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AECES' journal *Early Educators* has been publishing articles written by a community of early childhood educators who work in the field, whether in the preschools or in related services. It has been both challenging and fulfilling when we can see how the sector has grown and now receiving recognition for the work it does with young children.

This issue starts with a letter from Dr Shirleen Chee, President, Academy of Principals (Singapore). Hers is a comforting message; in the midst of it is a story she tells of a Japanese Shogun who wanted his favourite bowl which was cracked to be repaired. The craftsman was so very skilful in repairing it that the broken piece was 'even more beautiful than the original.' The journey of an educator (or any worker for that matter) is not always perfect, there are good and bad times but we embrace them because experiences become stepping stones for the next, and next, experiences. This was exactly what Loy Wee Mee experienced when she was a mentor in Principals Matter, a leadership development programme for principals. Read her sharing and be inspired to join the programme!

In the section on professionalism, we have interesting articles and there is a diversity of topics. They provide the reader with much food for thought, on various aspects of professionalism and what professionalism means to each of us. Have you heard of 'Plearning'? It is a new word! Check it out in Karen Chin's article. Read 'Image of the Child: Develop Strategies to Optimise Children's Learning and Development' by Christine Soo, then follow it with the next one on 'Guiding Children's Behaviour through the Learning Environment'. These two flow nicely from one to the other.

Have an enjoyable read and look out for more to come in future editions.

From all of us at AECES, we wish you a most precious 2020.

Ruth Wong
Editor

A Teachers' Day Message

Dr Shirleen Chee
President, Academy of Principals (Singapore)

5 September 2019

Dear Colleagues,

Have you tried repairing a chipped porcelain or a broken ceramic that you treasure dearly? When a repair is made such that the original crack or chip is not even visible, we admire the craftsmanship even more. It takes greater skill to restore something that is damaged to perfection! When flaws are smoothed, hidden and camouflaged to picture perfect, we can be sure that the process of repair was no mean task.

In reality, the past is always imperfect. In our journey as school leaders, we make mistakes. We learn from them and move on. Our shortcomings, flaws and failures cause us great pain, but in order to be authentic, we have to look at our experiences as a whole and appreciate the imperfections that we have. I have learnt from the Japanese art form, Kintsugi, that there is beauty in not hiding our flaws.

The story was told of the Japanese Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa who wanted his favourite tea bowl, which was cracked, repaired. On seeing it being mended with unsightly metal staples, he wanted a better way of repair. Instead of focusing on how the tea bowl has cracked, he had wanted it to be restored to perfection again.



<https://www.1stdibs.com/furniture/decorative-objects/bowls-baskets/decorative-bowls/large-chinese-export-punchbowl-staple-repairs-18th-century/id->

You can guess by now that his craftsmen decided that one possible way of repair is to emphasise the cracks and not hide them. Can that method result in beauty? Through the use of golden lacquer, the craftsmen dignified and celebrated each artifact's unique history (and past) by emphasizing on its fractures and breaks. As a result it made the broken piece even more beautiful than the original. You see, brokenness and cracks need not be hidden. It is part of who we are and how that has also shaped us and made us a better person.



<https://soraneews24.com/2014/02/16/japane-se-pottery-repair-technique-makes-comeback-clumsy-people-rejoice/>

How true and apt a lesson for our leadership journey! Instead of wishing that we could turn the clock backwards, or that we could have done something differently, we can embrace disappointments and failures as these have been part of our path to growth.

As a fraternity, we can understand that these experiences have made us more resilient and grounded. Don't we encourage our students and tell them that failures are just a stepping stone to something better? Failure and disappointment can result in brokenness, but with restoration and rebuilding, it brings forth a new beauty and strength that is unparalleled.

As we celebrate Teacher's Day as a fraternity, we celebrate authenticity with the children that we nurture in our schools by encouraging them to draw on their strengths and soldier on. We celebrate Teacher's Day with our colleagues by helping them to see the impact they made on others. Indeed, we also celebrate Teacher's Day with our fraternity of school leaders, drawing on the very essence of our values and beliefs as we support one another in our own unique leadership journey. Anyone who has held the helms of school leadership will understand those pains we've had - those cracks that hurt and the joy that comes when we accept imperfections and learn to see beauty in that.

So may this Teacher's Day be a day of celebrating of our leadership journey with the schools that we lead – that together, in good and bad times, we can encourage one another to press on with courage and joy.

Like Kintsugi, let us embrace the scars as part of our growth; repair and rebuild any shattered dreams and see perfect beauty in the imperfect!

May I wish one and all a wonderful Teachers' Day!



<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/338966309440568836/?d=t&mt=signup>

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Principals Matter A Journey to Rediscover Self as a Leader

Loy Wee Mee
By-the-Park

In the last 20 years, the early childhood sector has gained traction in raising the quality and standard of professionalism in this sector. Many initiatives and programmes have been-created or driven by ECDA and various organisations for this purpose. I was privileged to be involved in one such programme, Principals Matter, as a mentor and shall share my experience and humble insights.

The idea of crafting an EC leadership programme was mooted in 2015 with several rounds of focus group discussions and talks chaired by Hays Group, Seed Institute and Lien Foundation. This resulted in the birth of Principals Matter, a leadership development programme which was generously funded by Lien Foundation.

What sets this programme apart from the rest? It was **connections**. From the onset, we knew that this programme had to be impactful in developing the leaders and not just about attending workshops and doing assignments. Like a concentric circle, it starts from 'me', and then it moves outwards to the organisation, the sector and perhaps even the nation.

To kick off the programme, selected principals had to go through a rigorous process to do a 360 degree survey with

people they work with on a daily basis and who knew them well, from teachers to management. For some, this could be a self-discovery, an Aha moment. For others, it could be a surprise "Is that who I am or how others see me?" This was then unpacked by consulting giant, Sequoia, through a 5-day workshop and a coaching session where each principal's MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator), FIRO-B (Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation-Behaviour) and survey results were dissected to help her/him better understand herself or himself. This was a revolutionary mindset shift for principals as many of these warriors had been battling alone and were often scarred and deflated over time. By this stage, we saw Principals opening up and really connecting with their peers as they bared ourselves. The revival and refuelling sets the stage for their change management.

"Knowing is not enough, we must apply. Willing is not enough, we must do."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, German philosopher (1749-1832)



With the new knowledge and awakening, principals crafted capstone projects where they would implement the intended change. This was where we, as Mentors, came into the picture. From each batch, Mentors were assigned 2-3 mentees and we walk with them on their journey in Principals Matter. This small grouping allowed us to know our mentees well on a personal level and enable us to dig even deeper into their change and their capstone plans. The conversations touched on real issues and challenges faced by principals who were often weighed down by centre issues. As a Mentor, we posed questions and gently helped the principals to reflect and unravel their deadweight. Most often, the revelation was anchored on the awareness of self care, courage or reconnecting with their purpose when they took on the leadership role. It was not rocket science; but just pausing for a moment to take stock of one's leadership journey and marking the next phase was enlightening.

Principals were next packed off to their next challenge, a 10-day learning journey in Boston. Jet lagged from the long flight, packed schedules and having to live 24 hours with their cohort definitely cemented their bonds. The support and esprit de corp kept many going as they fought fatigue, home sickness and worries about their centres back home. Despite it all, every principal was immersed in the learning journey and soaked up the very insightful workshops planned for them. Principals were also attached to best practice centres that were helmed by

rock solid leaders who role modelled and generously shared their strategies or frameworks with our principals. The intention was not for our principals to mimic them but to expand perspectives and deepen their understanding of grounded leadership practices in real situations.

My personal favourite session was the mini round robin conversations principals had with astounding EC leaders. For better connectivity, the sessions were organised into smaller groups such that principals could have up close and frank conversations with these leaders who shared openly about their journeys and their drives.



Josette Williams, Program Manager of Countdown to Kindergarten, affectionately introduced as Josie, was one leader whose effervescent personality rocked! She wore her power boots for the day, challenging our principals to find their own power boots to make a stand. This certainly moved our principals' thought processes from self to organisation and now to sectoral.

We were also very privileged to have Amy O’Leary, President of NAEYC, to share about her advocacy work. We learnt that it took courage to advocate or push for changes – her call was to start small, build it up; then to find that one word to push the change, find like-minded people to share your stand, and above all, stay current with policy changes. These were just some of Amy’s gold nuggets for our principals.

Principals Matter has impacted many. Some could have lost their purpose prior to the programme. Others may have been on the verge of burn out or contemplating leaving their calling.

The many conversations with Boston leaders, peers, Sequoia coach and mentors impacted the principals and reconnected them back to their personal vision and goals.

This programme by the Lien Foundation has gone beyond a mere leadership training programme. The impact has been deep because it hits into the core, the **purpose** which I believe every quality early childhood programme should have. These principals have revisited their purpose and some have found theirs while others now see with sharper lens.

Professionalism of Early Childhood Educators in Singapore

Susie Aurelia Bose

Picket Fence Education Pte Ltd

This article aims to present the issues that affect the professionalism of early childhood (EC) teachers in Singapore. It discusses challenges faced by EC teachers to be recognised as professionals and what we can do better to bridge the gap. Here onwards, the terms 'educators' and 'teachers' are used interchangeably and professionalism is defined as the competence or skills expected of a professional (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.).

Many research findings show that the most significant factor in achieving high quality early childhood programme is the quality of the workforce, which in turn can be attributed to both internal factors and external factors. Internal factors involve passion of the educators, willingness to learn, autonomy in class and professionalism. External factors involve recognition of the profession, pay, professional development and respect from family and the community.

Finland is often hailed as having the best education system in Europe and teachers in the country are highly trained. According to the Finnish National Agency for Education, teachers in general education and pre-primary teachers are required to have a Master's degree, while those in vocational education (for example, day-care centre and guidance staff) have a Bachelor's degree. The Agency also concur that high level of

teacher training enables teachers to be very autonomous professionally.

Teachers in Finland must also participate in in-service training every year and they often participate actively as they see the training as a privilege. An article that was recently published by *Education International* mentioned that whilst EC teachers must have a Bachelor degree, the municipalities pay only a basic salary (around €2,300/± S\$3,721) that led to a shortage of teachers. According to the article, on 24 March 2018, around 500 parents participated in a demonstration in Helsinki to demand better salaries for early childhood teachers. This movement, in my opinion, was a very significant move by parents to support the teachers. It showed the highest respect and support that families and the community had for their teachers. In Australia, early childhood teachers must complete a four-year Bachelor degree in early childhood. Those who hold a general bachelor degree in any area must complete a 2-year Master of Teaching programme that specialises in early childhood to enable them to teach in early childhood settings. According to the website Living Australia, EC teachers are paid a basic salary around ±A\$4,500 – A\$6,250 a month.

In Singapore, the starting pay of early childhood teachers has increased by 20% since 2013 (Tan, 2018). According to the

2017 Polytechnic Graduate Employment Survey, full time early childhood diploma graduates can earn as much as \$2,300 a month. The salary increase is seen as recognition to the early childhood educators in Singapore along with the increase of quality in providing good programme and care.

Since a decade ago, there has been significant changes in the scene of EC, especially in increasing the quality of EC teachers (see Appendix 1). Realising that high quality EC education can contribute significantly to children's development and learning in their later age, in March 2008, MOE-MCYS announced that all new childcare teachers embarking on a Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education–Teaching (DECCE-T) are required to have minimum academic qualification of 5 different subjects for GCE 'O' level credits and minimum B4 grade in English or higher in GCE 'O' level. This change has been a significant increase in minimum entry criteria for teachers who wish to obtain a qualification in EC. Furthermore, childcare centres are also required to have 75% of their teachers to have a DECCE-T (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2012).

However, what's done in 2008 was obviously not enough. In 2012, a study commissioned by the Lien Foundation ranked Singapore's position at 29 out of 45 countries in early childhood education (Ang, 2012). According to the study, affordability and availability were average, whilst quality scored the lowest. The quality was mostly due to the difference in programme content, learning experience

and overall teaching and learning approaches provided by different preschools.

In November 2013, the then Minister for Social and Family Development, Mr Chan Chun Sing, acknowledging the importance of continuing education for early childhood teachers, announced the launch of the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Masterplan for early childhood sector at the ECDA's inaugural Early Childhood Conference (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2013).

He added that these strategies were to attract, develop and retain EC professionals, and raise the quality of EC programmes. Since then, ECDA has announced many subsidised courses. Although CPD is not compulsory, EC educators are strongly encouraged to complete at least 20 hours of CPD per year.

Teachers as Professionals

A research done by Kok (1996) mentioned that academic qualifications and teaching experience were not interrelated with teacher professionalism, even though professional development was an essential factor in developing teacher's professionalism, especially for in-service teachers. Nevertheless, there is no one easy way to measure professionalism. The Singapore government has been working to uplift the image of EC educators by providing support in professional development through the CPD Masterplan (Ministry of Social and Family Development. 2013).

CPD can be achieved through formal and informal ways. Formal CPDs are programmes that are provided in formal sessions such as seminars and short courses. Informal CPD can be in the form of collaborative reflections, mentoring and discussion time provided for educators with a prepared agenda. Although many subsidised workshops and course have been rolled out by ECDA, the question remains on whether the childcare centres can release their teachers for these training due to the shortage of staff (Goy, 2016).

Early childhood educators are increasingly referred to as professionals around the world. In many Asian countries however, educators in formal education are still well respected because educational outcomes are viewed to be paramount for a positive future. In the Singapore context too, it is commonly known that greater respect is given to teachers at higher level, such as primary and secondary school teachers, instead of early childhood educators. As more Singaporean parents are university graduates while the required early childhood educators' qualification is only a Diploma or even lower, the image accorded to preschool educators by more qualified parents is not the same as their overseas counterparts. From my experience, early childhood educators are still seen as child-minders or nannies. Hence, professional development alone is not always enough.

A national campaign and parents' education is needed to uplift the image of early childhood educators. During the

National Day Rally in 2017, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that a centralised institute (National Institute of Early Childhood Development, or in short, NIEC) would be set up as part of efforts to raise the standing of the profession. He drew a comparison on how primary, secondary and junior college teachers are trained in NIE. NIEC would ensure all early childhood educators received the same quality education that is provided by NIEC.

In addition, ECDA has also launched a few videos since 2016, aimed to educate parents to appreciate and understand more the work of preschool teachers. A video called 'Behind-The-Scenes: Preschool Teach-off' where four professionals were invited to be a preschool teacher for a day, showed the reality of being a preschool teacher to other professionals, in order to have a deeper understanding of how it feels to be a preschool teacher (ECDA Singapore, 2018).

Attrition and Retention

Preschool teachers are said to be leaving even before they start on their career. Ministry of Manpower (MOM) figures show that only 56.5% of fresh ECE graduates from polytechnics are in the labour force – a much lower percentage than many other diploma holders (Craig, 2013). This statistic shows a financial loss in government subsidy for their education, as well as a personal loss as the students have invested their time and energy training for a career that they do not eventually embark on. High turnover at the preschool level is one of the factors that accounts for Singapore to be lowly

ranked in preschool quality globally. In the survey conducted by TODAY, only about 48% of diploma students said that they are 'very likely' to go into early childhood career. Some cited reasons such as the low prestige of the profession.

Whilst the minimum qualifications to be EC educators need to be raised, Singapore also faces yet another challenge. With the rapid expansion of childcare centres in Singapore over the last few years, we are faced with a shortage of qualified early childhood educators. According to the statistics published by MySkillsFuture, between 2008 and 2016, the number of EC centres increased from 1,200 to about 1,800 centres throughout Singapore (Appendix 2). In 2017, there were 170,335 enrolments and 16,000 educators. In April 2017, Mr Teo Ser Luck, Minister of State for Manpower at the Early Childhood Care and Education Leadership and HR Conference mentioned that 4,000 more early childhood professionals would be needed by 2020 as centre leaders, preschool teachers, toddlers educators and infant care educators. Just how to train 4,000 more 'quality' early childhood educators in two years remains a big question.

Pay is also another factor that could influence professionalism. High pay will increase the supply of qualified educators. Therefore, with the current shortage of educators, pay is expected to rise. Early childhood educators earn an average of \$2,000 to \$3,000 for 2015 (ECDA, n.d.). Therefore, the salary for early childhood educators is comparative to those in other sectors as the requirement to be early

childhood educators is a diploma qualification. The pay scale can only increase when the basic qualification to be early childhood educators is raised to be comparable to bachelor degree holders (the median salary for university graduates in 2015 was about \$3,300). Having said that, there are also many university graduates joining the sector because of their passion. However, the pay gap should not be too wide and the way to increase pay to lessen the gap for this group of educators must be through government subsidies. A study conducted by Ang (2012) recommended that a national pay scale should be established and having a competitive pay scale with more government investment to ensure that childcare service remains affordable.

Independent practice (or autonomy) is also one of the criteria to measure teachers' professionalism. Teachers' own views on the curriculum or their beliefs about children and how they learn may have a strong influence over the quality of instructional practices and teacher-child interaction (Pianta, 2016). However, only highly skilled teachers can deliver lessons effectively according to the children's ability.

In Finland, early childhood teachers are given a lot of autonomy because they are highly skilled (Finnish National Agency for Education, n.d.). However, how much independence is given to teachers here in Singapore remains varied. Some large early childhood organisations usually have their own prescribed lesson plans for the teachers to ensure teachers deliver all lessons in a similar way across all the

centres. There are also worries that some novice teachers are not able to deliver lessons according to the organisation's standards. Smaller organisations, however, are usually more flexible in the delivery of the curriculum. While creating one's own lesson plans may feel burdensome for some teachers, it is a good practice to ensure teachers practise reflective teaching and exercise their autonomy in terms of curriculum delivery. If teachers want to be viewed as professionals, then more must be done to uplift their own image as well. Uplifting early childhood professionals' image do not come only from external factors such as government policy and company policy, but the push must come from the educators themselves.

Whilst it can be challenging to really define the professional status of early childhood educators due to the diversity such as pedagogical position, philosophy and working with different age groups, it can be concluded that some factors that determine early childhood educators' professionalism are passion, application of knowledge in practice, professional academic qualification, professional development, high pay, prestige of the profession, and independent practice. Though the list is not exhaustive, these factors are some of the elements that are identified to affect professionalism in early childhood educators the most. To close the gaps, more needs to be done by the educators themselves, the organisations that are involved in EC education and government through its policy. The 3 parties must engage each other for

dialogues to progress in the EC sector. Like what was mentioned, "We have come a long way in a very short time. But there is a lot more work to be done." (Ang, 2012).

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KEY DATES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SINGAPORE EARLY CHILDHOOD SECTOR

Professionalism

-
- 1983** • Centre-based Financial Assistance Scheme for Childcare introduced by the then Ministry of Social Affairs to support working mothers.
 - 1988** • The Child Care Centres Act and The Child Care Centres Regulations Act, set the standards and licensing requirements for all child care centres.
 - 1991** • Certificate in Preschool Teaching and Certificate in Preschool Management and Administration introduced by National Institute of Education.
 - 1994 – 1997** • Training awards for full-time Early Childhood Care and Education courses sponsored by the Ministry of Community Development.
 - October 1995** • Singapore government acceded to the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Convention came into force in 1990 by the General Assembly of the United Nations.
 - 1998** • Back-to-Work scheme for low-income families to cover start-up cost of childcare.
 - March 2000** • Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced the Desired Outcomes for preschool education.
 - January 2001** • Pre-school Qualification Accreditation Committee (PQAC) was set up; a joint ministerial body between the MOE and the Ministry of Community Development and Sports.

(Ang, 2012)

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- January 2001** • Committee recommended policy of minimum qualifications for preschool teachers:

 - By 1 January 2008, all pre-school teachers must have a minimum qualification of a Certificate in Pre-school Teaching (CPT)
 - From 1 Jan 2009, all new teachers must have 5 'O' level credits including English Language and a Diploma in Pre-school Education - Teaching (DPE-T).
 - From 1 Jan 2013, all teachers must have a minimum of 5 'O' level credits including a pass in English language and a DPE-T to be employed in kindergartens.
- January 2003** • Introduction of *A Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum* by MOE.
- 2006** • Subsidies by Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) offered to lower-income families to help with the cost of preschool education: Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme (KiFAS)

 - Policy framework by MOE 'Standards for Kindergartens. Pursuing Excellence at Kindergartens'
 - Targeted intervention programmes introduced by MOE to enhance the school readiness of preschool children: the Focused Language Assistance in Reading (FLAiR) initiative that provides intensive one-to-one and small group language support for preschool children to develop their English language skills and prepare them for primary schooling. FLAiR introduced in 10 kindergartens.
- 2007** • Committee on Improving Quality of Pre-School Education was set up by MOE.
- March 2007** • The Focused Language Assistance in Reading (FLAiR) initiative extended to 90 kindergartens.

- 2008**
 - Training bursaries for pre-school teachers by MOE and MCYS. The bursaries offered generally cover 80% of the course fee, including an annual book allowance.
 - Preschool innovation grant for preschool providers
 - MOE publishes 'A Kindergarten Curriculum Guide' to assist kindergartens in applying the Kindergarten Curriculum to their programmes.
 - MCYS announces plans to build 200 new childcare centres in the next five years.
- May 2009**
 - MCYS announces the introduction of a new recurrent grant for non-profit childcare operators to help attract and retain childcare teachers.
- October 2010**
 - MCYS launches the Child Development Network (CDN) to build and connect the community of stakeholders in early childhood care and education, and as a way of championing the quality of early childhood education in Singapore.
- November 2010**
 - Nominated MPs Mr Sadasivan and Ms Wong filed a parliamentary motion urging the government to conduct a comprehensive review of preschool education in Singapore, and addressing issues of continuity to formal schooling, variance in standards and fees, and equal opportunities.
 - MOE introduces a national accreditation and assessment framework for preschool services: The Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework (SPARK).
- April 2011**
 - Increase in the eligible monthly household income criterion for the Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme (KIFAS) by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), from S\$1,800 to S\$3,500, to allow more families to benefit from the subsidies.

- September 2011** Introduction of Early Years Development Framework (EYDF) for children from 2 months to 3 years by MCYS.
- November 2011** MOE announces plans to review the Kindergarten Curriculum Framework by the end of 2012, provide additional curriculum resources to support kindergartens in delivering the Framework, and increase professional development opportunities for kindergarten teachers.
- March 2012** MOE announces Quality Assurance Consultancy scheme in partnership with the Association of Early Childhood Educators Singapore (AECS) to support Kindergartens in achieving the SPARK certification.
- April 2012** MCYS announces funding of close to S\$10m for approximately 600 scholarships and teaching awards over the next two years. The aim is to raise the quality of child care by attracting new teachers and promoting the professional development of current in-service teachers to take up tertiary qualifications and specialist courses.

Sources: MOE and MCYS websites <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/preschool/>; <http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/>; MCYS (2008) 'Child Care in Singapore. Waves of Professionalism'.

We have come a long way in a very short time. But there is a lot more work to be done.

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Appendix 2

Growing Number of Early Childhood Development Centres

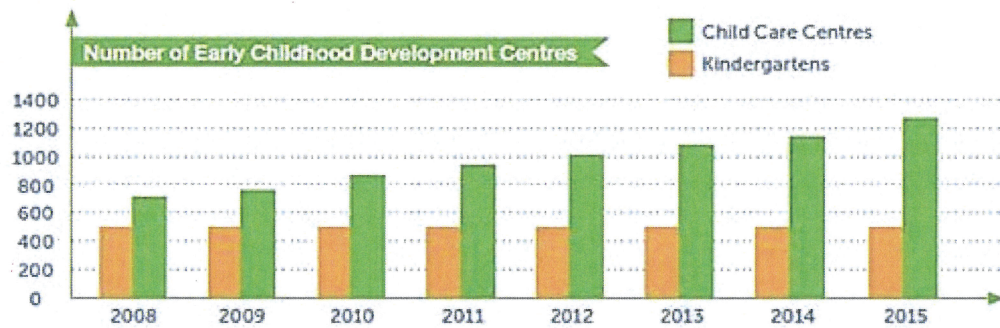


Figure 1 : Number of Early Childhood Development Centres in Singapore

Between 2008 and 2015, the number of early childhood development centres (both kindergartens and childcare centres) has increased from about 1,200 to about 1,700 throughout Singapore.

Adapted from ECDA website

Reinventing Teaching

Sam Korda
Wildfire Education

Educators around the world are recognizing that traditional ways of teaching are not meeting the needs of students in our rapidly changing world. How can we truly transform teaching to foster the skills and capabilities our youth will need in the future? This article shares the steps being taken at Wildfire Education to address this challenge.

Researchers at University of California Berkeley have calculated that in the three years between 1999 and 2002, the amount of human-generated information created around the world was equal to the amount of information generated over the previous 5,000 years of human history. In a separate study, IBM predicts that by 2020, recorded information will double every 11 to 12 hours. Yet, educators still find themselves having to work within a system that was designed more than a century ago to ensure students all learn the same set of facts.

The industrial model of education, such as that which prevails in the U.S. public school system, is structured around imparting knowledge of specific content and producing workers ideally suited for a specific working environment. This rigid model does not provide room for nuanced and individualized instruction or the development of skills. With increased access to information on the internet, this model is becoming obsolete. Furthermore, the increasing pace and sophistication of automation means it is only a matter of time before the jobs

schools traditionally prepared students for will no longer be performed by humans at all.

Firsthand experiences with real problem solving can be messy, but there is no better way to shift students away from passive learning and toward more active, self-driven learning.

If we want to start providing students with a real chance to succeed once they enter the “real world,” we need to fundamentally reinvent what teaching looks like in the 21st century. The role of the teacher needs to shift away from being an arbiter of knowledge to focus on being a designer of transformational learning experiences. What students need now are educators who can foster the development of skills and allow them to practice solving complex challenges in their own communities. They need teachers who can help them understand not just what they are learning, but also how they are learning it. With this approach to education, students can be

Professionalism

truly adaptable for whatever changes or disruptions they might encounter in life.

Doris Korda became aware of this need when she entered the education world 22 years ago. Before turning to education, she had worked in the technology field during the 1980s and 1990s. She realised that skills in fostering collaboration among teammates and creating a culture of innovation based in rapid-fire iteration were just as important as her systems engineering knowledge and skills. When Doris became a teacher, the experience at first felt like being dunked in an ice bath. Everything about the standardized way in which academics were structured went against what she knew her students would need. Over the next two decades, she developed new methods and strategies that focused on making what the students were learning relevant to their lived experience. In doing so, she could foster the mindset they would need to thrive in whatever field they chose to pursue.

Doris created a highly developed approach for overhauling how a classroom should operate to make it a place where students have the chance to work together to solve real and complex problems in their communities (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CprGuCyIYSI&=t=>). Korda's approach has been used by educators all over the globe who are eager to step up and do what is best for their students. Four pillars are crucial to this method, and can be applied to everything from a hard sciences class to an entrepreneurship or humanities course.

The Community Challenge Framework

The Options for Success (OFS) program in Columbus, Ohio, was created to serve as an alternative for high school students who have been suspended or expelled. When Dr Danielle Bomar was appointed as the new principal, she was determined to try something different to ensure OFS students would be re-energized about learning when they returned to their home schools. She started with the first pillar of the Korda Method: the community challenge framework (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GF-EyJebeXQ>). After Dr Bomar and her teachers decided on the specific learning objective for their students, they used the method's decision filter to identify a local business or organization that would provide a problem that would engage their students, and selected Hot Chicken Takeover. This local fried chicken restaurant provides fair chance employment for people who had been previously incarcerated. They needed help developing a marketing strategy as they worked toward opening a second location. Developing that strategy became the objective for the OFS students. "A lot of people think students with behaviour problems don't care about the community, but when they saw somebody doing something good for the community, they wanted to help," said Dr Bomar, reflecting on the first pilot program. "And so they did; they jumped right in. Each one of them from day one felt they had a personal mission to help this business and they gave it 100 percent."

Problem Solving in the 21st Century

As you may have guessed, Korda's teaching methods do not require students to sit quietly in rows while a teacher lectures. Learning is entirely experiential. Students with no prior expertise are thrown into the deep end to solve a complex problem for a real person with a real stake in their solutions, who also acts as the audience for their final presentations. Combined with a tight deadline, this approach forces students to get serious about taking stock of what resources are at their disposal, how to use them most effectively, and how to navigate and synthesize the limitless information at their fingertips to inform real solutions. In other words, it is a problem-solving process that looks a lot like what it means to live and work meaningfully in the 21st century. This is the second core pillar of Korda's method.

Firsthand experiences with real problem solving can be messy, but there is no better way to shift students away from passive learning and toward more active, self-driven learning. Jeremy Wickenheiser was a science teacher in the Denver School of Science and Technology charter school network when he decided to teach entrepreneurship. He wanted to equip his students with the critical skills and confidence they would need once they graduated. Furthermore, as Jeremy explained, "This framework of learning can be applied to any sort of content. It just so happens that we're using entrepreneurship as the vehicle to deliver these critical skills." When faced with the task of distilling endless amounts of information available on the internet,

Jeremy's students asked him where they should look for answers. Jeremy turned that question around and asked where they thought they should start. He urged his students to master their ability to independently research and validate information and to effectively critique both their work and that of their peers. After all, these would be exactly the sorts of questions and processes they would be facing in whatever careers they chose, whether at a Fortune 500 firm or a bike co-op. "We want to give kids the skills so they can go learn all those pieces on their own as they need to on demand," said Jeremy. "Because that is very much what the world demands."

Collaboration and self-reflection are at the forefront of the experience and are emphasized as essential skills that can be taught and refined.

Scaffolded Skills Curriculum

Bringing the world beyond the schoolhouse into the classroom is only the first step. Once the students have their challenge, the work of the teacher truly begins. Presenting a project to students and expecting that alone to be enough to keep them interested and engaged is a recipe for disaster. Once the students are split up into teams, it is the educator's job to keep them on track. They do so not by holding the promise of an A over students' heads or by lecturing them on what it means to do good research, but rather by keeping the students focused on what they have to do in order to come up with a solution the intended beneficiary might actually be able to use. It involves helping

students understand the sheer scale of resources available and how best to use them. There are no answers in the back of the book.

If we want students to have a chance at succeeding in a world where change is the only constant, we need to challenge all the traditional notions.

This brings us to the third pillar: a scaffolded skills curriculum. In practice, this means that instead of teachers organizing their lesson plans around specific content, they craft experiences that engage students in creative problem solving, critical thinking, and collaboration. Teachers also prompt students to reflect on their learning to help them recognize how the skills and thinking they use in the course of solving these problems can be translated to any other discipline. These skills are the foundations for the acquisition of deeper skills. At the beginning of the school year, Terry Chou, a science teacher at Joaquin Miller Middle School in San Jose, California, tasks her students with working in teams to create products that solve real problems directly tied to the intersection of science, business, and technology. She works to help her students recognize that they are at their most effective when they are applying these skills in concert with the other members of their team. “Ultimately, none of it will push itself to its full potential without the team understanding they have to work together as a team,” said Terry. “I tell them how important it is for them to really think of each other as a team and not a group.”

Ultimately, students emerge from the first few weeks of Terry’s class with a deeper understanding of how they learn, what it means to communicate scientific ideas clearly, and what true collaboration feels like and how they can each bring their own unique talents to the table.

The deeper learning can begin as they enter their next challenge. Assessments in these classes involve the educator giving concrete feedback to students, which they can immediately incorporate into their work. Instead of handing out grades and moving on, the students build on their previous performance as they address each subsequent challenge. Collaboration and self-reflection are at the forefront of the experience and are emphasized as essential skills that can be taught and refined. The end result of this approach? Students are able to take control of their learning like never before. They are encouraged to interrogate, with both their teachers and classmates, how they learn, where their strengths lie, and how to build on those strengths going forward.

Teacher Agency

The students are not the only ones who gain more agency in the classroom. Pam Reed, a middle school humanities teacher at Columbus City Preparatory School for Girls, had long struggled as she tried to engage her students with history. After trying a series of pilots with Korda’s methods (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nq_yUs9RML8), she felt, as she put it, “like I have permission now to teach the way I’ve always wanted to teach.” She framed the historical concepts

in her class around the Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar, which was then dominating the news cycle. Her questions became focused on making sure that her students were developing the skills they needed and building confidence in their abilities, not just retaining knowledge. This is the final key pillar of the Korda Method: teachers gain a new level of control and agency over what happens in their classrooms from minute to minute. As Pam describes it, “This breaks all the rules of traditional education and it feels freeing.”

Pam saw that her students did not need the sort of step-by-step instruction she had become used to doling out. In fact, it became clear to her just how valuable it was to provide the students and herself with the ability to make their own structure for class. Pam shifted the way she thought about her lessons away from what she wanted to teach and toward what she wanted to be sure her students learned. “There’s no part of what I’m doing that’s leaving anything behind,” said Pam. “There’s no part of what I’m doing where I go home at the end of the day and question and say, ‘I really wish I could have done that better.’ I’m learning to let go of perfectionism with education in that class because it’s free-flowing. It’s a fluid class. And it’s not about me.”

Wildfire Education

After sharing her method in a series of informal workshops and being warmly received by teachers of all kinds, Doris Korda took the next step. Last year, she founded the nonprofit organization Wildfire Education ([https://wildfire-](https://wildfire-education.org/)

[education.org/](https://wildfire-education.org/)). So far, Wildfire has trained hundreds of teachers in 12 different countries. Wildfire works directly with teachers (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Dqp7MVE3qM>) to provide implementation support, coaching, and toolkits as the teachers construct and start running their pilots. Her methods have been adopted by a wide range of educators across public, private, and charter school, from teachers in rural Ohio to a new school in Kazakhstan that will be geared entirely around just this type of problem-based learning. In every case, the results are undeniable, as the first educators to bring these teaching strategies to their schools attract the attention of their peers, who turn to them for help in reconfiguring their own teaching practices after seeing the drastic progress students make, as evident in their final presentations. Put another way, once one teacher at a school tries these methods in their classroom, they begin to spread through the rest of the faculty like ... well, you get the idea.

Pam shifted the way she thought about her lessons away from what she wanted to teach and toward what she wanted to be sure her students learned.

If we want students to have a chance at succeeding in a world where change is the only constant, we need to challenge all the traditional notions regarding the role of the teacher and the structure of the classroom. All around the world, everyone is realizing school isn’t set up to teach the skills students will need in work and in life. Educators need a level of

agency the old system of education was never designed to provide so they can transcend the outdated role of dry lecturer. Students need to be active participants in constructing their learning and discovering their strengths. The content they learn shouldn't exist in a vacuum or for the sake of a question on a test, but rather be tied directly into

problems that are relevant to their lives and their communities. Doris Korda and Wildfire Education are helping educators take the lead in re-inventing what both instruction and learning should look like so students gain experiences they can use and learn from for the rest of their lives. In short, it is school done better.

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'Plearning' through Scaly Friends

Nurturing the Seven Essential Life Skills at Singapore Zoo

Karen Chin
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Introduction

'Plearning' is an invented word. Nobody knows who came up with it. 'Plearning' happens when play and learning becomes one seamless process. The *Nurturing Early Learning* (NEL) framework (2012) recognises that play is the primary way in which children explore their surroundings. Purposeful play involves intentional planning and facilitation of children's play by educators or parents to achieve intended learning outcomes. However, play, as defined by play researcher, Peter Gray (2013), is self-chosen and self-directed, and is activity where the means are more valued than the ends. Play, according to Gray, has structures and rules that are imagined by the players; the imaginative nature of play necessitates an active, alert but non-stressed frame of mind. Adult intervention, however, is not featured as an inherent factor of a child's play. These varied definitions of play prompted education staff at Singapore Zoo to wonder if child-directed play could be blended with educator-initiated learning opportunities. This pedagogical puzzle motivated us to experiment with how our living collections can be strategically used to support child development. We thought the Seven Essential Life Skills outlined by Ellen Galinsky (2010) afforded us with an evidence-based framework to

be intentional about our revamp of the RepTopia Behind-the-Scene tour for preschoolers.

The Site of Experimentation

RepTopia showcases over 60 species of reptiles and amphibians from four unique geographical zones. Each creature's exhibit is inspired by its natural environment. The desert, riverine and rainforest settings allow visitors to envision how the creatures would be found in the wild. There is also a behind-the-scenes facility (Photo 1) for learners to gain insight into the work that goes into caring for the animals.



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Photo 1: Behind-the-Scenes

Just beside RepTopia is Reptile Garden, home to the Komodo Dragon from Indonesia, the Aldabra Giant Tortoises from the Galapagos, the Nile crocodiles and a myriad of other lizards and tortoises.

The Revamp Exercise

While alien-like appearance, sharp teeth and forked tongues of RepTopia's scaly residents are not always popular with the preschool community, reptiles deserve our attention as almost one-fifth of all reptiles are threatened with extinction. RepTopia was created to bring our guests closer to these remarkable creatures and to join us in our conservation efforts. The message we want to share is that reptiles are cool. However, it is challenging to spread conservation messages about reptiles to fearful or overly excited educators and preschoolers. We understand their awe and their fears; we want to tap on their sense of curiosity to help them take up new challenges.

The existing tour focused on the unique adaptations that allow reptiles to survive in various environments followed by a tactile session where learners can touch a reptile ambassador, usually, a ball python or a bearded dragon. Our review surfaced two key strengths. Firstly, learners enjoy handling skulls, skeletons and taxidermized specimens. Secondly, learners young and old are excited about the live animal interaction. Most participants viewed reptiles in a more positive light after the contact session. Many thought reptiles might be slimy but

were pleasantly surprised that the skin was cool and dry.

Our review also revealed three areas of growth. The first area concerns the amount and the type of information. Zoo education staff packed in a tremendous amount of content about the different types of reptiles. In the existing one-hour tour, we observed preschoolers losing interest when zoo education staff talked at them for more than 20 minutes. The second area for improvement involves the mode of delivery; only some children can sit through the show-and-tell segment. Questions asked focused on getting specific scientific answers; very few preschoolers got the right answers. Handling objects were used solely to demonstrate facts and usually only two volunteers got to touch these specimens. Questions used at the end of the tour were intended to assess if children were attentive and if they were able to recall facts; only few children responded well to such an approach. The third puzzle concerns the varying attitudes of preschool educators towards animal interaction. On one extreme of the spectrum, we witnessed preschool educators literally running away from impending contact with a reptile. On the other end, we had preschool educators who insisted every child touch a reptile regardless of their fears.

The revamp exercise was a chance to experiment with

- 1) the types of content that will be most relevant to preschoolers
- 2) modes of lesson delivery that will allow preschoolers to practise the Seven Essential Life Skills

3) how we can better respond to the diverse attitudes and reactions of educators and preschoolers towards reptiles

Planning for ‘Plearning’

While preschool programmes at Singapore Zoo have always been intentionally designed with a programmatic focus on the six learning domains outlined by the Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) Framework that was developed by the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) in 2012, this prototype is the first to address both the NEL Framework and the Seven Essential Life Skills as promulgated by Galinsky (2010). Education staff at Singapore Zoo decided to focus on three learning domains: Discovery of the World, Language and Literacy, Social and Emotional Development as they are highly compatible with the Seven Essential Life Skills (Fig 1).

The NEL learning domains guided us to design programmes that are aligned to ECDA’s proposed learning goals. Out of the Seven Essential Life Skills, we view ‘Focus and Self-control’, ‘Perspective taking’, ‘Taking on Challenges’ and ‘Self-directed, Engaged Learning’ as skills that fit into the NEL Learning Domain of Social and Emotional Development. The new learning opportunities should offer preschoolers space and time to try out intra-personal and inter-personal skills. We deemed the essential life skills of ‘Communicating’, ‘Critical Thinking’ and ‘Making Connections’ to the NEL Learning domain of Language and Literacy as well as Discovery of the World. We recognized the need for preschoolers to play and learn at the same time so they may practise these essential life skills in a playful, non-stressful environment.

NEL Learning Domains	Seven Essential Life Skills	Pedagogical Tools used in WRS Programme Design
Social and Emotional Development	Focus and Self-control Perspective taking Taking on Challenges Self-directed, Engaged learning	An Element of Choice The See-Think-Wonder Thinking Routine
Language and Literacy Discovery of the World	Communication Critical Thinking Making Connections	Loose Parts Play

Fig 1

In order to make our planning more intentional, we selected three pedagogical tools to conceptualise ‘plearning’ opportunities. These tools helped us select the types of information, finetune modes of lesson delivery, and help educators and preschoolers negotiate their fears of reptiles:

a) An Element of Choice

The NEL (2012) Framework encourages educators to offer choices and time to reflect on choices to children to promote responsible decision-making. When given choices, children are also encouraged to create new and unique combinations of ideas and materials. They can practise skills of problem-solving, independence and responsibility. They also feel more committed to their activity of choice. However, many educators we work with harbour mixed feelings about choices. Many expressed concern, they perceive giving choices as an invitation for chaos while others already practised it in their centre.

b) The See-Think-Wonder Thinking Routine

Philosopher Nelson Goodman founded Project Zero (PZ) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1967. The decades of research on children’s learning and thinking at PZ produced thinking routines which promote sustained dialogues for learning. Thinking routines are mini strategies that are repeatedly used to enable learners to observe, think and ponder about what

intrigues them. We selected the See-Think-Wonder thinking routine to help preschoolers think creatively, critically and deeply about the world around them.

c) Loose Parts Play

Architect Simon Nicholson (1971) believed that everyone, especially children should experiment with elements of design and loose parts in order to experience the joy of discovery and invention. In loose parts play, preschoolers are invited to explore open-ended materials, words, or ideas and decide for themselves how to use them. The element of choice is an essential part of loose parts play.

The Prototype

We invited a group of Kindergarten Two preschoolers to pilot the new Behind-the-Scenes tour with us. We started the tour by introducing a Hello Song while standing in a circle with joined hands. The preschoolers were then instructed to move towards the centre of the circle whenever they hear a particular word in the song. Then we introduced a little walk where a zoo education staff called out slow and quick steps for the preschoolers to execute on the 15-minute walk to RepTopia. The zoo is full of distractions, so the preschoolers had to pay attention and remember the rules of the games. These two simple games allowed the preschoolers to practise Focus and Self Control, a skill they will need for the two ‘plearning’ experiences ahead.

'Plearning' Experience #1 Loose Parts Play

Reptile Garden is an ideal outdoors space to prototype the programme, away from the crowd and other distractions. For this prototype, zoo education staff facilitated the See-Think-Wonder thinking routine with preschoolers right in front of the exhibit of the Komodo Dragon and the Aldabra tortoise. This thinking routine supports the skills of 'Self-directed, Engaged Learning', 'Critical Thinking' and 'Communicating' where facts and provocations were intentionally but spontaneously layered upon the observations and questions of the preschoolers to encourage curiosity, close looking and deeper investigation of the animals and their environments. Reptile Garden also features enough outdoor space for the preschoolers to pick up loose parts from nature. To allow children to practise 'Focus and Self Control', we issued a challenge for the preschoolers to stay within the two portals that mark the entry and exit to the garden. Another challenge meted out was to only pick up natural loose parts that have fallen to the ground.

We weaved in 'Self-directed, Engaged Learning' by intentionally inviting the preschoolers to choose between creating the Komodo Dragon and the Aldabra Tortoise out of loose parts. All of them responded positively and knew exactly which animal they preferred.

Photo 2: Pre-schoolers making a Komodo dragon out of natural loose parts at Reptile Garden during the prototyping phase.

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The two groups formed were of uneven numbers. While this was totally acceptable to the zoo facilitator, the teachers automatically wanted to split them into two equal groups. This attempt evoked cries of protest from quite a few preschoolers until we assured the accompanying preschool educators that we would like to honour their choices.

We anticipated that group work would involve the preschoolers 'Taking on Challenges' and indeed verbal tussles occurred after three Komodo Dragon heads were created simultaneously by three different preschoolers. The zoo education staff and the accompanying preschool educator stepped in and used questions to help the preschoolers think about the impact of their words and actions. Through negotiations on how to better work as a team, the preschoolers practised 'Taking on Perspectives' of their peers so they could work collaboratively on creating one animal image (Photo 2).

With loose parts play, there was also room for individual exploration and 'Making Connections'. One preschooler wondered if he could also use wispy-looking loose parts to represent the spider web he noticed in the exhibit of the Komodo dragon while another waited patiently for five minutes for the tortoise to open its mouth in order to verify the shape of its tongue before searching for



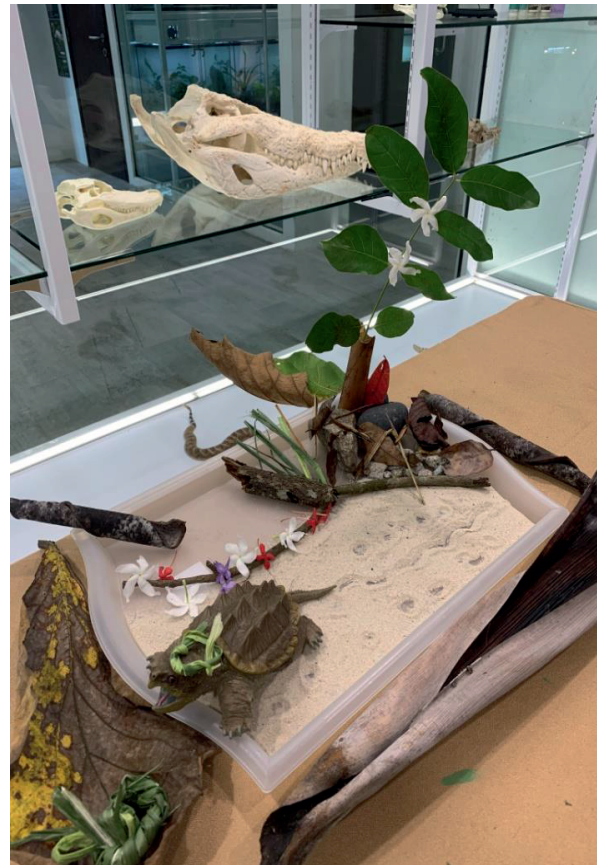
an appropriately-shaped leaf to symbolise it.

Understanding and using symbolic representation is essential to literacy. In addition, the open-ended nature of loose parts afforded preschoolers in this pilot stress-free occasions to be active and alert. One preschooler used a leaf that is naturally split at one end to stand for the forked tongue of the Komodo Dragon. Another searched for the biggest leaf to signify the shell of the giant tortoise while others focused on sourcing smaller leaves for its limbs. Such unusual connections form the bedrock of creativity.

'Plearning' Experience #2 Build-a-Habitat

Before they entered the behind-the-scene facility in Reptopia, the preschoolers were invited to investigate three exhibits featuring different reptiles and their varied habitats. The facilitator presented occasions for the group to practise 'Critical Thinking' and 'Communicating' skills as they verbalised their observation and hypotheses. When the group became adept at investigating their observations, the zoo education staff facilitated more in-depth discussion by repeating the thinking routine of See-Think-Wonder on one skull to look for clues that tell us how the reptile survive in the wild. Thereafter, the preschoolers made creative use of the loose parts they gathered in Reptile Garden to create a habitat for a reptile they had expressed interest in. They had to use their capacity for 'Making Connections' in this hands-on activity as they needed to tap on their working memory of what they observed in

the exhibits to respond to the task at hand.



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Photo 3: A habitat re-created with loose parts by early childhood leaders at the newly revamped Behind-the Scenes Workshop at Reptopia.

Being able to choose which reptile to work with promotes 'Self Directed, Engaged Learning'; preschoolers got to make decisions that motivate them to learn more deeply. The element of choice that was so crucial to engendering ownership of the learning episode was also integral to the animal interaction session. We designed two levels of 'Taking on Challenges'. They could either choose to have a close-up look at the reptile or touch its back with gentle

hands. Even before the scaly ambassador was brought out, the facilitator requested those who wished to touch the reptile to hone their 'Focus and Self Control' ability by practising gentle strokes on their own arm with the back of their hands. This practice often went against the more instinctive patting with the right palm or fingers which usually resulted in accidental or intentional poking of the animals' eyes, pulling of tails and animals receiving more pressure than necessary. Singapore Zoo champions animal welfare; we would like our guests, young or old, to practise 'Perspective Taking' by understanding how their actions can help us care for animals. In the process, they learn to look at the environment from the point of view of a reptile. We want to be very deliberate in getting young learners to pick up mindsets and skills that enable them to play an active part in caring for their pets and wildlife.



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Photo 4: Early childhood leaders at a reptile interaction session at RepTopia's behind-the-scene facility.

Conclusion

Three major insights emerged from this prototype workshop. Firstly, the Seven Essential Life Skills as developed by Galinsky (2010) enable zoo education staff to become more mindful of how we design a preschool workshop. We are starting to be consciously competent in our efforts to strike a balance between animal-related facts and pedagogical approaches that address the developmental needs of preschoolers.

Secondly, we realised that when the criteria for successful learning shifted from information retention to staging intentionally designed 'plearning' opportunities for preschoolers to nurture essential skills, young learners respond more confidently. They were able to play and learn regardless of how experienced they were in a certain life skill.

Thirdly, the Seven Essential Life Skills are applicable to adults as well. Positive responses from preschool educators in this experiment motivated zoo education staff to develop a new professional development workshop for early childhood educators. We subsequently piloted a Preschool Principal's Leadership Retreat as well. The participating preschool educators and centre leaders value the exposure to new pedagogical techniques. They also embraced the invitation to use animals as metaphors and discuss how these Seven Essential Life Skills relate to their teaching philosophies and leadership practice.

Insights from this 'plearning' exercise in 2018 will now inform the design of preschool programmes at Singapore Zoo. We are looking forward to the next

opportunity to blend play and learning in ways that will help preschoolers pick up skills for life through encounters with new animal friends.

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Image of the Child: Develop Strategies to Optimise Children's Learning and Development

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Historical Perspectives of Children

Historically, the human mind was thought to be an empty vessel just waiting to be filled with knowledge. John Locke, philosopher and political theorist of the 17th century, believed that children were born as 'blank slates'. He said a child's nature and personality would develop over childhood, a period of time during which the educationalists believed a child was particularly impressionable, and adults surrounding a child could potentially have a very lasting effect on his personality. In his book titled *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Yolton, 1989), Locke presented the basic argument that 'a child's mind must be educated before he is instructed, that the true purpose of education is the cultivation of the intellect rather than an accumulation of facts'. He added that a child should be taught virtue, wisdom, breeding, and learning, and this was possible because a child's mind was a 'tabula rasa', or blank slate.

However, Jean Piaget's research strongly contradicted the idea of 'tabula rasa' within children. Piaget (1976) concluded that children could be considered 'little scientists' exploring the surrounding world. He considered children as 'active builders of knowledge'

who can and will construct their own theories about how the world works. To do this, to explain what they experience, children may have their own special logic which may be very different than that used by adults. This personal construction led to mental representations for the children which he labelled as "schemas". Internal equilibration of these schemas dictated how children would interpret and interact with the surrounding world.

Concurring Piaget's research was Olivier (1999) who explained that the learner is viewed as an active participant who constructs his own knowledge. The learner comes to the learning situation with his own existing knowledge; new ideas are understood and interpreted in the light of the learner's existing knowledge and built up out of his previous experience. Learning from this perspective entails that the learner must re-organise and re-structure his present knowledge structures, and this can only be done by the learner himself.

Hence, there are differing beliefs of children and hundreds of different images of them influenced by our social, cultural and historical experiences. These images refer to what people believe, understand and assume about the role of children in education and society, including how

people think about children's capabilities, development, motivations, purpose and agency.

Building a contemporary image of the child

Founder of Reggio Emilia's educational philosophy, Loris Malaguzzi, defined the image of the child that sees the child as rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and connected to adults and other children, is based on the idea that the child has rights rather than simply needs (Malaguzzi, 1994). He explained that each of us has an image of the child that directs us as we begin to relate to a child. This image of the child within us pushes us to behave in certain ways; it orients us as we talk to the child, and listen to and observe the child. It is very difficult for you to act contrary to this internal image. He added that the environment the educators construct for the children reflects the image that they have about the children. He pointed out the environment that is built based on a preconceived image of the children differs from the environment that is built based on the children and relationship the children have with the educators. This is because the environment that grows out of the relationship with the child is unique and fluid. Consequently, the quality and quantity of relationships among all the adults including the educators also reflect the image that educators have of the children. Consequently, the child's rights are recognised, respected and embedded in their early childhood educational experiences (Fyfe, 2011).

To create the image of the children enrolled in group care programmes, it is important for educators to consider each child's reality. The children are already tightly connected and linked to real relationships and experiences of the world. They bring these feelings, experiences and relationships into the preschools. To teach children, educators need to leverage on the experiences and relationships that the children bring with them to amalgamate ideas to feed their curiosity and provide relevant and authentic developmentally appropriate sensorial experiences and meaningful interactions to optimise development and learning.

Importantly, educators need to enjoy interacting with other colleagues to role model building relationships. Collectively, they must enjoy watching and guiding children acquire or enhance their capacities in learning and development.

Preschool leaders and educators need to first recognise that 'children are not empty vessels' but that they have a valuable wealth of scientific knowledge and experience on which to construct and adapt new ideas. Educators should embrace and nurture curiosity, promote critical thinking and provide creative learning environments that facilitate purposeful exploration and social interactions.

It is important for educators to reflect on their images of children because that perspective affects how children learn, the role of the teacher and the curriculum. In addition, the images will affect the decisions educators make every

day. For example, educators with differing interpretations of a child's motivation and capability will impact educational decisions.

The way educators see children changes everything – it changes teaching, it changes learning and it changes children. These provocations will be discussed. What is your image of the child? Can this principle be transferred to the more traditional classroom settings to improve teaching practices? Can we advocate for a child-centred and respected preschool environment instead of a prescribed and predictable learning environment that value teaching without learning (Malaguzzi, 1993)?

In order to develop effective strategies to support and optimise children's learning and development, preschool leaders can lead their teams to identify the images of the children enrolled in the preschool. The alignment of the team's images of the children will lead to consistent communication, interactions and guidance to the children to vividly demonstrate the philosophy, mission and vision of the preschool.

The images of the children form the basis of everything that the leader and the team strive for and everything they believe is important about providing quality early years and/or preschool programmes. The team's strong beliefs about children, childhood and their respective roles have profound effects on the programmes, and the classroom and outdoor experiences for young children. Haigh (2007) shared that the image of the child as capable, ready to learn and eager

to socialise can spearhead educators to listen and observe children to develop emergent curriculum experiences and an environment that stimulates exploration, learning and development, and can impact their interactions and involvement with the children. Furthermore, educators can acquire a deeper understanding of how children learn as well as the children's interests, skills and strengths by posing questions to the individual or small groups of children to empower children to be responsible for their own learning.

To examine the image of the child, Hughes (2007) proposed educators to ask these important questions:

- Who is a child?
- What is childhood?
- How does the child learn?

Rinaldi (2001) stressed the importance of understanding the historical and sociocultural context of a community which can influence the ways educators view and interact with children. To create a supportive and inclusive classroom, Gilman (2007) suggested special rights instead of special needs of children who require additional guidance. She explained that when educators differentiated guidance or resources to enable the child with special needs to participate in the class activity, to take risks and interact with classmates, it enabled the rest of the class to view the child with special needs as capable and deserving of respect. This in turn, creates an inclusive classroom community that celebrate and respect the unique and


capable qualities of the peer with special needs.

The image of the child and its impact on teaching

Each preschool teacher has an image of the child. This image can be a personal one, from her experience with the child, from her observations or from her cultural values and beliefs. By examining her individual beliefs about children, she can individualise effective strategies to support each child in the group care programme. By collectively shaping their views of the children, the preschool leader and educators can create a foundation for

the vision upon which the preschool will function and deliver its services.

To co-create a shared image of a child, the preschool leader and educators can list the A to Z Image of the Child, determine their respective roles, and suggest opportunities and develop strategies to support the children’s learning and development in the curriculum. This can be extended to how the environment should be created and equipped to heighten the children’s experiences and educators’ facilitation.

A-Z Image of the Child	Role of Teacher	Curriculum
Active	Provide opportunities for child to explore	Include on-going explorations and projects based on children’s interests
Brave	Provide guidance for child to take calculated risks	During indoor and outdoor structured and unstructured activities
Competent	Listen, acknowledge, validate child’s efforts	Empower and respect that children are learning routines and social skills, and extending capacities
D	 <i>For readers to complete</i>	
E		
F to Z		

When developing strategies to support the children’s learning and development, educators need to acknowledge that a child is a unique, fully independent human being with bountiful potential, and to educate a child means to strengthen, awaken, guide and protect the best in each child. Instead of having the image of

the child as fragile, incomplete, weak, made of glass and always requiring protection, educators need to give children the recognition of their rights and of their strengths.

The extensive work of Piaget within the development of constructivism has changed the course of education and has

helped shed light on how children learn math and science. Children are not empty vessels but are active learners, continually processing information from their surroundings both in and out of the classroom. Educators must constantly change themselves based on the interactions they have with their learners in order to produce intellectual and behavioural success. Rote learning strategies should be reduced to ensure that creativity is not restricted. In addition, assessment of learning should involve the children who will take ownership of their own learning (Slipp, 2017).

In his book *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Yolton, 1989), Locke believed that it was important to take great care in educating the young. He recognised that habits and prejudices formed in youth could be very hard to break in later life. He rejected authoritarian approaches. Instead, he favoured methods that would help children to understand the difference between right and wrong and to cultivate a moral sense of their own.

Caro & Hauser (1992) identified teaching as cooperative behaviour in which the 'educator' changes his or her actions to aid a naïve 'learner' in acquiring knowledge or skills. Another guiding principle would be to embrace the hundred languages of children and use a myriad of different mediums to explore and express themselves in art, drama, dance, music, puppetry, sculptures, role play, painting to demonstrate their thinking, theories and understanding. (Gandini, 1998).

National Research Council (1989) reiterated that all learners engage in a great deal of invention as they learn; they impose their own interpretation on what is presented to create a theory that makes sense to them. They do not simply learn a subset of what they have been shown. Instead, they use new information to modify their prior beliefs. Consequently, each child's knowledge is uniquely personal.

As teaching is an interaction between two beings and that the by product is effective learning through support, preschool educators can play profound roles by examining their images of children to develop effective strategies for the individual child or group of children through the programme, from arrival to the preschool to the departure for home when the programme ends.

To be effective in nurturing and optimising children's learning and development, educators need to revisit these questions: How do we see our children in the classroom? Do we listen to their ideas? Do we take the time to understand their schemes? Are we continuing to use factual information as a conduit to "fill up" our children with knowledge? Then, we need to be reflexive in our actions.

To this end, the project-based approach represents an image of the child as motivated, engaged in making sense of the world, and full of ideas and thoughts that are worth exploring and taking seriously (Martalock, 2012). Educators facilitating a project-based curriculum will support the children as active, capable

and motivated to articulate and debate ideas in a process of co-constructing a shared understanding with others. This approach provides opportunities for the children to think, argue, gather information, reconsider, represent their ideas in drawings or graphs and co-construct meaning about their topic of interest. Here, the accuracy of the children's understanding is less important than the fact that existing schemes lead to more complex schemes, and eventually to a well-defined theory that can be articulated and defended, explained Schafer (2002).

In comparison, the traditional model reflects the image of the child that passively receives information from the educators and needs to be given an activity that ends with a product. Educators will use a teacher-directed and instructional approach to teach children the content of the topic that is decided by the teacher and the children are evaluated based on what the children can remember and produce as end products.

It does not matter where early childhood practitioners are on a continuum – from a traditional model to a project-based curriculum or a philosophy such as Reggio Emilia approach – they will benefit from reflecting on their own image of the child. A good educator wants children to be strong, motivated and engaged learners in her classroom, and her image of the child may support or inadvertently detract from this goal.

Here are questions for reflection focused on teaching approaches:

- Are children seen as recipients of information and an educator's job is to give them the right information?
- Are children viewed as curious and interested in important things and the educator's job is to support them as active researchers to find the right answers?
- Are children considered to be capable of engaging in a process of thinking and re-thinking together about important ideas that result in a shared construction of knowledge? or
- Is the view of the child a combination of these things? If so, how do educators negotiate this in the classroom?

The image of the child and its application in our local context

How might you use the image of the child in your preschool or classroom? The Early Years Development Framework (2013, ECDA) and Nurturing Early Learners Framework (MOE, 2012) offer guidelines of learning outcomes for children from birth to three years old, and four to six years old, respectively. Nonetheless, educators can uncover and reflect the important ideas and concepts that matter to the children to create and deliver learning experiences to provide a quality holistic early childhood education while honouring the image of the child.

Consider integrating the project-based approach which maintains a focus on inquiry and investigation rooted in concrete and tangible subjects or the Reggio Emilia philosophy that includes

abstract ideas and the process of co-constructing theories to make learning visible as an important aspect of learning and teaching. Each approach provides avenues to demonstrate learning outcomes but it is up to early childhood educators to determine how to reach these outcomes. Reflecting deeply on the meaning of knowledge, the value of the process of constructing shared understandings and how the image of the child influences these ideas will give educators insight into the decisions that they make every day in their classrooms.

Early childhood educators should seek ways to incorporate, integrate and value a full range of possibilities in their classrooms. They can create an atmosphere where they can recognise the strength and depth of the children's knowledge, their desire to communicate, and their ability to engage in learning and thinking together.

Malaguzzi (1994) encouraged educators to let children be children. He explained that children learn from other children, and adults learn from children being with children. Children love to learn among themselves, and they learn things that would never be possible to learn from interactions from educators. Thus, it is advantageous for the interaction between children to develop and flourish without excessive assistance from educators. Educators, he said, must know what they know about the children and learn to see the children, to listen to them, to know when they are feeling some distance from them, when they are distracted, when they are surrounded by a shadow of

happiness and pleasure, or sadness in order to provide effective individualised support and guidance.

Image of the child exemplifies how children can be respected by educators and adults (Slipp, 2017). Educators need to redefine their role – from a transmitter to a creator of relationships between people, things, thoughts and with the environment. They must see themselves as researchers, able to think and produce a true curriculum – one that is produced from all the children, and not impose adult time on children's time that negates children from being able to work with their own resources. Furthermore, educators need to be prompters to cue children, stage designers and audience to applaud children's performances and successes instead of directing all the time.

Last but not least, educators need to build strong images of children. When educators have drawn the images of the children to honour all children's right, including a good school, good educators, good activities, meaningful relationships and strong sense of agency and healthy well-being, they would be able to respond promptly and sensitively to children despite the restrictions of the schedule or curriculum that hinder every opportunity to honour the images of children. This is because children need to know that they can depend on educators to meet their needs and support for things that they have and dream about and desire. This leads to educators honouring their full rights of citizenship and in society.

Conclusion

While with children it is important that educators uphold the belief that children are intelligent, strong and have ambitious desires and requests, at all times. Only then, can educators give them the recognition of their rights and their strengths instead of over protecting children leading to compromises in children's development, learning and sense of agency. McNally & Slutsky (2016) concluded that children should be held in high regard, respected and included in their education, and act as researchers alongside their teachers who function as collaborators and co-learners, as well as guides and facilitators. Then, educators can be confident that they truly honour the image of the child to optimise learning and development.

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Guiding Children's Behaviour Through the Learning Environment

Teh le Lyn
Pro-FLAiR

I teach in a programme called FLAiR – an acronym for Focused Language Assistance in Reading. My groups of kindergarteners usually number three to four students per group. They are typically active and often easily distracted. During storytelling time, they like to scramble for the best spots so as to be as near to me as they possibly can. They inch forward to get better views of the book and in doing so, block the view of those who are behind, triggering howls from them. Storytelling times became noisy for all the wrong reasons.



Photo 1: Typical sitting positions during story telling time.

At a workshop I attended, I read an article entitled “Being Human in the Classroom” and during a group discussion, some experienced Pro-FLAiRS shared about the importance of creating personal spaces for the children to give them a sense of belonging in the classroom. I

thought deeper into this and came up with the idea of providing cushions, one for each child. I laid them on the floor, each a little apart from the other (Photo 2).



Photo 2

When the children came in, they saw the cushions and became curious. I introduced them to their “little cushy house” and invited them to choose one and to take a seat on it. This was to be their ‘house’ whenever they came to class. I talked about the Dos and Don’ts. They were to protect their cushion and to take good care of their own house, not to let it become dirty or damaged by someone else. They were to bring their “little cushy house” to the floor during storytelling time, sit on it and keep their bottoms warm from the cold ceramic floor. I demonstrated how they were to sit cross-legged and be within the cushion. I also drew their attention to the space between their house and their neighbour’s, explaining that it was to give privacy and personal space so that they would not be disturbed by their friends and vice versa. In this way, they would be able to

concentrate and enjoy the story fully. At the end of the session, they were to pick up their house and stack them neatly on the shelves before leaving.

To incentivise them to be good house owners, they would earn a sticker at the end of every week. With 30 stickers, they can become the proud owner of their own cushion and they could take it home. If they did not do a good job in taking care of their cushion, a sticker would be taken from their collection. Losing 5 stickers would mean losing their cushion and they become “homeless” during story time for the rest of the year.



Photo 3: Stickers collection

This idea was well received by the children. One by one, they became owners of their “little cushy house”, they were eager to impress and prove to their peers that they were capable of being responsible house owners. They were quick to lay their cushions, with some space away from their friend’s cushion. At the end of each session, they would automatically stack their cushions neatly on the shelves because they wanted to earn that sticker. Besides being conscious of their own behaviour in class, they also started paying attention to their friends’ behaviours, reminding them whenever they were going out of their boundaries.

A typical response from them to their friend was *“Your backside is out of the cushion!”*

Daily circle time and storytelling became a breeze and a pleasure to carry out as they were eager and always looking forward to these two activities. They were able to concentrate and listen better. As a result, I could even read to them a second story as time was not lost on classroom management. They were also beginning to show greater interest in storybooks, more than before.



Photos 4 & 5: Children’s sitting positions after the introduction of the cushions.

Reflections

I was pleasantly surprised by the transformation in the children. Once rowdy and uncooperative, they progressed and proved that they were teachable. Daily circle time and storytelling became easy and enjoyable. Although the sticker reward served to be an incentive to entice the children to cooperate at the beginning, it proved effective because after a month of implementing this change, it became natural for them to lay out their cushions and keep them according to my requirements. This trained them in the area of responsibility and ownership and I could also see that they were more willing to clean up the tables and pack up the stationeries after use, not just in the FLAiR classroom but also when they were back in their form class.

Another unexpected benefit was the children's increased interest in storybooks. They would request that I bring in more books from the library and they were able to specify the type of books that they wanted. Sometimes, they requested that I read a second or third book to them, or, if they wanted silent reading time, they would automatically pull out their cushions and find a quiet corner to flip through their story books.

It is good to give children opportunities to read in class, whether reading aloud or silent reading; it is important as it stimulates their imagination and expands their understanding of the world. It also helps them develop language and listening skills and prepare them to understand the written word.

In my own professional growth, I continued to learn and understand about the needs of young children, such as this one in providing the right opportunity and environment for them to grow and develop. I thought back to how I used to harp at them about their various misconducts, what a waste of time those were!

This simple change to the physical environment brought about positive outcomes and my relationship with my students improved. With better behaviour, the need to discipline disappeared. The atmosphere was more relaxed and even more fun. Circle time was fruitful as the children had warmed up to me and trusted me enough to share their problems and feelings more openly. I was glad that I managed to build an environment of trust and security for the children.

One child said to me, *"Teacher, I like the cushion because my legs (are) not cold."* From this statement, I realised that the ceramic tiles on the floor had caused this child to feel cold; hence he was unwilling to sit on the floor and would frequently fidget. This experience showed me I had misjudged the situation. Young children at that age may not be able to communicate well yet and, as a result, they often use their behaviour to show that they have unmet needs. Feeling cold was the unmet need of this child and now that this need was met, he became happy and cooperative in class.

It was so rewarding for me because I too became more confident in my teaching through the rest of the school year.

The Netherlands Trip

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The study trip to Leiden, the Netherlands, organised by the Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore) (AECES) in June 2019, brought together a team of Singapore early childhood professionals as well as pre-service educators and an academic from Hong Kong. The week-long carefully organized programme included the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) 2019 Conference, customised pre and post-conference workshops, and school visits. The focus of the conference was "Nurturing Environments for the well-being of young children and their families", with three strands exploring various environments such as home, service providers and communities or cities.

The pre and post-conference presentations and school visits rendered an excellent platform to orientate Leiden's complex demography, culture, multifaceted early childhood services and related infrastructure comprehensively. These presentations, done by field specialists, gave a glimpse of the challenges faced and initiatives taken to cater to the needs of children and youth in their diverse community. The pre-conference workshop was held at Het Gebouw, a building that houses a plethora of facilities such as primary schools, preschools, day-care centres, sports facilities for children, the

youth and families. Our team was split into three groups to visit a preschool, a public school, and a day-care centre that were operating in the building. These visits and conversations with the educators and professionals reflected the significant effort they dedicate to support the emotional well-being of the children under their care as well as working with families to build strong relationships. It was heartening to see that issues that arose from complex, diverse communities hardly discouraged their effort in providing the best care they can. One of the early childhood educators in the preschool shared that each time they enrolled a child in their school, they would treat it as though they were embracing a whole new family into their service. Such commitment was also observed across all the centres we visited during the post-conference programme.

The highly anticipated ISSA 2019 conference offered an enriching experience with three keynote addresses, eight concurrent sessions and the plenary session within two days. Leading early childhood experts, members from government and non-governmental bodies, academics, researchers and early childhood professionals from 61 countries participated in this annual exchange of expertise and experiences. As a highlight of

ISSA's 20th-anniversary celebration, Her Highness Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands moved the audience by her passionate speech on her dream of providing the best environment to all the children by connecting the different players of the industry with the appropriate KPI. Michael Feigelson, Executive Director of Bernard van Leer Foundation, gave an unconventional keynote address; he brought up a thought-provoking issue about air quality in the environment for the caregivers and children. This salient subject has been disregarded in fast-developing countries for a long time. He emphasised how the quality of air is an essential factor that affects children's physical and psychological development during their growing years. While the keynotes outlined big ideas, the concurrent sessions explored them in the three main themes through professionals and experts around the world, sharing their work and experiences. Many of these sessions encouraged informal exchanges between the speakers and the audience, which in turn set the stage ISSA wanted to achieve, which is to learn from each other to support young children in their development.

Indeed, there was much to take away from the study trip. As Singapore progresses economically, we might need reminders from better policies and practices observed around the world to stay closer to the fundamental principles in shaping our future generations. The cardinal takeaway of this whole experience was the flexible work arrangements that parents and educators have in the Netherlands. Such provision helps both the educators and the parents to devote invaluable attention to their young children without much worry. No one could deny the pivotal role of interactions between the caregivers and the children. In Singapore, if we need to promote such engaging caregiving, then we ought to consider how we could create work-life balance for our parents and educators.



ISSA participants from The Open University of Hong Kong

I learned many new things at the conference. One which inspired me was Risky Play. Children are allowed to choose for themselves how they want to play; caregivers in Europe believe that children will know how to play safely on their own after they are taught the rules and potential risks. This is unheard of in Hong Kong, I would never have thought that our children could play under risky situations.

Tam Yuen Shan

One of the topics I learnt about was called “A three-steps approach to Strong Childcare”. This approach is about using a quality scan to analyse the childcare situation in Netherlands. The scan revealed that their emotional quality is very good, however, their educational quality was low. I thought about what it might be for Hong Kong – likely the opposite because, being an internal city, Hong Kong is very much focused on language and knowledge, compared to the Netherlands which focuses very much on the children’s physical and psychological development, play and the interests of the child.

Yeung Sum Yi

The ISSA Conference was a unique platform for me, to listen to the world’s leading early childhood experts who shared their knowledge and experiences. I was impressed with the presentation on ‘human resources policy for happy employees’ which gave me some important information that can help me in the future when I develop and build my own team.

Chris Lee



Photo 1: Pre conference Presentations by field specialists

Photo 2: Pre-conference Workshop Greet Meesters workshop – a workshop to stimulate the children learning through music



Professionalism



Photo 3: Post Conference School Visit to SmallSteps



Photos 4-6: Het Gebouw



Photos courtesy of Hong Kong group of participants.



