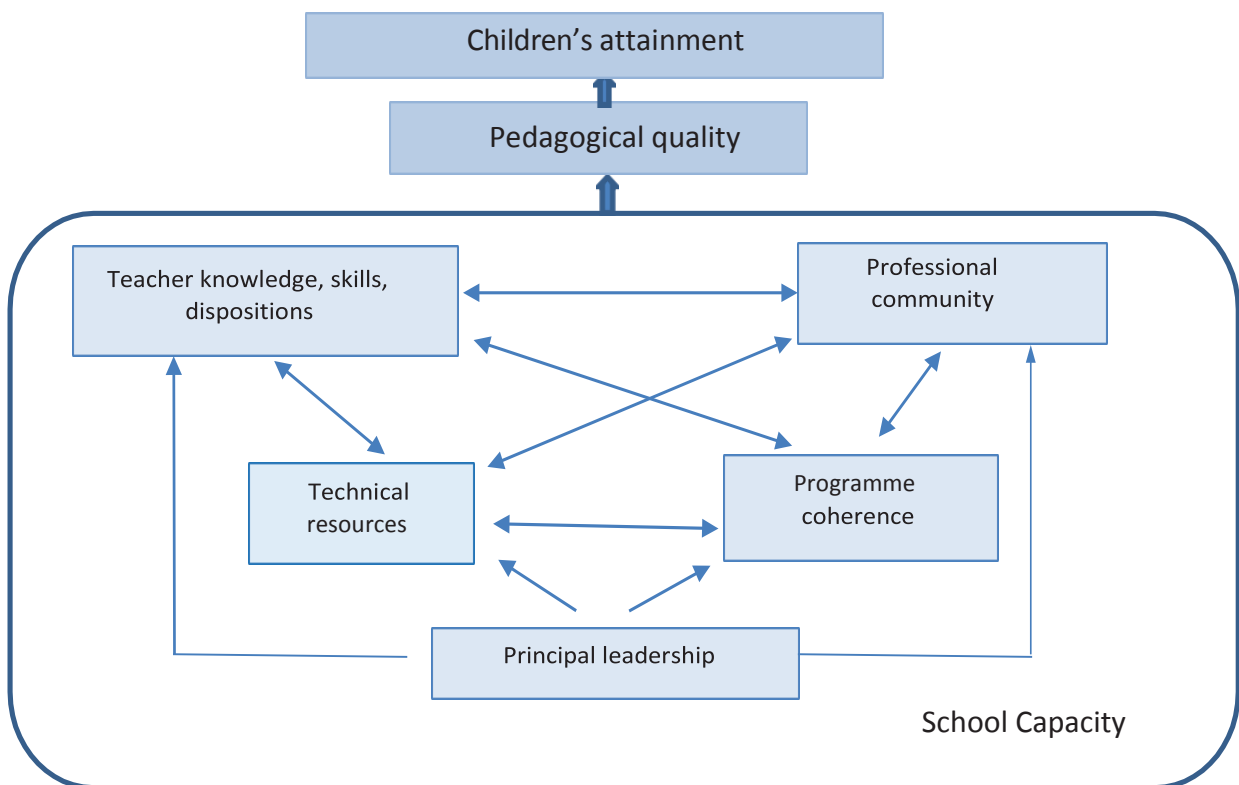
### A model for building capacity

The model proposed by Youngs and King (2002) for capacity building maps over the five components gleaned from the literature on leadership for learning and capacity building which have been outlined in the preceding paragraph. The adapted model has five components,

namely, (1) Providing for teacher knowledge, skills, and dispositions; (2) Nurturing a professional community, (3) Ensuring programme coherence (managing the children’s programme), (4) Providing centre leadership, and (5) Providing technical resources. The model has been presented diagrammatically below.

Model for Capacity Development

Leadership



Adapted from Youngs and King (2002)

#### (1) Focusing on the skills, knowledge and disposition of teachers

The link between teachers’ knowledge, skills and dispositions and student attainment has been well documented in the literature on teacher education and professional development (Borko et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond, 1998, 2000; Knapp et al., 2003; Spillane and Loius, 2002; Timperley, 2008). In fact, teachers’

continual professional development has long been found critical for planned changes in schools (Elmore et al.,1997; Smylie, 1996). Teachers’ continual professional development and on-going development was also found to be critical in effective ECEC centres (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007). OECD’s comparative review of school leadership has also identified developing teacher quality as

one of the focus areas of effective leaders in ECEC centres (Schleicher, 2012).

The learning of teachers need to take place at different levels, at individual, group and organizational level. Individually, teachers must be able to align the considerations they have for a topic or an activity with considerations of their students' interests, prior knowledge and the teaching context in order to be effective in classroom practice. Classroom practice needs to be dynamically adjusted and this requires constant reflection and re-tooling. Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) reminds us of the importance of teacher reflection. While reflectivity might be an important disposition for all teachers, it is vital for ECEC teachers as the children that ECEC teachers look after are often not able to give feedback to the teachers on what is or is not working.

Collectively, teachers work and learn together to synergistically advance the work of the entire school (Senge, 1990). The collective efforts of the teachers is subjected to the influence of the prevailing culture of the professional community of the school, the availability of technical tools, and whether there is alignment of plans and coordination. Thus, the impact of the teachers' work within a setting needs to be organised and facilitated for the collective impact on the learning of the children, and this depends on the efforts of leaders (Youngs and King, 2002).

When learning at the individual level proceeds through the team, is internalised, codified, accumulated and preserved over time (Kline and Saunders, 1998), organisational learning is taking place. The

collective memories of such learning, whether in behaviours, mental maps, norms and values of its members (Hedberg, 1981, in Fiol and Lyles, 1985), are then deployed to achieve performance goals (Bowen et al., 2007).

## (2) Nurturing a professional community

Youngs and King (2002) emphasized the importance of establishing a professional community with a learning culture that pervades the organisation. Although the definition of a professional community varies, generally there is agreement that a professional community is characterised by (a) shared goals for student learning and collective responsibility to reach them, (b) meaningful collaborations among teachers, (c) opportunities for teachers to exert influence over their work, and (d) a centre-wide learning culture.

### (a) *Shared goals for student learning*

Having a shared vision is vital for organizational effectiveness and capacity building as the vision provides the focus and energy for learning. Senge (1990) explained that the shared vision is not just an important idea, it is "a force in people's hearts" if it is compelling and has the support of members of the organization. Articulating a learning-focused vision, fostering collective commitment to this vision, and having a set of clear goals aligned with this vision are important for effective leadership (Bush and Middlewood, 2011; Kruger, 2009; Hallinger, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2008; Murphy et al., 2007; Robinson et al., 2008; Rodd, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007; Youngs and King, 2002).

(b) *Meaningful collaborations among teachers*

Lieberman and Mace (2008) wrote that learning is a social activity that happens through doing, through participating and being with others, and when the experience is meaningful and adds to an individual's identity (ibid.). There is also growing consensus that professional learning focused on collaborative work in the classroom is most effective for teachers' learning (Newmann et al., 2000; Budd and Earley, 2007). Meaningful collaborations among staff can take the form of mentor-mentee arrangements, group visits to effective centres, watching videos together (Mulford and Silins, 2005), group inquiry into assumptions, evidence, and alternative solutions to problems or innovations (Imants and van Veen, 2010; King and Bouchard, 2011; Youngs and King, 2002).

(c) *Opportunities for teachers to exert influence over their work*

The psychological underpinning for giving teachers influence over their work can be found in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT is based on the empirical work of Deci and Ryan (2008) and it states that autonomy, relatedness and competence are basic psychological needs across cultures. Thus, giving teachers some influence over their work allows the psychological need of having autonomy to be met. Allowing teachers to have influence over their work has been found to be helpful towards developing stronger ownership of organisational goals (York-Barr and Duke, 2004), developing of trust among teachers, and

enhanced collective responsibility for student learning (Leithwood et al., 2008; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007; Spillane and Loius, 2002; York-Barr and Duke, 2004; Youngs and King, 2002). Teacher involvement in some decision making ensures that teacher perspectives are taken into account in management decisions, resulting in more robust decisions (ibid.).

From the perspective of teachers, participation in decision-making on instructional, pedagogical and curricular topics, is often useful, while involvement in decision-making associated with administrative topics is usually not (Imants and van Veen, 2010).

Many scholars (Fullan, 2005; Gronn, 2002; Heck and Hallinger, 2010; Harris, 2008; Leithwood, 2004; MacBeath, 2010; Mulford and Silins, 2003; Robinson, 2010; Robinson et al., 2008; Spillane et al., 2004 and Yukl, 2006) have proposed that teachers be involved in decision-making through some form of distributed leadership arrangement. They reasoned that where there is distributed leadership, the total or aggregated leadership far exceeds that of a situation where leadership is the domain of a few people at the top of the hierarchy (Knapp et al., 2003; MacBeath, 2010). Indeed, empirical findings from school improvement literature have alluded to improved student learning outcomes where there are multiple leaders with overlapping but different responsibilities in decision making (Gronn, 2002; Heck and Hallinger, 2010; Yukl, 2008).

Associated with distributed leadership is teamwork. Researchers have found that

when there is distributed leadership, decisions related to instruction, pedagogy and major decisions related to the children's well-being are made together, even though there may not always be consensus. Communication amongst staff is high with teachers consulting one another on problems formally and informally. There is high alignment of teachers' thinking and interdependence among them. Teachers are aware of what is happening at the centre, activities are well-coordinated, and teamwork prevails (Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008).

However, Mehra et al. (2006) cautioned that not all decentralised leadership structures are associated with better team performance.

#### (d) *A centre-wide learning culture*

A culture supportive of learning is one that protects instructional time, has high expectations for teacher and pupil learning (Sammons et al., 2005); has clear goals (Robinson et al., 2008); pays attention to planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum (Greenfield, 1995; Robinson et al., 2008); is safe, caring and encouraging (Jaruszewicz and White, 2009; Spillane et al., 2002;). It is also one where continuous improvement is valued, and where the values and practices being advocated for teaching and learning are modelled by the principal (Colmer, 2009; Hallinger, Leithwood and Heck, 2010).

Respect and trust are key ingredients for building a centre-wide professional community. Trust for colleagues is often fostered through opportunities to learn

together, arrangements of mentorship and use of social persuasion in situations of disagreement (Smylie and Hart, 1999). Trust between teachers and their principals is fostered when principals' actions are congruent with espoused beliefs and centre goals, when principals consistently support the teachers' work and manage conflicts proactively and effectively (Smylie and Hart, 1999; Youngs and King, 2002).

Research has found that when the level of trust is raised, there is also an increased level of collective teacher efficacy. Collective teacher efficacy refers to "The groups' shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given levels of attainments". (Bandura, 1997, in Goddard, Hoy and Hoy, 2000:482). It has been found to be significant in predicting the achievement of students (Goddard, Hoy and Hoy, 2000).

#### (3) Ensuring programme coherence (Managing the children's programme)

##### *The concept of coherence*

Programme coherence may be thought of as a measure of organisational integration (Newmann et al., 2001). It refers to the extent to which the children's programmes and staff professional development at a centre are coordinated, aligned with shared goals and sustained over time. It is also associated with how well a leader buffers the school from conflicting external influences (Louis and Marks, 1996; Kruse et al., 1996, in Newmann et al., 2001).

Factors that might threaten programme coherence include unresolved internal

issues such as the lack of consensus, and external tensions such as incoherent external policies (Newmann et al., 2001). One external area that requires managing by ECEC leaders is the partnership with parents. Parents play an important role in ensuring that the centre and home environment allows continuity of learning experiences for their children (Bodrova et al., 2004). Where the beliefs of the centre and parents differ markedly, learning becomes incoherent for the children. In fact, it may be necessary to establish a good understanding of this partnership with parents even before the children are enrolled. This may go some way to reducing the chance of conflicts later on. Partnership with parents should go beyond merely providing help and information, it should involve parents in decision-making and policy issues (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007).

Additionally, Newmann et al., (2001) suggested a four-tier strategy for programme coherence, which includes

- (a) Having a focus in the centre improvement plans, leveraging on a few goals rather than many goals;
- (b) Emphasising learning/development programme coherence as a key dimension of centre improvement plans;
- (c) Focusing on building team expertise rather than individual expertise; and
- (d) Aligning funding with the improvement plan and ensuring that the areas of focus are funded for a sustained period that stretches over multiple years.

In safeguarding programme coherence, however, it is important to give room for

extenuating circumstances and individual needs, so that the centre does not become too clinical or mechanistic (Newmann et al.'s, 2001). Studies have found regimentation and rigidity in organisations that have taken programme coherence to the extreme. An example of regimentation includes narrowly focusing on a curriculum that has been developed without taking into account the children's prior learning, or requiring all staff to conform to a certain professional development regime regardless of their prior knowledge and experience.

#### *Systems thinking and coherence*

Systems thinking has been applied by organisations including schools as a strategy to bring greater coherence in thinking and planning. Systems thinking refers to viewing issues as component parts of a system, rather than the issues in isolation (Senge, 1990). Systems thinking encourages a set of thinking habits that focus on understanding relationships and patterns rather than snapshots or static single data points, and a cyclical rather than linear cause and effect. Instead of reacting to specific parts or events and potentially contributing to the development of unintended consequences, issues are dealt with in the context of their relationship with other parts of the system.

*"In general, systems thinking is characterised by these principles*

- *Thinking of the big picture*
- *Balancing short-term and long-term perspective*

- *Recognizing the dynamic, complex and interdependent nature of systems*
- *Taking into account both measurable and non-measurable factors*
- *Remembering that we are all part of the system in which we function, and that we each influence those systems even as we are being influenced by them.”*

(Anderson and Johnson, 1997:18)

#### (4) Providing Centre Leadership

Whether in the school or ECEC centre, the leader’s vision serves to enlist the support of followers and captivate the imagination of those being led. A well-articulated vision with buy-in of the followers becomes a collective vision and focal point for everyone (Aubrey, 2006; Moyles, 2009, in Hallet, 2013; Rodd, 2011, and Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007).

While the vision provides a focal point for action, a leader needs to keep watch over five inter-related aspects of leadership, namely, moral, social/interpersonal, instructional, managerial and political (Greenfield, 1995) leadership. Instructional leadership is critical in education, and this is evidenced in empirical research. Siraj-Blatchford and Manni’s (2007) empirical findings show that it is not leadership in general that matters, but a set of leadership practices associated with learning that is critical in preschools.

Leadership for learning refers to leadership efforts directed towards building structural, procedural and cultural support for the children’s learning,

and growing the capability to do so in a sustained manner. Leadership for learning is generally associated with

- Promoting the continual learning of the teachers;
- Nurturing a learning community and team culture;
- Planning and coordinating teaching and learning, and the curriculum.

(Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007)

These areas have been embodied in the model adopted by Youngs and King (2002). Empirical evidence can also be found in the work of other researchers. Robinson et al. (2008) found that the principals’ participation and promotion of professional learning of teachers has great impact on the outcomes of the children’s learning. Apart from the signalling effect, principals need to understand professional issues well so that they can chart the direction of the school and facilitate the setting up of structures and processes to support professional learning and change in the school.

In line with the learning of teachers is the need for leaders to develop the leadership skills of teachers. One strategy that has been recommended by many scholars is shared or distributed leadership. While there are subtle differences between shared and distributed leadership, suffice to say here that the benefits of shared and distributed leadership are similar and manifold. As mentioned earlier, the aggregated leadership in a shared or distributed leadership arrangement far exceeds that of a setting where leadership is the domain of a few people at the top of the

hierarchy (Knapp et al., 2003; MacBeath, 2010). Research has also found that when leadership is shared or distributed, teachers' ownership for organisational goals increases. In addition, teachers need to be given opportunities to lead, beginning with areas of a smaller scope, and make decisions and be responsible for these decisions to be ready for larger leadership roles and decisions with greater impact later on. Thus, besides providing teachers with opportunities to deepen their skills in teaching, leaders need to actively look out for opportunities to develop the leadership of teachers.

While there is broad convergence on leadership across educational institutions serving different levels, early childhood researchers have found differences in practices between preschools and schools. One area that ECEC leaders give more attention to compared to their counterparts in the school sector is partnership with parents. Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) highlighted that leaders of effective ECEC centres encourage and facilitate parent and community partnerships. This may be associated with the important role that parents play in ensuring continuity of experiences across different environments for the children (Bodrova et al., 2004). In fact, the quality and frequency of parent-child interaction have strong positive effects on the children's cognitive development (Sylva et al., 2003), and the quality of the home-learning environment is associated with positive gains in the children's early development, their social development, their later academic success and high school completion (Belsky et al., 2007 and

Melhuish, 2010 in Taguma et al., 2012). Given the importance of parenting and the home-learning environment in the development of young children, it is understandable that early childhood leaders of effective centres give high priority to partnerships with parents.

#### (5) Providing technical resources

Technical resources refer to funds, curricular frameworks, teaching resources and technical expertise. In line with the principle of coherence, funds need to be allocated according to the centre improvement plans, and for a sustained period of several years (Newmann et al., 2001).

Funding would need to be allocated to the professional upgrading of skills and knowledge of teachers for these same areas as the impact of the teachers' knowledge and skills will be felt directly in the learning outcomes of the children.

Technical resources such as curricular frameworks which provide principles for operationalising programmes or activities would provide guidance to teachers while they acquire new knowledge and skills to deliver these new programmes or activities.

Youngs and King's (2002) model takes into account the interaction of the five dimensions. This is an important point to note as literature on systems thinking remind us that systems do not exist in isolation. Developing the teachers' knowledge, skills and dispositions, for example, will help towards developing a professional community, and vice versa (King and Bouchard, 2011). The presence of the professional community, with its

shared vision and shared decision making, will help to protect the coherence of the programme. The coherence of purposes, plans, and actions on the other hand is likely to support team building and boost faith in the professional community by its members (Newmann et al., 2000).

The leadership model adapted from Youngs and King (2002) is one that mirrors that adopted by international funding bodies for development of entire systems. As has been explained above, it is a model that echoes the empirical findings of many researchers working in the school as well as ECEC sector.

### Conclusion

In summary, the leader's vision serves as a focal point in galvanising those that he/she leads. As the leader's role is to mobilise the group that he leads and to realise the group's vision, his role necessitates bringing the group through change and development. Such changes when facilitated effectively by leaders, contribute towards the building of capacity of centres and the achievement of the vision. The purpose of leadership is to build capacity of the organisation so that key deliverables can be attained.

Findings from leadership research have suggested that there are key dimensions and systems that centre leaders to work on to build the capacity of their centres. These key dimensions and systems are: (1) skills, knowledge and dispositions of teachers, (2) a centre-wide learning community, (3) programme coherence, (4) centre leadership, (5) technical resources. Attention to these five systems are necessary for capacity building.

Building of the teachers' skills, knowledge and dispositions need to involve individual, group and organisational learning. One disposition that is critical for teachers in ECEC is reflection, as the children in ECEC are too young to give teachers feedback.

A centre with a centre-wide learning community is often characterised by teachers having shared goals for the children's learning, teachers having meaningful collaborations, teachers having opportunities to exert influence over their work and the presence of respect and trust. In addition, such an environment is safe, caring and encouraging, has clear goals for learning, has protected instructional time, has high expectations for teacher and pupil learning, gives attention to planning, coordinating and evaluating of teaching and the curriculum, values continuous improvement, and has the principal modelling values and practices being advocated for teaching and learning.

Programme coherence refers to the extent to which the children's learning programmes and centre improvement plans on the one hand, and staff professional development plans on the other, are coordinated. It also refers to the extent that resources have been vested to realise the key goals. In ECEC, coherence of learning for the children can be jeopardised when there is no continuity in the learning environment for the children. For this reason, partnership between centres and homes is critical.

The allocation of funds and the development of staff and technical resources need to be aligned with the

principle of coherence. An overarching point on coherence is that it depends on the leaders' ability to deal with issues in the context of their relationship with other parts of the system.

Finally, it is important to share leadership. The common adage, "many heads are better than one", is aligned with the thinking behind shared and distributed leadership. Apart from being able to satisfy the 'autonomy' needs of teachers, it allows for leadership development when there is proper scaffolding for the learning of the teachers.

I started by saying that leadership is needed to create the conditions for organisational success. The centre leaders' own leadership development is thus very important, and this is particularly so in an environment which is quickly changing. Centre leaders have both the privilege and responsibility for leading the learning of the teachers and children. Essentially, they need to be lead learning and lead people besides being able to cope with the daily management of their centres. Centre leaders need to be able to role model whatever they 'preach' to the teachers and children. Thus, it is necessary for leaders to constantly reflect on their leadership practice alone and with peers. It is also important for leaders to seek opportunities to move out of their comfort zones and to have new encounters that will challenge their assumptions on leadership or give them fresh perspectives on the children's learning from time to time. Effective centre leadership can create the conditions for a good start for the children, and a fulfilling career for the teachers.

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## Getting to Grips with Data. What Early Childhood Principals Need to Know.

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### Data and leadership

It would be almost inconceivable for a preschool principal to say that a 'love for data' drove them to choose a leadership role. More often than not, their decision would have been motivated by their love for children and a passion for their vocation. Taking a leadership post would be the most natural career progression for a majority of outstanding teachers. Yet in some cases, it may have been an unplanned career move. No matter the reason, all leaders, prior to accepting their roles, would be fully aware that preschool leadership is a *very, very* tough job. However, this job would be so much easier if they learnt to harness the power of data.

A study on early childhood leaders in Singapore showed reluctance among teachers to take on leadership positions due to the lack of support (Ebbeck, Saidon, Soh & Goh, 2014). This does not come as a surprise when researchers in the field are only beginning to unravel a better understanding of early childhood leadership and the extent of its challenges. Regardless of the difficulties, leaders have a job to do and very little choice but to do it. Some trudge along bravely, others aim to do their best and most just get on with it.

As the early childhood sector in Singapore begins to re-engineer itself, it is timely for preschool leaders to review their approach towards their work. Having

interacted with school leaders as part of my research, coaching practice and involvement with the Principal Matters programme, I have been privileged to observe great leaders and gain insight into *how* they do their job well. A key strategy they employ is the use of data to drive effective change within their school.

### Why do we use data?

'Data driven leadership', 'data driven decision making' or 'datafication' are a variation of terms to describe how data is used to improve school practices. This can be used in many areas of school improvement such as refining pedagogical practices or even reviewing teacher workload. The practice is not new having been applied extensively in the assessment of school systems and policy making decisions. The approach is systematic, objective and often used to address areas of teaching and learning that may have once been overlooked. In large educational systems, this is a vital source of information to track learning and may adopt a more complicated process. Nevertheless, the same principles may be adapted for use by preschools keen to improve the quality of their services.

### Why do I need data?

As a leader, you may have found yourself asking the following questions at some point.

*How do I really know that my programme is doing well? What am I using to prove it?*

*What areas of my programme need review? How do I know this to be true?*

*How do I know that my projects have contributed to change? How do I measure it?*

If you have an answer to these questions, you deserve to celebrate because you would probably have mastered the art of using data to support your actions as a leader. But if you are at a loss yet intrigued, you should also rejoice as you may now be on the verge of a leadership breakthrough!

Data has the added advantage of giving weight to a leader's intentions. By presenting relevant data, the rationale for a leader's actions becomes much clearer and helps to establish the currency of support that is so critical to leadership. In reality the decision making process within the preschool is usually an isolated undertaking. It is often initiated by the principal who is perhaps pushed by a higher management to take on new initiatives. Eventually the work will be undertaken by teachers who may be less convinced of the need for such an effort. Rather than assume teachers are resistant to improvements, leaders should also consider if the process of communication promotes or creates a barrier to change. It is difficult for teachers to accept and believe in a process that they cannot see or understand. However, when data is

presented in a democratic manner, it can be a powerful precursor to such change. Leaders should employ a common 'language' to facilitate the engagement process which creates a buy-in with the team.

### **Data as a tool for change**

Let's imagine this scenario.

*The management suggests the inclusion of a synthetic phonics programme to complement and add value to the language and literacy curriculum. This would require all teachers to be trained extensively with a massive budget to be set aside. Knowing her teachers were already stretched and that it could add further demands to the existing curriculum, the principal decides to explore if such a programme would be necessary.*

*She collates all the information about children's literacy skills from their reports to gain an understanding of their performance. She also seeks the views of parents as well as children about the current programme. With the data in hand, the principal and her team realise that the children have performed well in their reading scores. In comparison, they discover that thinking and comprehension skills were areas that needed improvement instead. Using the data, the principal and her team present an alternative strategy to the management which addresses their curriculum's proven area of weakness. They propose using*

*the budget to invest in high quality books and adopt a structured questioning approach after storytime. This would increase interest in books, improve comprehension skills and also facilitate word recognition. Now that children's needs are more specifically addressed, teachers are convinced that the programme changes are purposeful and they are more invested in the process of change.*

This example shows how data can be a powerful tool to organise thinking and influence decision making processes. Without data, leaders are powerless to convince and may rely on hearsay, opinion and judgement to implement change. By presenting data to the teachers, it offers a clear evidence of outcomes and allows the valuable opportunity for group thinking. It also engages staff in a powerful buy-in process when they decide on the strategies that would be best for children together as a team.

### **What about data?**

It should be noted that 'data' has often been misinterpreted to mean only numbers (Pratt, 2016). In fact data could also include non-numerical forms of information such as written observations, pictures or photographs (Bradbury & Robert-Holmes, 2018). Although numerical data could generally be more persuasive, forming an understanding through a more systematic and deliberate presentation of anecdotal comments could be equally effective.

The usefulness of data lies in the following four qualities which data can provide (Bradbury & Robert-Holmes, 2018). Firstly, data based approaches in leadership are productive. Data that is presented will usually be more targeted and data sets can be viewed in many different ways. For example, data about parent involvement can be broken down and compared between groups of parents from small families and those from larger families. Secondly, data is reductive; it is easy to understand the scale or extent of a problem just by reviewing frequencies and patterns of the data. This helps to simplify the decision making process whilst exercising greater objectivity. Thirdly, data results in the increased visibility of performance. With data, it is easy to measure the effectiveness of a strategy over time and understand if something works or doesn't. Lastly, there is usually a level of accuracy associated with data. Although this may be an assumption, it can then be used to track progress or even predict if an initiative will be effective.

Kohm (2017) asserts that one of the important roles of a principal is to weave a school's past, present and future into an inspiring narrative. She suggests that the narrative will be even more powerful if data is used to support the 'stories' of the school's achievements. Research also shows that early childhood practitioners who use data to monitor students' learning and growth, eventually become more knowledgeable about their own abilities and are more able develop improvement plans (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007). Data can reveal problems, facilitate a change in practices for improvement and

act as a 'useful vehicle for developmental purposes' (Hardy & Boyle, 2011). It has the potential to be a powerful tool for positive change when used appropriately.

Although the reason for data use in education settings is lauded, in reality the mechanics of data gathering can present a challenge to some. In a study on data collection in early childhood programmes, teachers from seven preschools were reluctant to engage in data collection as they believed their personal and eclectic data collection methods were already sufficient (Zweig, Irwin, Kook & Cox, 2015). Much of the reluctance to use data lies in the additional time required to obtain the data. In a study that explored the attitude of Singapore preschool teachers towards a practitioner inquiry approach, teachers mentioned that they needed much more support and time to engage in research based practices (Ebbeck, Chan & Yim, 2011). Despite the challenges, the benefits of using data outweigh its difficulties. With careful planning, organisation and support, leaders can design simple data gathering processes and embed these within any initiative. Having conversations about data can then be developed as a habit over time.

### **How do I collect data easily?**

A practical and realistic data collection approach is recommended for any beginner. One of the first things to do is to look for data which is already available within the school system. This might be a surprise to many principals but enrolment forms, parent surveys, attendance measures can all yield useful data depending on its relevance. Tabulating

this may take a bit of practice but there are simple-to-use tools in MSWord and Excel to help even the clueless beginner.

Should there be a need to collect more information there are free technology based tools to aid the process of data gathering. To explain the use of these tools, I will illustrate how Mrs Tan, a principal, goes about gathering data to improve the school's literacy programme. As part of her strategy, she has decided to collect information systematically from parents, teachers and the children about different aspects of the programme. She has a set of 10 different questions to ask them and she has decided to use 3 different technology tools to do so.

1. SURVEY MONKEY for a quick survey with parents. ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com))

The idea of conducting a survey has the potential to reduce enthusiasm even before the process begins. This is because the traditional method of gathering paper based responses involves a great amount of work and analysis. Using a free and easy-to-use service such as SURVEY MONKEY allows principals to create questionnaires quickly and have the data tabulated almost instantly into charts or graphs. Leaders can create the survey online, provide a link and participants will be able to respond anonymously. Using scaled questions or multiple choice answers, the results of the survey can be visualised easily. In this case, Mrs Tan only needs to design the questions which would provide the information she requires from parents. After keying in the questions into the SURVEY MONKEY template, she completes the survey document and opens

it on a tablet. During pick-up time, she passes the tablet to parents who need just 5 minutes to answer the survey. This is a

sample of how her online survey could look like.

ANALYZE RESULTS SCORE MY SURVEY PREVIEW & TEST

### Parent response to literacy programme

⊕ PAGE TITLE

1. How often do you meet in person with teachers at your child's school?

Almost never
  Monthly  
 Once or twice per year
  Weekly or more  
 Every few months

2. How do you rate the feedback given on your child's literacy progress

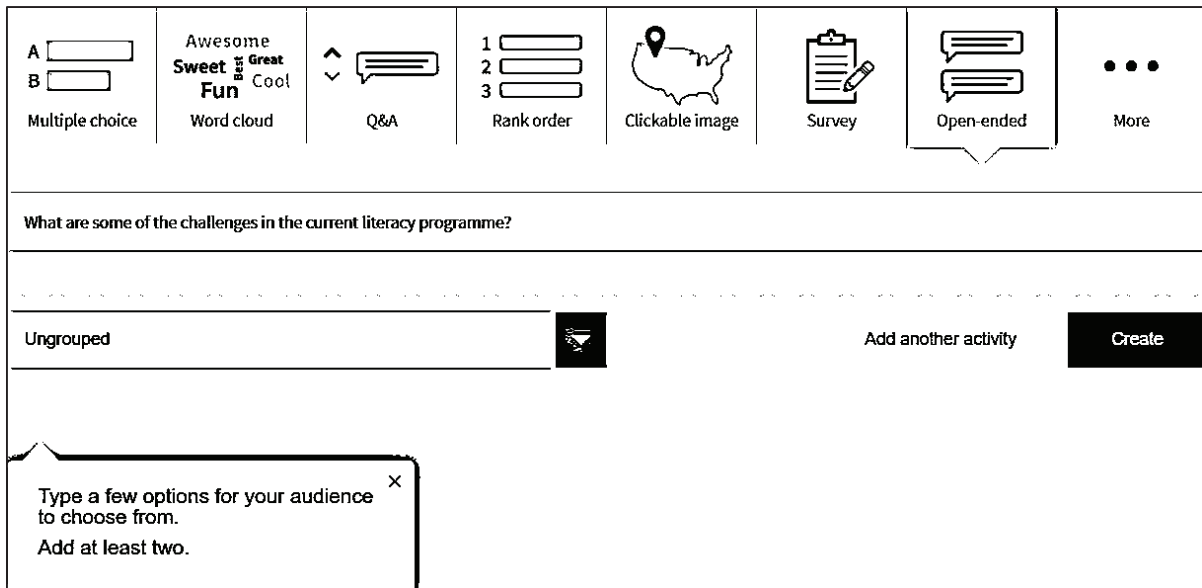
★ ★ ★ ★ ★

⊕ NEW QUESTION ▼

## 2. POLL EVERYWHERE for teacher feedback. ([www.polleverywhere.com](http://www.polleverywhere.com))

Although raising one's hand is a common manner of response, it could also be time consuming and may not encourage response to sensitive questions. Enter POLL EVERYWHERE! With this tool, Mrs Tan's teachers will be able to use their personal mobile phone to key in their responses when she seeks feedback from them during meetings. Should they be absent, they will still be able complete it via a link. For this project, Mrs Tan decides to seek open-ended responses from her teachers. Though open-ended responses cannot be tabulated quantitatively, their qualitative

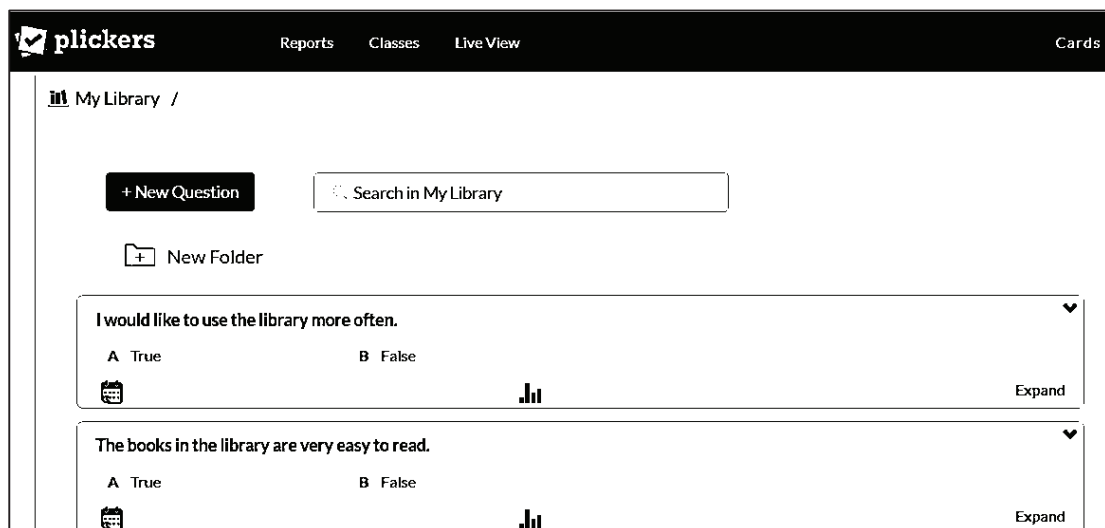
responses would be just as valuable. Mrs Tan's teachers will enjoy the process that POLL EVERYWHERE provides as their answers will be anonymous. Their varying responses can also be collated and viewed on the home page in real time. These responses can then be organised into themes and analysed later. The process of obtaining data now becomes a highly engaging process. Should Mrs Tan prefer, she could change the design of the questions to be multiple choice upon which the statistics for the responses could be shown. Here's an example of how a simple open ended question page would look like.



3. PLICKERS to gather children’s response. (www.plickers.com)

Gathering data from children should preferably be a simple and engaging process. Mrs Tan previously used more manual methods such as sticker counts, emoji votes and counters as simple data counting tools. With PLICKERS, she is able to count, identify and tabulate responses much more easily. PLICKERS is an interactive tool to collect data and can be used with adults as well. Although it takes a little more preparation than the other two tools, it has the advantage of being able to identify the respondent to their answer. To do this, Mrs Tan downloads

and prints the PLICKERS card set which is made up of symbols. She assigns a card to each child in the K2 classroom. With the app she has downloaded, she proceeds to ask the class a question verbally. For example, ‘*The books in the library are very easy to read*’ to which they can answer ‘*True or False*’. Each child flips their card when their preferred response is called out, Mrs Tan then uses her mobile camera and the app scans the responses in the room. The system then tabulates the scores automatically. Mrs Tan has all the data she needs from the children now. This is an example of how a PLICKERS page would look like.



Using these 3 data tools would yield a mountain of data without the lengthy process of printing, conversion and tabulation. There is of course no substitute for the analysis process that will make sense of the data. Interpretation from the user is still required! It would be good to note that the tools introduced here are not just simple to use but are highly engaging and can be used for general classroom teaching.

With the changes in our sector, the need to keep up with new skills and technology will be a key part of every centre's sustainability. Leaders need to develop their toolset and model their willingness to learn. Be encouraged to language your intentions and use data to justify your decisions. In our drive to improve the quality of our sector, we have a responsibility to ensure our progress is continually made visible. As learning organisations, schools and leaders need to reinvent themselves to meet new demands and challenges constantly. All this is possible so just try it one data set at a time.

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## Learning to Unlearn. An Early Childhood Leadership Journey

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Having been a Regional Marketing Manager in a few large travel organisations for 16 years, leadership was not a new experience to me. However, my career switch in 2008 to join the early childhood industry shocked me into realising I had to unlearn and relearn all that I knew about leadership from my previous experience. Some aspects of leadership may be universal but I learnt very quickly how situational it could be in the early childhood field.

### An analogy of leadership

At a workshop some years back, we were asked to make an analogy of a childcare centre to a commercial establishment. I chose the laundry service. At the launderette, customers send in their precious apparels and expect the launderette staff to treat them with care and respect. They want the stains and dirt removed even though they are the ones who soiled it. Upon collection, they expect to see spotless clean apparels. Similarly, in our centres, parents expect certain outcome when they send their little bundle of joy to us, hoping we can undo the children's 'undesirable' behaviours and groom them into outstanding personalities. Both the launderette staff and early childhood educators take great pride and effort in handling what is entrusted to them. The launderette professionals will use different cleaning

agents on the apparels depending on its material, just like how early childhood educators would respect each child by understanding them and respecting their unique personality. Business wise, the person running the launderette has to be responsible for its own marketing, getting people to know about its existence and services, take care of its finances, hire, manage and train its staff force, improve on service quality by extending services, keeping abreast with new products and technology and dealing with daily operations such as getting a substitute or standing in when a staff is away from work or machinery break down. Comparatively, these are the similar functions that an early childhood leader would experience as outlined in Hujala & Eskelinen (2013) namely:

- Financial Management
- Human Resource Management
- Service Management
- Network Management
- Daily Management
- Pedagogical Leadership
- Leading Change

### Leadership in reality

I feel assured that EC leaders are not alone in this constant debate of whether EC leaders are overloaded with responsibilities as I can see EC leaders in the outfit of a small business entrepreneur. It is true that a team leader

or departmental head in a big corporation may not have all the above 7 responsibilities under her belt as there may be different departments to support these functions but they would have to be accountable for at least a few of these functions at varying weightage. We do not have the luxury of specialization. As an EC leader, we should pride ourselves as being capable of handling what a small business owner would experience on a daily basis. A small business entrepreneur would have to start off doing all these 7 managerial and leadership functions personally until the business grows to a scale which justifies the setting up of various supporting departments. Likewise for EC leaders, we have to recognise that financial management is a crucial part of our duty, regardless of how much we dislike it.

Rohacek, Adams and Kisker (2010) concluded that centres struggling with funding were most commonly categorised with the lowest observed quality, and financially comfortable centres were classified with the highest observed quality as they would have more and most probably better resources. Although EC leaders are usually trained as teachers rather than business or financial professionals, we have to upgrade ourselves to handle such functions as long as we aspire to become good leaders. Financial management includes maintaining a desirable enrolment as that is our main source of income, minimising expenses and managing resource effectively to produce a healthy bottom line, in order to carry out programmes that will stimulate a more profitable

enrolment and other supplementary income. The cycle will spiral upwards when all the above-mentioned elements are positive. On the contrary, an insufficient enrolment produces a smaller income which hinders the further development of programmes to escalate the centre's growth. Programmes to enhance centre's growth spans across all the other 6 functionality of EC leadership, namely:

- Human Resource management - programmes to grow people so that there will be eligible candidates to fuel and sustain the centre's growth.
- Service Management - programmes to enhance customer satisfaction in order to create positive branding which will bring about better brand awareness and improved income.
- Network Management – programmes to help, benefit and even influence the industry and community, giving the centre a respectable standing in the community.
- Daily Management – programmes to help reduce fire-fighting situations such as being able to hire a 'floating teacher' to relief planned or unplanned absentee staff so that such time and effort spent to address these issues on a daily basis can be better channelled to address other more productive matters. Maintenance of the premise, facilities, equipment and resources also requires a healthy financial status to execute effectively.
- Pedagogical Leadership – this is the undoubtedly the most familiar functions for all EC leaders as we

were professionally trained in this discipline. However, without sound financial backing, it would be difficult to execute the exact programmes needed to propel the centre's progress.

- **Leading Change** – programmes to bring the centre in line with society and industry development and to keep abreast with advancement for the benefit of the children under the centre's care and their respective families.

### Learning to lead

With the intention to improve my leadership skills, I signed up for Principal Matters in May 2016. The biggest draw for me was the 5-day leadership seminar and the 3 psychoanalytical test as I really needed to know if I was doing things right. What else can I do? I had the feeling of being trapped in a bottle neck and had no one to discuss and bounce ideas off. I was hoping that the programme would give me an insight into my leadership capabilities and allow me to build a network with industry professionals. The opportunity to interact with prominent early childhood leaders in Boston would enable me to view leadership with a different lens. The sponsorship of Lien Foundation would be an investment in myself and a priceless opportunity of a lifetime.

It turned out that the Principal Matters programme offered me what I was looking for and much more! The PM-01 batch was an amazing bunch and we not only built a professional network to exchange ideas and verify facts, we also built a network of support and care. The

programme offered many learning moments such as the 5-day seminar conducted by the Sequoia Group, sharing from non-EC leaders, the various speakers in Boston and the schools that we were attached to. Some of the most outstanding ones were:

- **Self-awareness is key** - I need to be aware of myself in order to be aware of my relationships with the people I work with. With self-awareness, I will better understand my relationship with the organisation that I work for, which is essential for decision-making and to lead effectively. My character and preferences will influence how I communicate, make decision, manage change and conflict, which are all inter-related and determine who I am. If I enhance on my strengths and work on my weaknesses, I can make changes and see positive outcomes.
- **Leadership is beyond management** – be open and approachable but do not micro-manage. Do not make it a habit to solve the staff's problem, encourage them to raise their problems but guide them to solve their own problems. Delegation and empowerment is the way to go as a leader's job is to grow people.
- **Same Intention Can Create Different Impact** - It is important to understand the personalities of the people I work with, in order to get my message to them in the most appropriate manner. A 'One size fits all' model of communication may not work well.

A great leader is one who will grow her people and the inspirational leader is one

who is influential. I am still learning and strengthened now by clarity of purpose as my leadership journey continues.

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## How Can the Support Given to a Novice Teacher Help Her Manage the Classroom and Engage the Children?

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### Introduction

A novice teacher (Teacher F) who joined the school last year in June is currently undergoing the place and train programme. In the mornings, she would be working in the centre's Nursery class and in the afternoons, she would be attending her Diploma in Early Childhood Teaching course. From my observations, I realized that the novice teacher did not complete her class set up by the given deadline. It also appeared that she was having difficulty in planning her class layout. Instructions given to her were either not carried out or not done on a timely basis, her reason was that she had forgotten them. Her class tended to be chaotic after lunch and she needed help even though the number of children she had was within the ratio and the experienced Chinese teacher was there to help her. Classroom routines were not established. The children tended to be easily distracted halfway through her lesson. All these observations demonstrated that this novice teacher was struggling to cope with the expectations of being a form teacher.

### Action Research Question

A teacher's first year on the job is often difficult. The novice teacher needs time and support to develop the necessary

knowledge and skills in order to deal with tasks such as classroom management. Novice teachers need more support and guidance early in their teaching practice in order to develop professionally (Brock & Grady, 1998). They need time to learn how to apply their understanding of the curriculum, child development and learning into their teaching practice. They also need time to plan for age appropriate experiences and establish routines in the class so that children will be engaged in classroom activities. I would like to help Teacher F plan engaging activities as well as establish a routine in the daily activities. Hence, the action research question is 'How can the support given to the novice teacher help her manage and engage the children?' The sub questions will be

- What do I know about novice teachers?
- What do novice teachers need?

### Literature Review

#### The Different Stages of a Novice Teacher

Katz (1972) described four stages of pre-school teacher development, they are Survival, Consolidation, Renewal and Maturity. The Survival stage may last throughout the first full year of teaching. The novice teacher's main concern in this survival stage is whether she

can survive the daily challenges. The challenges include being responsible for a whole group of young children and monitoring their growth, development and learning. The first full impact of the responsibility for a whole group and their encounters with the children's parents, which is unavoidable, may provoke anxieties. During this stage, the novice teacher needs support, understanding, encouragement, reassurance, comfort and also guidance.

The next stage is Consolidation where the teacher is ready to consolidate the overall gains made during the first stage. She is now able to differentiate specific tasks and skills to be mastered next. At this stage too, the teacher is beginning to identify individual children whose behaviour is different from most of the children she knows. Therefore, she is able to identify the more unusual patterns of behaviour that have to be addressed to ensure the steady progress of the whole class.

The third stage is the Renewal stage which is during the third or fourth year of teaching. During this stage, the teacher begins to be tired of doing the same things or conducting the same activities. If a teacher has an interest and commitment towards projects and activities she provides for children and they contribute to their educational value, then her need for renewal and refreshment should be taken seriously.

The last stage is Maturity where some teachers will reach this stage within five or even more years. The teacher is likely to have come to terms with herself as a teacher. She has reached a comfortable

level of confidence in her own competence and is then ready for other options and considerations in undertaking other roles in the profession.

This is Teacher F's first year of teaching, she is at the survival stage where she needs support, understanding, encouragement, reassurance, comfort and guidance.

### **What the Novice Teacher Needs**

During the survival stage, other than comfort, understanding, guidance, reassurance, support and encouragement, the novice teacher also needs help with specific skills and insight into the complex causes of behaviour. All these must be provided at the classroom level. The principal, senior teacher or an experienced teacher may be the ones to guide her. They must be constantly and readily available and know their teaching context well. Armington (1969) describes how advisors can meet these teacher needs on site, at times of stress or during moments of crisis. Therefore, the one guiding her should have enough time and flexibility to be on call, as and when needed by the novice teacher. This leads to pairing up the novice teacher with a more experienced teacher who can guide her in planning and implementing engaging classroom activities.

### **Engaging Children in Classroom Activities**

It is essential to reflect on the most effective practices to ensure that children are actually learning what is being taught. The novice teacher needs to create a climate of engagement in the classroom. The use of engagement strategies is a

powerful teaching tool critical in promoting children's well being. The novice teacher can use engagement strategies to avoid chaos during transitions. It also helps to keep the children focused. Some strategies she could use are to establish routines in the classroom, limit the time for each activity, use appropriate song with some actions or movements during transition, use a variety of hands-on activities or use visuals and manipulatives together with the hands-on activities.

Positive classroom engagement is characterized by children's enthusiastic, self-directed and active involvement with classroom activities (Downer, Booren, Lima, Luckner, & Pianta, 2010). Studies suggest that preschool children's positive engagement with tasks and activities is associated with better attention and impulse control (Bierman, Torres, Domitrovich, Welsh, & Gest, 2009). It suggests that interest and engagement in an activity strengthens inhibitory and attention control during the activity (Pessoa, 2009). This is why the novice teacher needs to plan classroom activities that engage the children.

### Methodology

To find out how to help Teacher F plan engaging activities as well as establish routine in the daily activities, two observations were conducted and a survey questionnaire was given to the novice teacher. The first observation was to observe the children, to find out what engaged them and what caused them to be disengaged. The observation also hoped to determine which part of the day

the children tended to be disengaged. The second observation was to find out how Teacher F conducted the activity, her tone of voice and her body language. It would also determine if a routine was being established in the daily activities. The survey questionnaire was given to her to identify her strengths and weaknesses, teaching strategies and the challenges she faced in the classroom.

### Baseline Data

Findings from the two observations:

- About the children -
  - Not all observed classroom routines, for example, when the children return to class, they were supposed to take out their communication book and their water bottle and place them on the table. Some children followed this routine but some were seen walking around the class talking to their friends.
  - Distractions - I noticed some children were easily distracted during lesson time, especially 3 to 4 of them seated at the back row. Teacher F would call their names a few times, they would respond and toe the line but only for a short while until they became distracted again.
  - Engaged/disengaged – the children tended to be engaged when they had hands-on activities like art and craft, or while they were at the learning corners. They were not engaged when they were not interested in the lesson or activity.

- Inappropriate behaviours – observed during lunch and shower time and this would happen after showering when the children were all seated at the library corner. This was when they tended to go to the teacher to complain, for example, about friends not sharing books. There were quite a number of children at the library corner with some books.
- About Teacher F -
  - Her voice was monotonous - from giving instructions during lessons and even during storytelling.
  - She lacked the support of the Chinese Teacher during her lesson time. The Chinese teacher was not seated with the children but was walking around the classroom doing her own thing. The novice teacher had to teach and at the same time try to control the children on her own.

From the survey questionnaire, I managed to collect data to support what I had observed. Teacher F found that the most challenging part of the day was during lunch and shower time. The most difficult time to get the children engaged was halfway through her lesson when the children would become distracted. However, she knew what to do with the children so that they could be more engaged in class. She also shared the teaching strategies that she used in class and what she planned in order to

establish a positive and productive learning environment in her classroom.

### **Action Plan and Implementation**

After analysing the pre-test data, I shared my observations with Teacher F. Together, we created a plan on how to manage the class so that the children would be less chaotic during lunch and shower time. Teacher F decided to divide the children into small groups and let them play with toys instead of having all of them sit down and read books at the library corner. This would be the strategy for about 2 to 3 weeks, after that we would review the effectiveness of this strategy.

We also discussed reasons behind the children feeling restless halfway through lessons and how we could make the lessons more interesting, for example, using real materials instead of pictures, or, conducting a cooking activity by using different kitchen equipment.

I shared with her the importance of intonation while talking, teaching the children and for storytelling.

I had a small conference session with Teacher F and the Chinese teacher about the importance of helping and supporting each other during lesson time.

I observed Teacher F again after six weeks to see how the action plan unfolded.

### **Post Test Findings**

#### **Observation (Children)**

Upon returning to the classroom, most children were aware that they had to take out their communication book and place it in the basket. After that, they sat down

on the floor and waited for Teacher F to start her lesson. Teacher F also called a few children and got them to sit in front of her. I observed that the children were able to sit down during lesson time. They were engaged during their art and craft activity. They made 'pizza' out of a paper plate, coloured papers, crepe paper and pipe cleaners. The children were also more participative during lessons and more focussed.

### **Observation (Teacher)**

The second observation focussed on Teacher F. When Teacher F was conducting her lesson, the Chinese teacher was supporting her in class management. As such there was no inappropriate behaviour observed. Teacher F did a cooking activity where she got the children to make muffins. They were learning about bakery as the theme was on Our Neighbourhood and Community. The children were given the chance to mix the ingredients in a mixing bowl, place muffin cups in the muffin trays and scooping the muffin mixture into the muffin cups.

The class also seemed less chaotic during lunch and shower time. Both Teacher F and the Chinese teacher got the boys to shower first before their lunch while the girls had their lunch first. After lunch and shower time, Teacher F divided the children into small groups - some were at the library corner, one group was playing with a box of toys and some were at the different learning corners. After all the children had showered, Teacher F had a storytelling session while the Chinese

teacher was preparing the children's mattresses.

### **Survey Questionnaire**

My third baseline data was from the survey questionnaire. Teacher F reported she did see some improvements with the children. They had become more engaged during lesson time. She found them much more responsive. She also found that it was easier to manage and teach the children when they were divided into smaller groups. With the help of the Chinese teacher, she was able to conduct her lesson smoothly without having to manage the children's inappropriate behaviours at the same time. Teacher F found that the children tended to be more engaged when they were doing hands-on activities. She realised that she had to plan more hands-on activities for the children so that their interest could be sustained.

### **Analysis and Discussions**

The action plan was thus successful and effective.

The all-important routine that was previously lacking had been re-established. Most of the children did not need to be prompted or reminded what they had to do upon returning to their classroom. Previously, only a few children were doing it, the others paid no heed.

Teacher F identified the distractors and had them seated closer to her. By doing so, these children became more attentive.

The children had more engaging activities. When she was teaching the children about bakery, she planned two different types of hands-on activities, an

art and craft and a cooking activity, their engagement level was high. Copperstein and Kocevar-Wiedinger (2004) explained the benefits of hands-on activities, "abstract concepts become meaningful, transferable, and retained because they are attached to performance of an activity" (p.145). In other words, when students have the opportunity to take learning into their own hands, they become proud and motivated to continue to grow and learn.

The class was also much more manageable after lunch and shower time. Previously, the children took more than one hour for their lunch and shower routine. When it was changed to either the boys or girls showering first while the other group had their lunch, it took just about forty five minutes to complete the routine. Changes, such as providing for more choices and eliminating wide open spaces, helped reduce the potential for conflict and influenced the behaviour of all children. Fox and colleagues (2003) emphasized that when a teacher makes such changes, it gives her the opportunity to observe the children when they are engaged in socially competent behaviour such as following directions, helping their friends, participating in dramatic play with their peers and sharing. None of these would be possible if the group is too large.

Teacher F did storytelling after lunch and shower time. She tried her best to improve her intonation, however from the observation, she still needed to work on it. Children, regardless of their language skills or reading abilities, can understand the story because it is communicated through words, vocal intonation, gestures,

facial expressions and body movement (Mallan, 1997).

From the survey questionnaire, Teacher F realised that, with the help of the Chinese teacher, she was able to conduct her lesson smoothly without having to manage and teach the children at the same time. The change the two teachers made was to ensure their attention was always on the children and they would only do their own work, like preparing lesson materials, when the children were napping. Teacher F's lesson plans now had more hands-on activities so that the children were motivated and well engaged during lesson time.

### Reflection

Action research in education can be defined as the process of studying a school situation to understand and improve the quality of the educative process. Through repeated cycles of planning, observing and reflecting, individuals and groups that engage in action research can implement changes required for classroom/school improvement. Action research does not only determine ways to enhance the lives of children, it also enhances the lives of those professionals who work within the educational system.

### Conclusion

This action research provided me with a meaningful way to grow professionally, I discovered new roles for myself –

- as a role model for the novice teacher
- as someone continuing to develop professionally, gaining new

knowledge and understanding about how to improve educational practices or helping to resolve significant problems in the classroom or the school

- as a self-directed learner, and
- as a reflective practitioner.

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## What does it mean to be Reggio inspired? Perspectives from a Singapore preschool

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### What is the Reggio Emilia Approach?

What exactly is the Reggio Emilia Approach? Compared to just 10 years ago, Reggio is now very much searchable on the internet. There are so many resources available online. This means a few things to me – using the term Reggio has become a bit of a commodity. It is trendy in the educational circles, and not only because it looks pretty. In fact, you can now find many schools describing themselves as ‘Reggio schools’.

The Reggio Emilia schools have been described as the best preschool method in the world by Newsweek Magazine, and many words like ‘innovative, inspiring’ have been used in the world of early childhood education. The Reggio Emilia Approach was founded by the late Loris Malaguzzi, and came about in a small town north of Italy called Reggio Emilia after World War II. It is not a method; it is an approach or rather a philosophy of learning that is focused on young children. The theoretical basis of the Reggio Emilia philosophy comes from Vygotsky, Dewey, Piaget and many others. Visual arts feature strongly.

Reggio Emilia is in North Central Italy, with a population of about 170,000. It has

a socialist government, and the main religion is Catholicism. The population is increasingly diverse because of migration. The region’s main businesses are related to agriculture – cheese, wine, livestock and balsamic vinegar.

Reggians value certain things – they take their **time**, celebrate beauty and quality of life, relationships, family and community. One big thing that is extremely different from us in Singapore is that people in Reggio Emilia take their time. Buildings in Reggio Emilia are old, and there is a rich sense of architecture, and there are large piazzas, markets, courtyards and cathedrals.

In the city, children are welcome everywhere. Generations stay together – in the school, a sense of continuity is important for the children. This means a child who starts school at 2+ years old has the same class teachers every year until they reach 6 years old. Many teachers in Reggio Emilia have worked for 30 years at a time.

### Reggio 101: Philosophy and Principles

There are heaps of books that dig deep into the Reggio Emilia philosophy, and

they range from beginner to advanced reflections. The main tenets are:

- Image of the child
- The hundred languages of children
- Community support and parental involvement
- Teacher as researcher, collaborator and guide
- Environment as the third teacher
- Long-term projects as vehicles for learning

### **What makes the Reggio Emilia Approach different?**

What makes the Reggio Emilia Approach so different from other philosophies that are popular in our world today? From a Reggian pedagoga named Veia Vecchi, one feature is that of aesthetics – the appreciation of beauty, which she says is extremely important in human life, and so should be as important in education and learning. You may ask “How does beauty or appreciation of beauty come up in early childhood education?”

Let us think about what we are used to or rather, what is normal for us. We grew up with traditional schooling – teacher led, and being academically prepared for kindergarten and then primary school. Teachers plan the curriculum, use what is given to them and guide the children in prepared class activities. This includes structured themes, and the schedule of the day follows a routine. The classroom is set up to support development of specific skills – letters, numbers, colours,

shapes, telling the time. And depending on age level, pre-reading skills are also emphasized.

Such an academic classroom is one that suits children in a highly structured environment, especially those with long attention spans. These children can sit and stay focused for longer periods and are able to take directions. There is a high emphasis on academic learning, and therefore less on the socio-emotional development of the child.

But imagine a classroom that is not set out with numbers or letters, and instead has walls that show an engaging and exciting project that is going on. The spaces in the classroom support that of the project, and are rich with a variety of materials that can be used in project work. The classroom supports the children moving from one space to another, and is able to facilitate small group and large group learning. Imagine a room that is full of beauty in different ways – a work in progress that is provocative, or the layout of the materials that is aesthetically pleasing, and children discussing their work together or doing something independently and in a totally engaged way.

I have described the difference between a traditional academic driven classroom that we are familiar with (see Photos 1 and 2) and a classroom that you might find in Reggio Emilia or in a Reggio inspired space elsewhere in the world (Photo 3).



Photo 1: Structured classroom

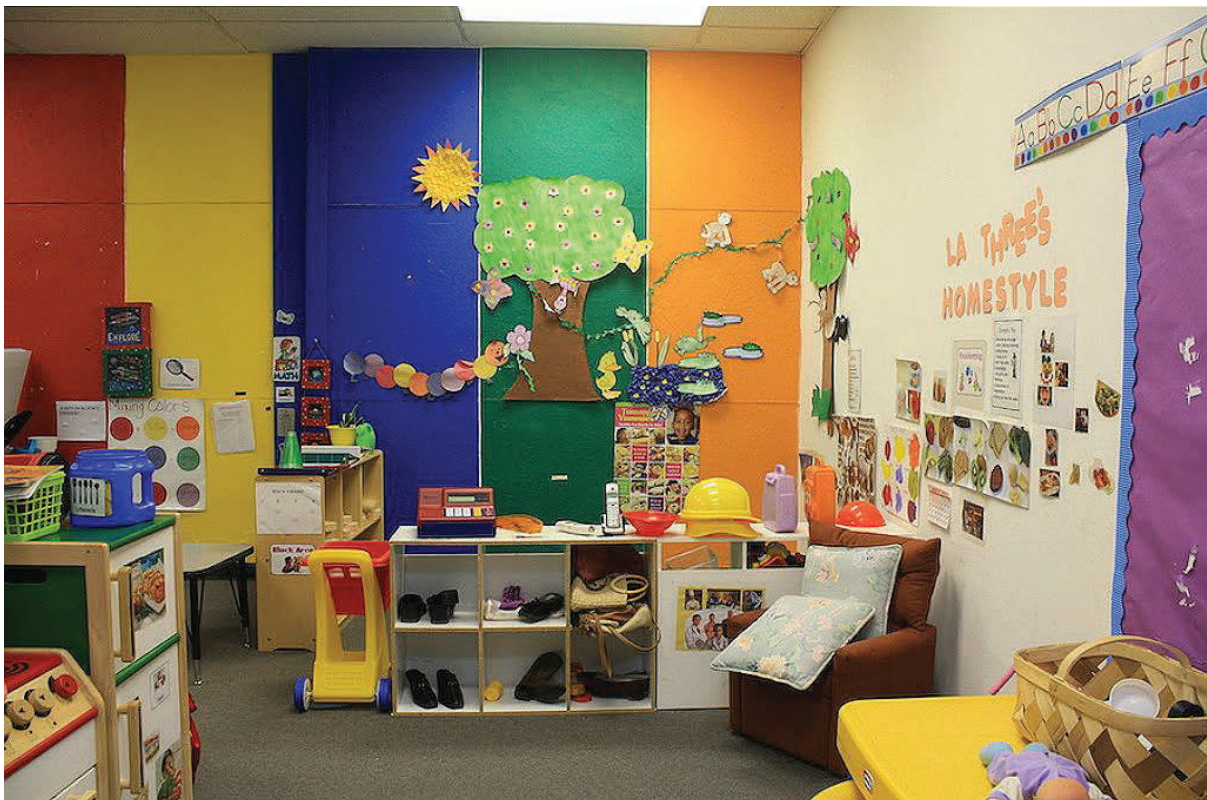


Photo 2: Play- based classroom

Source: <https://www.slideshare.net/kidadmit/kidadmits-preschool-101-webinar-series-preschool-philosophies>

### The Reggio classroom



Photo 3: Reggio classroom

Source: 'Children, Spaces, Relations – Metaproject for an Environment for Young Children' © Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia Italy, published by Reggio Children, 1998.

The differences in the Reggio classroom:

- The wall colours are muted. It is not bright, not 'noisy'.
- The work on the walls are all different, they show a variety of drawings which can mean that the work was done by the children and not by the adults.
- The space is entirely 3D – at the child's eye level, there are things to look at and provoke conversations, but in a balanced way. Imagine from a child's perspective, there is something to look at, near and far, high and low.
- There is dimension and depth in the classroom, with windows and sunlight – this allows for an inside and outside space where the child can go. This provides a sense of freedom and autonomy.
- The seating options provided support work at the table, and at higher tables. There are also steps for group chats.
- The far wall is full of documentation that sets out what is happening in the class – this acts as a form of communication, it is a 'talking wall'.

The Reggio classroom works off the assumption that a child is curious and has potential that drives learning. The teacher is a person who collaborates with the children, and the space supports fluid transitions for both the children and the

teacher. There is an emphasis on exploration and discovery.

### **Why is the Reggio Emilia Approach so important to us? The image of a child**

Reggio educators believe that a child has unlimited potential through a hundred languages, the child is eager to interact and contribute to the world. This is perhaps the single most groundbreaking feature of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

This child that the Reggio Emilia educators view is curious and imaginative, and constructs his or her own learning. Over and over again, Reggio educators consider each age group from infancy onwards to be developmental phase, where children demonstrate an immense amount of curiosity about the world. In Reggio Emilia, you will see many life size murals and art pieces in their schools and across their city landscape, all done by the children and facilitated by the teachers, school artists and curriculum coordinators called pedgogistas. Within the Reggio Emilia approach, the image of a capable child includes every single child; not a child who has less means or more means, or the child who has special needs (whether high functioning or low functioning). The image of every single child is that of a capable child.

### **The Hundred Languages of Children**

This is a poem that Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach, made famous.

*The child is made of one hundred.*

*The child has  
a hundred languages  
a hundred hands*

*a hundred thoughts  
a hundred ways of thinking  
of playing, of speaking.*

*A hundred.*

*Always a hundred  
ways of listening  
of marveling, of loving  
a hundred joys  
for singing and understanding  
a hundred worlds  
to discover  
a hundred worlds  
to invent  
a hundred worlds  
to dream.*

*The child has  
a hundred languages  
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)  
but they steal ninety-nine.  
The school and the culture  
separate the head from the body.  
They tell the child:  
to think without hands  
to do without head  
to listen and not to speak  
to understand without joy  
to love and to marvel  
only at Easter and at Christmas.*

*They tell the child:  
to discover the world already there  
and of the hundred  
they steal ninety-nine.*

*They tell the child:  
that work and play  
reality and fantasy  
science and imagination  
sky and earth  
reason and dream  
are things  
that do not belong together.*

*And thus they tell the child  
that the hundred is not there.*

*The child says:*

*No way. The hundred is there.*

### **Teacher as researcher, collaborator and guide**

The role of a teacher is extremely important in the Reggio Emilia Approach. Each child is seen as an individual person, there is no one size fits all. The teacher provides support and collaborates deeply with the child. The teacher has respect for a child's ideas and theories. This teacher stays with the child for 3 years. The teacher also researches into ways the children learn and spends a large amount of time observing, and listening to children in small groups.

Documentation is really about the children's learning journey and this work constitutes the assessment for children's learning. It is very different from the methods of assessment that is currently being used in mainstream schools – there is no report book other than the documentation of projects. One of the most important parts of the teacher's role is the documentation of the child's learning process.

Documentation happens through a variety of ways – through audio and video recordings, photographs, drawings and notes. Documentation shows the teacher's understanding of the child's capabilities and possibilities. Through documentation, the teacher creates a reciprocal and mutual relationship between the teacher and child of learning and teaching.

The teacher is also a learner, and research is an important learning strategy. Teachers are learners first and foremost, and model this for the children. In observing children closely, the teacher listens and is able to consider different perspectives. The teacher is also able to work with 'outside experts' - people who live and work outside of the school. They can be scientists, musicians, writers, architects, poets and so on. It provides the teacher with additional perspectives to work from. The teacher also invites close communication with parents and the community – this is an important part of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

### **Environment as a third teacher**

Unlike a traditional classroom, in a Reggio inspired classroom, the spaces are not separate but are connecting spaces that flow into one another. Rooms open onto a central space called a piazza and this mirrors the central meeting places they have in town, here children move freely through the space (both in town and in school). This openness encourages values of participation and interaction by the children, notwithstanding the differences in the children, teachers and other adults in terms of language, culture, race, religion and so on.

In Reggio, the environment is often referred to as the third teacher. A lot of thought and consideration goes into space planning, organization and use of materials. The school space is often multi-sensory, and the display of materials is often used in many ways. There is a large value placed on nature, and the outside environment is a source of colour, texture

and reflects seasons and the passing of time.

### **Long term projects as vehicles for learning**

Instead of structured themes, the ‘curriculum’ is described as emergent – and working off the children’s interests. The adults who the children come into contact with are their class teachers (usually a pair), the school artists and the pedagogista (also known as the curriculum coordinator). All three teacher roles cover different angles and starting points. Long term project learning takes place in Reggio inspired schools.

### **Why Reggio Emilia does not work for us**

In a lot of literature and articles, people have written that Reggio Emilia works because of the philosophy’s respect for children. But after some time at it, we discovered much to our horror that the Reggio Emilia approach was not working out for us. We have had huge issues with the values of the Reggio Emilia approach in our everyday lives.

First problem that showed up was our treatment of time. Unlike the Italians, we found ourselves rushing constantly despite trying not to. Where the Reggians leisurely take their lunch and naps, it is ingrained in us a sense of fitting into our day the things we ‘have to’ do. For example, despite our best intentions striving for a sense of enjoying our food at lunch and our teachers asking the children – “Do you like what we are eating today? What does this taste like?”, it was not uncommon to hear the cleaner auntie growling in the background “hurry up”.

The second problem is our difference in climates. Unlike the four seasons a temperate Reggio Emilia enjoys, it is summer all year long in Singapore. It is not only hot, it is extremely humid. We are not able to run barefoot on grass; our cow grass is sharp and the ground is often muddy. Parents do not completely support barefoot running because of fears of unclean soil.

The third problem is that of aesthetics and beauty. Despite wanting and yearning for beauty, we did not have a sense of that appreciation cultivated deep within us. Where Reggio and the rest of Italy enjoy architecture that has stood through centuries and then generations of refurbishments in a way that a sense of history holds beauty, our architecture in Singapore is somewhat new. In fact, Singapore is known to constantly purge and press ‘refresh’ on its buildings. Added to that our relatively short history as an independent nation, our growth in the arts is similar to that of a newborn or toddler! The adults in our space have not cultivated a deep and cultured sense of what entails beauty.

Our fourth issue is that of language and culture. Where the Italian language is flowy, flowery and detailed, our English, Mandarin, Bahasa and even Singlish are centred around getting us through the day swiftly.

The fifth and perhaps most stressful issue is that the images we have of the child, parent and teacher are slightly schizophrenic. On one hand, when we wear our educator’s hat, we value what we have learnt in Reggio. Yet our reality is steeped in that of commerce – we are a

private, for profit (small) childcare centre. In our world, we are often reminded that the customer is king, therefore customer service is important. Often, we have to strike a balance between customer service and the professional role of an educator.

These issues did not come up once or twice – they came up repeatedly, day after day. We were stressed and disappointed that our ideals were not working out.

### How a Singapore preschool is Reggio inspired

How then could we continue to be Reggio inspired?

Day after day, there were big and small pressures to push us NOT to practise what we say we believed in and while we constantly questioned whether we should keep a certain practice, we defined for ourselves what we were doing with our children. We made a conscious decision to do something a certain way. It became a constant negotiation of what was the norm and what was an ideal; sometimes it was a compromise, other times it was a ‘sacrifice’. In other words, we chose our battles carefully.

The first thing we did was to look closely at the language we were using. We simply changed the language we used – where we would describe a “problem”, we would look deeper and recognise the different perspectives that created the so-called problem. We recognised the complexities of things that were staring in our faces. For example, a parent wanted more worksheets and less project time. Our first instinct would be one of horror and outrage, did Parent X not know that

we do project learning for most of our time? But, when we looked at the educational climate in Singapore and the high stakes involved in Primary One readiness, it became completely understandable to empathise with that parent’s anxiety, a working mother who often worked till late and who had no time to walk through her child’s primary one readiness. She needed the school’s help wherever possible. A 2-way communication with the parent made it a lot easier for us to understand her, and for her to realise that her expectations of the school were slightly unrealistic and short sighted.

We became good at naming our ‘problems’ and the solutions:

- Where a new teacher has had no exposure to project learning => we would say to get more exposure to project learning
- Where we think and rethink the rigidity of subject learning => we try making it more flexible through adopting *listening* skills
- To raise the level of quality in EC learning => get teachers trained and be more knowledgeable

The second strategy we had was to move beyond binary arguments, to move beyond the ‘pass or fail’ mindset that we tended to have, for example, in saying “we are not good at art and the Reggians are” or “this philosophy is too Western and we are too Asian”. We acknowledged our feelings and recognised our deep disappointments that things were not going smoothly and in doing this, we began to empathise with our situations. This helped us.

Our third strategy was to contextualise. It took us time to realise Reggio's philosophy in our own practice. We believed in the Reggio principles but we had to make it work for us and not the other way round.

Finally, we began to frame our experiences around our own values. What were our values? We acknowledged this was a sensitive area as there were many contradictions, for example, Western education encourages individual thought and action but many of us with an Asian heritage learned from our families and communities that our strength is in family, that we must respect our elderly and submit to authority. Our position was that we must recognize our values and decide for ourselves, in our own context, how to proceed.

### Project Learning – The B2T Way

The B2T Way was how we have moved forward. Essentially, we worked through project learning, and we have a profound sense of our philosophy, culture and space in an Asian setting.

What did this mean? It meant that we are a preschool for local and international children and so our programmes provide for both project and subject learning. Subjects that we covered were English, Mandarin and Mathematics. Project learning takes place for half of the day, and subject learning takes place for the other half.

Physically, our school is small and our land is limited. So we add value with our project learning in the classroom, with simple and accessible resources in very little space.

We also rely on different experts that are important to us – we have an edible garden and a farmer who maintains the vegetables with the children. Our cook tends to the plants daily and harvests those that are ready with the children and teachers. We have both English and Chinese teachers who share their classes and routine care equally. Most of all, we provide for a lot of play time amongst different age groups so that children learn to play different roles to one another. (See photos 4 to 7).



Photo 4



Photo 5



Photo 6



Photo 7

### The B2T Way – how it is different

Fundamentally, our work is based on action research. It is qualitative, where we work off stories and multiple perspectives. Every person's voice is valued. Most of all, we make project learning work from an Asian perspective – we have many characteristics that are the opposite of Italy. For example, the tropical heat affects not just how much time you have outdoors but also what time you can be outdoors.

### Making the B2T Way work for you

If we are able to effect change, one more child would be able to learn creativity, one more child would be learning how to learn from mistakes, to be able to try because of failing, one more child would be inventing, and solving problems. The world would be a very different place if our young children are able to tackle real world problems from a young age, to ask questions and filter meaning.



# The Influence of the Learning Environment of Language and Literacy Experiences

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ProFLAIR

*'A language and literacy-rich environment includes classroom routines built around practicing and enjoying language and literacy in authentic settings'* (Griffith, Beach, Ruan & Dunn, 2008). Classroom routines are therefore important in my Flair session. Currently, my classroom routines include (Photos 1 & 2):

- Involving children to clip their name tags on a chart labelled 'I am here'
- 'Let's high five the words' where children give high-fives to two sight words for the week
- Writing the day and date
- Sharing of weekend experiences (Every Monday)
- Sharing of the week learning experiences (Every Friday)

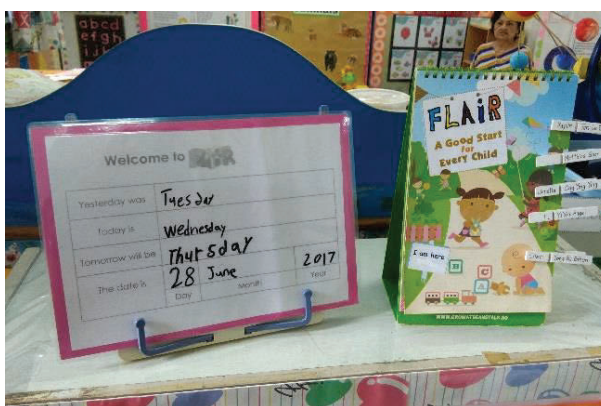


Photo 1



Photo 2

*'Functional print should be intentionally chosen to support children's emerging understanding of how print and oral language can serve similar functions. The children should be involved in constructing and interacting with the print.'* (Griffith, Beach, Ruan & Dunn, 2008). As such, I chose to implement a 'Flair Message Board' to the classroom daily routines replacing 'Let's high five the words'.

The objective of implementing a message board is to support children's understanding that, besides verbally, communication could also be done in writing. Children would be exposed to another type of environmental print and given opportunities to construct and interact with it through reading, drawing, and writing.

### Implementation – Day 1

I planned the introduction of a message board just after our weekly Monday's sharing of weekend experiences. I asked the children to discuss the following questions:

- If you want to tell someone what you have just shared, what other ways can we do it?
- If the person you want to share your weekend experience with is not with you, what other ways we can share it with him/her?

Besides the typical answers such as calling the person, writing, or drawing a card, a surprising response from one of the children was to 'text her'. When I asked her to share what she meant by to 'text her', she explained that it involved using the handphone to 'text' her. The child probably has prior knowledge of communicating using handphone text messages and could make connections to her own experiences. This shows that children's learning process is active and they 'construct their own knowledge through experiences in the world.' (Griffith, Beach, Ruan & Dunn, 2008).

After the children had shared their ideas, I told them I would choose to write what I wanted to say on a message board for all of them to read. Immediately, one of them asked, "What is a message board?" I briefly explained that a message board is a board where one could write a message for all to read.

I told them we would be creating a message board. I took out two types of message boards and gave them a choice

between the two and asked them to decorate it. The rest of the session was spent cutting shapes from coloured paper using the pattern scissors provided, and pasting these shapes around the border of the message board.



*Photo 3: Children at work on the message board*

### Implementation – Day 2 to Day 10

I observed that the children were eagerly waiting for my message each day. They would read aloud each message that was written (Photo 4).



*Photo 4*

I could hear them giggling as they waited for the message to be written down. There was an occasion when one of them even reminded me to write my message the moment I stepped into the classroom. One of the children, who is an emergent reader, was paired up with another confident reader. I also suggested to them to respond to the message by either writing or drawing. They were happy to do



so (Photo 5).

Photo 5

On Day 5, I asked the children to share how they felt about the message board (Photo 6). They were encouraged to draw or write their answers on the white board. I was happy when one of the children said she liked 'to answer the message'. This showed that children enjoyed interacting with the print either through writing or drawing and that asking them to respond to the written messages was a good strategy. The following week, I began writing questions on the message board (Photo 7).



Photo 6



Photo 7

During one session in the second week of implementation, my message included a sentence 'I am tired' (Photo 8).



Photo 8

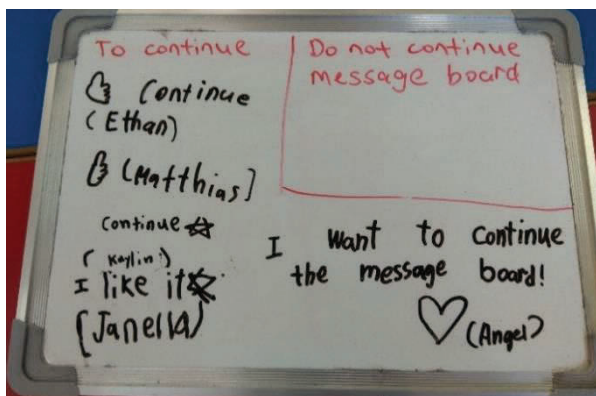


Photo 9

At the end of the Flair session, one of the children said softly to me, “Sleep early tonight, tomorrow not tired”. I was surprised because although this child read the written message at the start of the Flair session, he preferred not to respond either by drawing or writing. From this incident, I learnt that I may have restricted the children’s response by suggesting that they draw or write. I unwittingly omitted that they could also choose to respond verbally!

The following day, I intentionally planned a discussion after the children had read and responded to the message. We had a great time discussing the message ‘I am happy today. Do you know the reason?’ The child who had told me to sleep early the day before said aloud and confidently, “You sleep early!”

At the end of the second week, the children voted on whether we should continue with the message board. Their votes were unanimous, they wanted it to continue (Photos 9 & 10).



Photo 10

### Reflections

As I was too focused on my objective of implementing a message board to support the children’s understanding that communication could be done through writing or drawing, I had precluded their choice of expressing their thoughts verbally. Indeed ‘the importance of supporting preschool children’s oral language cannot be overemphasized’ and ‘oral language development lays the foundation of literacy development’. (Griffith, Beach, Ruan & Dunn, 2008).

By intentionally setting aside a time for discussion where children could respond verbally to the written message, I created another opportunity to engage them in conversations that would enable them ‘to make connections between the text and their own personal experiences, between the text and other known texts, and between the text and the world’ (pg. 36, Literacy for Young Children by P Griffith, S Beach, J Ruan, L Dunn, 2008).

Asking the children to evaluate the message board and involving them through a vote on whether to continue with it were good strategies that empowered the children in decision-making as it gave them ownership of this

class routine. 'Ownership for children is the children's feeling that the classroom is theirs, too, not just the teacher's.' (Stone, 1995). The children felt respected as their contributions were valued.

I was pleased that the children had voted to continue with the message board as it was a good change from giving high fives to the sight words. The success was due to the children's readiness in reading and understanding simple sentences and written questions. It also provided them with the opportunity to interact with print, either through writing, drawing or speaking. I was able to create opportunities to extend children's language development in meaningful and purposeful ways.

The following are some extension activities:

- Taking turns to write a daily message on the message board
- Creating a personal note box in the classroom where children can write personal notes to their classmates and teachers. The teacher could role model it first by writing a personal note to each child.

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## Morning Message

Roxanne Oh  
ProFLAiR

I introduced the 'Morning Message' when I felt that the children in my FLAiR class had arrived at a significant point where they had developed a love for stories. By this stage, my FLAiR students were recognising more prints in their environment. They were becoming curious readers, more aware of emotions and feelings around them. Some had already begun to bring their own story books from home, eager to share them during FLAiR lessons. At times, multiple books would be brought in and the day was spent exploring each book. We had many meaningful discussions; I learnt more about the children's favourite parts in the story and I was also able to share and discuss similar experiences. The students became excited coming into class, wondering about their day ahead.

On the first day of Term 3, my very first morning message appeared on the whiteboard.

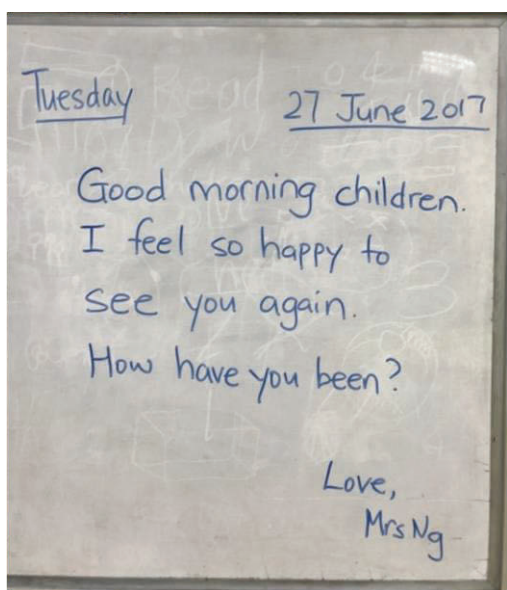


Photo 1

This led to this conversation.

*Child: "What is that Mrs Ng?"*

*Teacher: "It is my morning message to you written on the whiteboard. There will be a different message written especially for you every morning."*

*Child: "What is a morning message?"*

*Teacher: "A morning message is a special message that tells us the exciting things that are going to happen for the day, or it can be a special note to someone."*

*Child: [seen trying to read it silently]*

*Teacher: "Let's read this message together."*

*Child: [understood the written message] Where did you go Mrs Ng? Did you go to another school to teach other children?*

As the conversation continued, this message board became an ice-breaker on that first day of Term 3. The children were amused that there was a message for them on the whiteboard, it was a new experience for them.

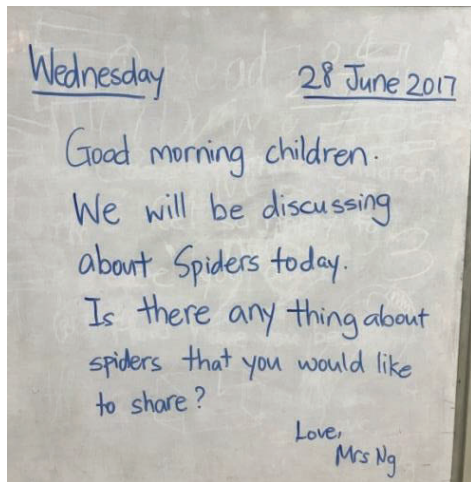


Photo 2: My second morning message to the children.

It was not difficult to get them to turn their attention to the morning message when they came into the classroom. They would walk towards the whiteboard and look at the message. Some read silently, some read aloud. I could see them trying their best to make out what I had written. Some asked how to read while others listened to my reading.

They got very excited about the discussion topic of the day. We spent time talking about spiders. The children shared about their encounters with spiders. One of them was so excited that he asked if he could write his sharing on the whiteboard (Photo 3).

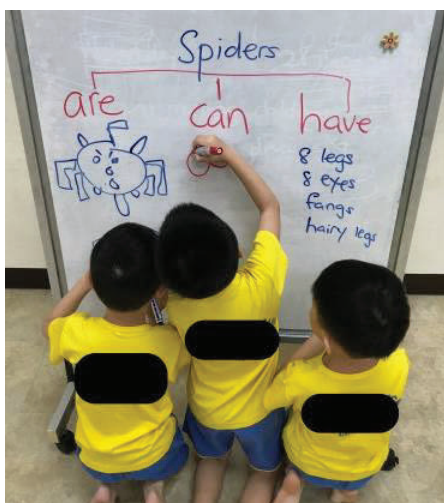


Photo 3: More children writing on the whiteboard

I extended our discussions:

- I brought in a live spider and the children observed it under a magnifying glass. There was a lot of excitement and more discussions followed.



Photo 4

- For craft, the children made a web by weaving string on a paper plate. The children's experience showed them the hard work that a spider had to put in, spinning a new web everyday.

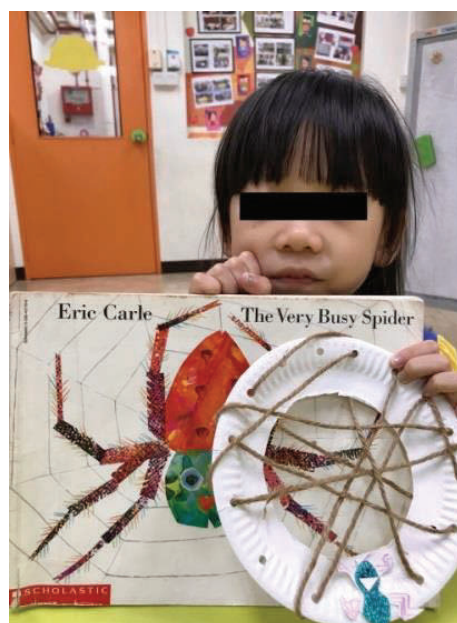


Photo 5

Other examples of our morning messages:

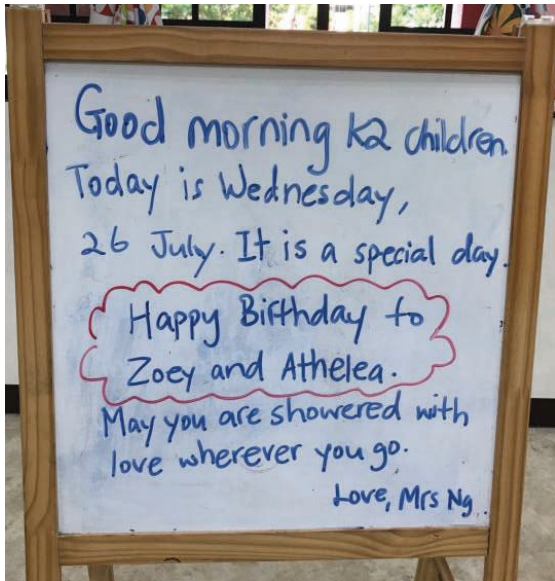


Photo 6: A message for our birthday girls

Children learnt how to exchange birthday greetings. They had not tried greeting with a handshake. They were shy about it at first but it turned out to be a very happy teachable moment for all of us.

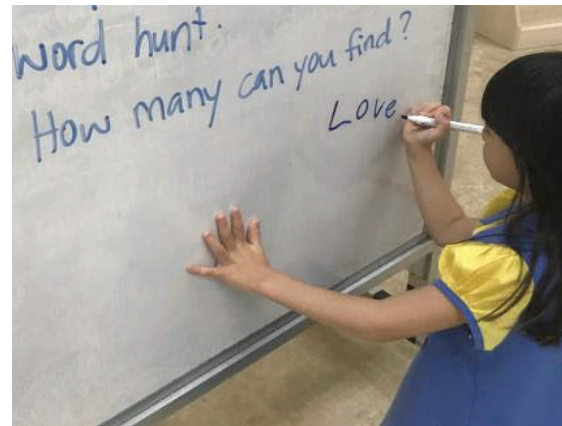


Photo 9: Ziqi filling in the missing information.

## Practices



Photo 7: Happy birthday Zoey.

Ziqi: Mrs Ng, you have forgotten to write something on the message.

Teacher: What did I forget?

Ziqi: You forgot to write Love, Mrs Ng. I want to write it for you.

Teacher: Ok. You are very observant. Great job!



Photo 8: Happy birthday Athelea

By Day 4, the routine of reading morning messages was well established. The children would come in, head to the whiteboard and read the morning message of the day.

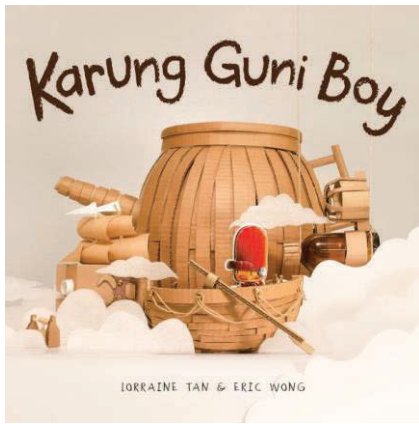
This daily message written for the class, highlighting a topic they would be learning or activities they would be doing is a simple but highly effective way in welcoming children into the classroom. It not only helps to set and anchor the tone

for the day, it also encourages reading skills.

Predictability of what to expect for the day helps children feel secure and the message also signals to the children that we are ready to start the day. In addition, when children see that the teacher has taken time to write them a different message daily shows them that the morning message deserves their attention.

Children look forward to seeing the message each day and talking about them every morning. It sparks off discussions so time is provided every day for interactions and sharing of experiences. This makes the child more confident. It also piques their curiosity as they are keen to know more about their friends. For those children who are listening, there will be input from hearing what their friends have shared. As such, connections are made with their own experiences. Social developments are seen through the interactions. Cognitive developments are made.

As a practitioner, I feel that the smallest change can achieve a tremendous impact on the learning environment. With a simple change of introduction in the morning message, the classroom becomes alive with discussions. Everyone wants to read the morning message now! It becomes a responsive classroom, such as when the children attempt to read, make their mistakes and learn to correct them. Words of encouragement are given even with the smallest achievement. When the same words are used almost every day, such as “Good morning children” and “Love, Mrs Ng”, they are imbibing it and learning to read.



A story set in an Asian context, *Karung Guni Boy* is about a little boy Ming who dreams of creating inventions but does not have the money to buy the materials he needs to do so.

*Karung Guni boy* is an interesting book about recycling and upcycling written by Lorraine Tan and illustrated by Eric Wong.

Lorraine Tan is a lecturer at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences in Ngee Ann Polytechnic. She has published two other children's books that have won the First Time Writers and Illustrations Award in 2009. Eric Wong is an illustrator whose work is witty and aesthetically pleasing. In this book, Eric Wong has chosen to portray the images using actual recycled materials which tie in with the underlying theme of the book - recycling and upcycling.

*Karung Guni Boy* takes us on a journey through the eyes of Ming, the main character in the story. Ming is boy who is very creative and has a million and one ideas for inventions. However, he is unable to buy the materials he needs for his inventions due to the lack of funds. Ming starts to think of various ways to save money for his inventions only to be discouraged. One day, Ming hears the "beep beep" sounds from a rag-and-bone man's horn and he is inspired to make his inventions using things that his

## Book Review

By Grace Victoria

The Salvation Army Childcare Centre

neighbours and friends might no longer need. This begins Ming's adventure as he invents things using materials he collects from the people in his neighbourhood. His ultimate dream is to build something that can help everyone, which he eventually does.

As Ming is just like any other child, children are drawn into the story very quickly as they share their thoughts about how Ming might be able to achieve his dreams. The illustrations in this book always excite the children. They are carefully crafted to gently lead them to dream and plan beautiful things that they too could build with just cardboard.

This book supports the ideas and goals of helping and saving the Earth and our environment as it gives children an insight into simple recycling and upcycling that even they could manage independently. It reinforces in them the notion that they can succeed in anything they set their minds on, that no dream is too small.

*Karang Guni Boy* is a refreshing read for children in this day and age as they are seldom exposed to the job and duties of rag-and-bone men and the importance they play in the grand scheme of recycling. Through Ming's ups and downs, children learn a little more about this job that is slowly fading away and about their responsibilities to our Earth. This story also sparks an interest in them to find out more about recycling and upcycling.

## A Garden in Every Preschool, 2017

Ding Zhen Xin  
Preschool Market

A simple but important vision - "A Garden in Every Preschool". It is a mission to provide preschoolers with an opportunity to get closer to nature and learn valuable lessons from it. Conceived by AECES, this project has taken small but steady steps to fulfilment.

In 2015, a seed was sown at Teacher's Day Celebration - Plant-a-Pot, catering to AECES members (Photo 1).



*Photo 1: Dr Christine Chen sharing the vision of A Garden in Every Preschool*

It was a joy to see the preschool educators getting their hands in the dirt and each bringing home a pot to remind them of the importance of exposing the children to nature (Photo 2).



*Photo 2: Preschool educators potting plants at Plant-A-Pot*

The seed grew into a seedling as the Dream Garden Seed Fund was awarded to 7 preschools at the 2016 Early Childhood Conference. With great anticipation and excitement, we watched gardens taking shape in each of the centres and children actively participating in gardening activities. Taking steps to fulfil dreams is not always smooth-sailing. Some centres met with structural and logistical setbacks, but at the end of 2017, all centres managed to progress with their gardens and 4 of them presented on their gardens at the 2017 Early Childhood Conference (Photos 3-6). This reminded me of how nature and gardening can teach children the process of problem-solving and perseverance. There may be setbacks, what we envision may not materialise as expected but something good will happen when we persevere and exercise flexibility.



*Photo 3:  
The Ascension  
Kindergarten -  
Blooming Hearts*



Photo 4: MFS Blk 466A Jalan Kayu – Our Garden



Photo 6: Posso Preschool @ Big Box – Posso Garden



Photo 5: MOE Kindergarten @ Farrer Park – Mystical Passageway

As the dream gardens bloomed in each of the 7 centres, AECES, Preschool Market together with Lifelong Learning Council, NParks and Kidz Meadow worked together to launch Garden in Every Preschool as part of the 2017 Start Small



Photo 7

Dream Big (SSDB) initiative (Photo 7). This little seedling grew into a tall tree; it exceeded the initial target of 200 centres when it reached almost 400 centres. It was very encouraging to see many educators taking steps to bring nature to their children.



Photo 8: Gardening Kit presented to Mr Desmond Lee

Kidz Meadow showed great commitment and enthusiasm in coming up with the Educators' and Activity Guide companion to 'The Curious Garden' by Peter Brown. Their article was published in AECES' Early Educators, June 2017. The Community in Bloom team from NParks faithfully followed up with centres, answering their queries and assisting them to troubleshoot issues they faced with their gardens.

The collaboration, shared vision and teamwork by all the various agencies and organisations moved the project towards achieving this amazing feat! (Photo 9)



Photo 9

At the 2017 Early Childhood Conference, the project showcased the fruits of the initiative. Along the theme of nature playscape, a wooden dome was set up with various activities like making a leaf press bookmark (Photo 10)



Photo 10

and a nature frame conducted on wooden pallets (Photo 11).



Photo 11

It was an honour to host Mr Desmond Lee, Minister for Social and Family Development and Second Minister for National Development and Member of Parliament for Jurong GRC, who launched the Start Small Dream Big initiative in March 2017. He was heartened to see how the project had grown in the past 7 months. It was a fitting closure for this year's SSDB initiative.



Photo 12: *The Giving Garden showcase*

As the various participants came by the Early Childhood Conference booth, we hoped that the passion for bringing nature to the children was ignited in them and more centres will join us in 2018. We

want to encourage that little seed to still grow bigger and stronger into a big tree, bearing more fruits and, in turn, sowing even more seeds throughout the preschool centres.

## A Timely Sabbatical Experience in Singapore

Tata Mbugua, Ph.D.

University of Scranton, Pennsylvania, USA

Between the months of August to October 2017, I spent my sabbatical predominantly in Singapore with short educational trips to Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. My sabbatical experiences will be framed through two “lenses” namely the relatively new concept of educational diplomacy and, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as they manifested themselves within the Singapore context. This brief reflection of my time in Singapore aims to capture the experiences I was fortunate enough to have and insights that I gleaned about ECE landscape.

Education has been globally recognized as a main driver of development as well as a contributor in the achievement of proposed Sustainable Development Goal # 4 (SDG 4), “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all” (World Education Forum, 2015, p. 1). As a result, through Vision 2030, nations of the world including Singapore, are making a commitment, with a sense of urgency, to a single, renewed education agenda that is holistic, ambitious and aspirational, leaving no one behind. In effect, efforts aimed at prioritizing ECE as a foundation for early success which begets later success, continue to be a vital element of this commitment to educating the world’s children.

Pursuant to the global endeavor of prioritizing ECE and the inherent

international collaborative partnerships, the concept of education diplomacy comes to fore. The Center for Education Diplomacy, (2017) and the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI, 2013), suggests the following definition:

*‘Education Diplomacy cultivates trust to achieve mutual benefits in the pursuit of context-specific education goals using negotiation and other diplomatic skills to communicate across regional or national boundaries or with local communities responsible for education delivery. The practice of education diplomacy can encompass interactions with multiple actors at multiple levels that aim to shape a positive policy environment for education and manage issues of education on a local, bilateral, regional, or global level.’*

### My Journey

I will preface by stating that throughout my journey, which started when I received an invitation to serve as a Visiting Scholar at Singapore University of Social Sciences [SUSS], I applied some skills of education diplomacy. These include cross-cultural communication which cultivates relationships with individuals from differing cultural backgrounds through verbal and nonverbal exchange of thoughts and ideas; intellectual flexibility which is the ability to quickly adapt to

changing circumstances; and cultural sensitivity by being aware of cultural differences and similarities.

My “entry” into the field of ECE in Singapore was facilitated by two professional colleagues who are deeply committed to advancing the profession. These two colleagues are Dr. Christine Chen, President, Association for Early Childhood Educators of Singapore [AECES], and Dr. Sirene Lim, Academic Lead of the early childhood education program, Singapore University of Social Sciences [SUSS]. Individually, and through their respective institutional affiliations, they tremendously helped me in my learning curve and navigation of ECE landscape in Singapore. In sharing my experiences, it becomes evident that both the concept of education diplomacy and the journey towards the achievement of SDG 4 are at play in powerful ways in Singapore.

### Early Childhood Education

There is a palpable and growing demand for ECE profession as evidenced by increased interest in enrollment in both diploma and degree courses. Therefore, my sabbatical in Singapore has been timely and beneficial to my lifelong learning in two specific ways. First, I was able to witness this surge in interest in the field of ECE given impetus by the rising demand for pre-school services by young families. Currently, Singapore has around 16,000 pre-school educators, and another 4,000 are needed by 2020 (Goh, 2017). Second, my affiliation with Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) comes at an historic moment when SUSS is the

first public university granted the Ministry of Education (MOE) charter to offer a full-time degree in early childhood education, which started in July. It is of significant note that applicants for the degree program were eight times higher than the number of places available.

### Professional experiences and responsibilities

I was involved in a variety of experiences such as curriculum development projects at SUSS with Dr. Lim and the team at School of Human Development and Social Sciences; served as a guest lecturer at SUSS, and offered a seminar to faculty, preschool directors, and students. A visit to Early Childhood Development Agency [ECDA] provided a deeper understanding of the field of ECE in Singapore and an important document that guides professional practice *Singapore Pre-School Accreditation Framework: Quality Rating Scale* (ECDA, 2014).

In mid-September 2017, Dr. Chen and I traveled to Hanoi, Vietnam to attend an educational scientific conference organized by UNICEF and National College of Education. We provided a professional development workshop to ECE teachers whose focus was on “*Keeping the balance between teacher-directed and child-initiated learning.*” In addition, I was able to visit government kindergarten classrooms and a private early childhood center in Hanoi. One area that stood out for me was the rapid development and infrastructure in Hanoi city and the prioritized goal of teaching English to young children, impelled by the rapid

forces of globalization and the internationalization of the status of English.

### Visits to Preschool and ECDA

During my time in Singapore, my colleagues availed me opportunities to visit a variety of child care centers and kindergartens in Singapore which serve children below the age of 7. Specifically, the opportunity to visit the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) allowed me to gain further insights into the field of ECE in Singapore. This autonomous Agency, which is jointly overseen by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), and is hosted under the MSF, serves as the regulatory and developmental authority for the early childhood sector in Singapore. Its vision and mission align well with the *World Education Forum's 2015 Incheon Declaration* on inclusive, quality education for all. The emphasis on bilingual and multilingual experiences for young children was an important observation I made. In addition, it was my impression that the MOE and MSF commitment to high quality ECE, and a high degree of parental involvement in their children's education, play a pivotal role in contributing to the success witnessed by Singapore high achievement in international tests.

As I reflect on my experiences in Singapore, I do so with a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation for the kindness, respect and generosity of spirit and time from my colleagues, their respective institutions, pertinent

stakeholders, and the people of Singapore. Through these intentional professional collaborations, education diplomacy in our interconnected and interdependent global community that educators will continue to collaborate, in the spirit of advancing the field of ECE worldwide. This was a highly informative and educationally rewarding experience that epitomized the spirit of education diplomacy through international professional collaboration for the achievement of United Nation's SDG #4. The ECE insights gained and cultural nuances was only realized by being immersed in the society. As educators, let us continue to seek meaningful ways of building consensus around the role and benefits of education in our increasingly complex world. Mine was a very active agenda which helped me grow as professional and widened my perspectives to the ECE profession from different contextual perspectives.

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## Attending Conferences in the Region

Crissen Lee

Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society

AECES Executive Committee Member

The preschool sector is blooming rapidly in countries like Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia. I saw and witnessed enthusiastic educators seeking for knowledge and information to continue their professional preschool journey. The 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference: Leadership that Touches Hearts and Engages Minds had about 300 participants with 7 of us from AECES.

### The 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Leadership in Early Childhood Education @ Jakarta – 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> August 2017

When we first arrived in Jakarta, we received a warm welcome from Mrs. Juny Intan Gunawan, Chairperson of Indocare. She is a kind and spontaneous host who showcased IndoCare services through slides and a walk around the campus. Their eagerness to learn and selflessness to share really impressed me. It made me proud to be their partner in the Early Childhood field.



Photo 1: With Mrs Juny Gunawan (5<sup>th</sup> from left).



Photo 2: AECES shared materials with preschool practitioners

We also met our fellow professionals from Vietnam and seized the opportunity to have breakfast with them.



Photo 3: The Singapore and Vietnam Preschool Practitioners

Singapore's contribution to the conference was represented by our keynote speaker Dr. Sum Chee Wah who presented leadership development and capacity building of early childhood

practitioners in Singapore. She was highly acknowledged by the audience. There were also other keynote speakers from Japan, Malaysia and Indonesia, sharing experiences and knowledge over the course of the two-day conference.



*Photo 4: Keynote speakers from different countries*

**International Conference for Early Childhood Care and education @ Kota Kinabalu – 28<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> August 2017**

Besides Indonesia, I also attended the International Conference for Early Childhood Care and Education at Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Through these visits, it was noted that Indonesia and Malaysia have the luxury of huge space and endless supply of natural resources. They are able to maximise their children's learning with this advantage. Contrastingly, Singapore does not have the luxury of space due to the limited land we have. Outdoor activities are conducted at a restricted area and learning is often compromised.

Nevertheless, we are fortunate to have many professional educators who are resourceful and are able to make good use of our limited resources to make the impossible happen. One such professional is Ms Charmaine Teo who won the hearts

of the audience by being factual about this constraint and sharing creative ways to



overcome it for the past nine years.

*Photo 5: Interactive session with Ms Charmaine Teo, Vice President AECES*

Singapore may be a small country with limited natural resources but we have taken up the challenge of sharing our knowledge and experiences with fellow professional in the region. Let us fly our Singapore flag high in all future conferences.



*Photo 6: AECES had distributed more than 500 copies of materials throughout these two conferences and has shared ideas*

## Informed and Inspired: Key Insights from the Finland and Belgium Study Trip

Dr. G. Kaveri

Singapore University of Social Sciences

In October 2017, the Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore) organised a study trip to Finland and Belgium. The week-long, tightly-packed trip, which included the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) 2017 Conference as well as centre visits, brought together 32 academics, early childhood educators, and other professionals from both Singapore and Hong Kong.



With its focus on Local Responses, Global Advances: Towards Competent Early Childhood Systems, the ISSA Conference 2017 linked three strands presented as a platform connecting about 450 participants from 60 countries. It set the stage for listening to academics, practitioners, policy makers, and members of non-governmental organisations and for participating in meaningful interactions with them. The key note addresses by distinguished speakers Nora Milotay and Jan Peeters were inspiring and thought-provoking.

The principles behind a quality framework, the need to innovate and the ubiquitous presence of pedagogical heroes were some of the significant highlights of the keynotes. While the keynotes enabled us to connect the strands of the conference into a coherent whole, the concurrent sessions and workshops engaged us in enriching dialogues with experts from the field, thus offering a perfect match between theory and practice.

Each of the three settings we visited in Helsinki, Finland, included an orientation by the centre staff followed by a tour of the physical setting. This neat structure enabled us to understand the historical background of the centres and offered glimpses of children's routines, resources and curriculum structure grounded in child-centred pedagogy. Having access to classrooms and learning materials as well as opportunities to interact with both children and educators made our learning experience authentic. While each of the centres had distinctive features, a common thread across them was the critical importance of outdoor play. Centres such as the Auringonkukka Children's Day Care Centre have the advantage of being situated amidst open space and nature. Coupled with child-centred pedagogy, this makes outdoor play an integral part of learning. Seeing the very young spending a large part of

their day in outdoor spaces regardless of the cold weather and having opportunities to learn carpentry in the early years were eye-opening experiences for most of us. In addition, witnessing centres accommodating more than 100 children in one physical setting educated us to the possibility of managing large numbers of children through careful planning.



As a part of the ISSA Conference 2017, we also had the privilege to visit centres in Ghent, Belgium. While unique in its own ways, each of the sites showcased vibrant and contemporary developments in the field. For instance, a visit to De Buurt, a kindergarten and primary school with a homely environment, showed us the potential of a community-oriented and experience-driven educational project. In addition, attempts to strengthen relationships between families by providing a space for the exchange of material goods while also enabling environmental sustainability was something new we learnt from this centre. The centre visits also made it evident that the success stories of each of these sites were not independent of partnerships with families and communities. Meticulously planned by

AECES down to its finest details, the trip allowed us to immerse ourselves in learning experiences without having to think about the logistical arrangements.

On a final note, I would humbly recommend educators and those passionate about early childhood education to participate in such platforms as part of their ongoing professional development. Such platforms offer several advantages. They are critical to sharpening one's knowledge and skills. They provide us an excellent opportunity to get to know local, regional, and global members of the early childhood education community. In addition, they strengthen existing relationships between local practitioners and help form new professional relationships. These professional networks are important as they facilitate the exchange of ideas, which brings to light some of the everyday challenges faced by educators as well as effective ways to manage them. Insights into best practices revealed through the voices of practitioners from diverse contexts as well as policy makers open up possibilities for exploring dynamic approaches to preschool classroom teaching, management, and research in our local contexts. While study trips are opportunities to learn about success stories and challenges, they also serve as an opportunity for self-reflection and for rethinking our professional practices. In sum, this study trip was an insightful learning journey that provided evidence of best practices and reinforced the need for child advocacy.

## The 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Korean Society for Early Childhood Education (KSECE)

Cheong Su Fen  
Preschool Market  
Honorary Secretary, AECES

The 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference of KSECE was held on the 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2017 at Busan, Korea. This year's theme was Re-weaving Early Childhood Education in a Post Human Era. AECES, represented by our Honorary Secretary, Ms Cheong Su Fen was invited to the conference to give a celebratory speech.

Ms Cheong shared that AECES and KSECE have a memorandum of understanding for almost 10 years now. It was not the MOU that binds us but rather the friendship and common mission of advancing Early Childhood education that have kept the 2 associations closely knitted.



The theme of the conference posted a very significant perspective in today's Early Childhood scene, it highlighted the various kinds of social, philosophical and cultural issues embedded in our sector.

The keynote address was given by Prof Michel Vandebroek on the topic of *Post-foundationalism, Enhanced Liberalism and Post Truth in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Developments in the Early Childhood Education*.



Prof Vandebroek presented the post-foundational perspective, inspired by French philosophers such Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. It was acknowledged that there are always other, different perspectives possible on what was referred as truth, and that science cannot just be considered in a modernist way. Post humanism goes even a step further claiming that the human perspective or perspective that puts the adult human in the centre of the world is but one of the many possible perspectives and maybe not even the preferable one. He also touched on the topic of poverty and the real situation happening in many other countries, that with the rise of inequality

and poverty, a dematerialization of poverty seems to occur in policy and a discourse is spreading that the most salient source of poverty is education, rather than a lack of resources, income inequality or failures of the welfare state. International organizations, including UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank and others now depict Early Childhood care and education as 'the greatest of equalisers'.

Prof Vandebroek posed these questions: How do we view early childhood and what is our view of children? When he ended his keynote address, he said that we could not discuss education or pedagogy without discussing what education is for and also without discussing what kind of society we wish our children to live in.

We pause and reflect on Prof Vandebroek's words. In doing so, let us look at 2 countries - Japan and Singapore.

Very recently, the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made the decision that his government will invest in education and childcare; he made it clear it is about 'the future of our children'. Japan is set to offer free preschool places for every child aged three to five, and for children aged two and under from low-income families, for the children who truly need it. In our own nation state, PM Lee Hsien Loong announced that his government will have a bigger role in preschool education, in making it more affordable and accessible particularly for the middle and lower-income families. Certainly, these are huge bold moves, and many of us in the early childhood field laud these government decisions. Indeed, important stakeholders are stepping up and the future for our children, and for early childhood education, are so much brighter.