



I write this message with sadness but with hope as well. We have all gone through the worst pandemic of our time. It is like the third world war with a deadly invisible enemy hitting us. During the Circuit Breaker, AECES organised a Community of Practice (COP) for us to check up on each other and find solace in our fraternity and when my daughter sent me the photo of my grandson Tai (3+ years), I immediately saw HOPE. I saw the young child looking up to the sky with his hands clenched as if holding the gems of HOPE. Hope in the hands of the child? What do you see? I asked myself. If a child can hold hope in his hands so can we!

Through our COP, we delighted in how we worked closely with each other and with the families to get children back to school. While we were storming before the arrival of the children, the children sailed back smoothly in the calm after the storm. It was a remarkable achievement proving that when parents, families and teachers work together, there is always hope for a better tomorrow. Yes, we can bring hope back!

The first two articles present the faces of hope from different perspectives but the third article, a write-up on the children of Anji, China, brings us back to the child. In Anji, you see what children are capable of doing. I have visited Anji twice and am amazed with what they can do. However, you need not go so far. We have witnessed how children are real troopers when they came back to school. They have proved their resilience, their hard core commitment to holding true to the safety measures and their ability to care and share amidst such restrictive conditions.

Our children have given us hope and we can learn from them. Yes, children give us HOPE! Yes, we can bring HOPE back!

May I take this opportunity to wish all of you a year where our hopes may be realised. An enriching 2021 to all.

Dr Christine Chen PBM  
President  
Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore)

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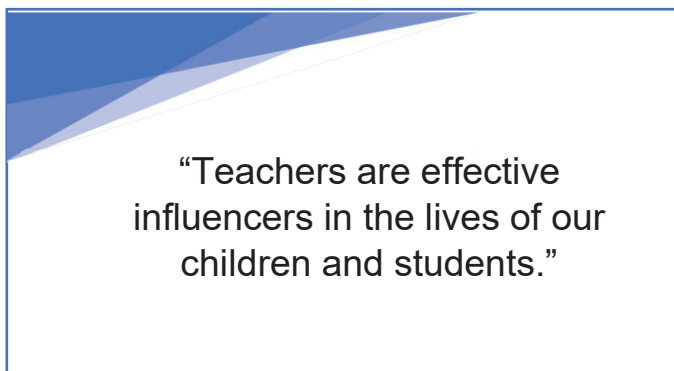
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# THE POWER OF HOPE

Chua Yen Ching  
Executive Director  
Academy of Singapore Teachers

Hope is a powerful word for everyone. Hope is not about wishful thinking, it is about confident expectation.

Teachers are effective influencers in the lives of our children and students. They use their skills to create meaningful school experiences both inside and outside the classroom.



When I first started teaching, my principal asked me to take charge of the Girl Guides unit in my school though I was not a Guide or a Brownie in my school days. It was a fruitful experience as I had the opportunity to

interact with the girls across the levels from Secondary 1 to Secondary 5. I appointed one of the girls, Cecilia (not her real name), to be the company leader. Though she was not very outstanding in her studies, I could see some leadership qualities in her and she had the potential to be an effective leader. She was hesitant initially but took on the role with some persuasion. She contacted me two months ago this year (after 25 years) and we met up. She shared that her childhood was far from desirable. Her mum passed away when she was very young and her father was missing in action most of the time. She was first looked after by her grandmother and later by her aunt. She did not have much self-confidence and she was surprised when I nominated her to be the company leader and took charge of 60 girls. She sharpened her leadership skills and improved in her self-esteem. The guiding movement had also helped to turn her thoughts from “IMPOSSIBLE” to “I’M possible”. Not only did she bring out the best in herself, she also provided the direction and brought out the best in the girls. Today she is the managing director of a company that specialises in health products and she attributed her success from her experience as a Girl Guide. It was the first time that I had heard of her childhood experience and I realised how a small decision and guidance provided to one student could have such a big impact. This is HOPE.



HOPE

## HOPE

“For us as educators, we must have this belief that every child can learn, can think and can achieve.”

Freddy (not his real name) did not clear his PSLE twice and he came into NorthLight School. Not long after, he began to play truant and did not turn up for school for three months. His form teacher, Mr Chan, visited him once a week for three months and he would get Freddy’s favourite Macdonald’s meal whenever he made the home visit. The boy felt bad that Mr Chan kept visiting him and whenever he received news from his classmates of Mr Chan’s visit, he would leave home to avoid meeting the teacher. This made him very tired emotionally and physically. One day, Freddy came back to school and I started my “scolding session”; I asked him why he needed the teacher to send “invitations” to him to come to school. He said he had never met a teacher like Mr Chan. He said running away to avoid the teacher was too tiring and since the teacher did not give up, he gave up. Freddy graduated from the school with a perfect GPA score of 4.0. This is HOPE.

For us as educators, we must have this belief that every child can learn, can think and can achieve. We often hope that the children in our class would perform and behave at a level that meets our expectation. When they fall short of our expectation, we jump to the conclusion that they are lazy. What we need to do is to make an effort to go deeper into the root and source of the behaviour. It could be a situation where they may be frustrated, discouraged, anxious or had become disillusioned over some past experiences. They may lack confidence but this is not laziness. If we were to jump into conclusions too fast, it could be destructive to the children. What we can do is to help our children find out what interests them because interest will lead to exploration and learning. There are many definitions of success and once we are able to help them experience small successes, they will perform beyond our imagination. Every child wants the teachers to be proud of him/her and we will be able to help the children to move from a stage of hopeless end to a stage of endless hope.

**YOU** are the inspiration.

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*Every child wants the teachers to be proud of him/her and we will be able to help the children to move from a stage of hopeless end to a stage of endless hope.*

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# FINDING HOPE IN SEEMINGLY HOPELESS TIMES: LEVERAGING CHILDREN'S PICTUREBOOKS

Dr Sherron Killingsworth Roberts  
Professor of Language Arts and Literacy Education  
Robert N. Heintzelman Literature Scholar  
School of Teacher Education  
University of Central Florida



HOPE

As a U.S. teacher educator supporting and facilitating our pre-service teacher candidates and our brave, in-service teachers during unbelievably sad and difficult times, I know that hope often seems distant, broken, or shallow in my mind. Certainly, Early Childhood (EC) Educators around the world are agentive beacons of hope for young children and their families in normal times, but in pandemic times, EC educators must find ways to prioritize hope. Therefore, this piece will discuss the role hope plays in the field of children's literature, the importance of hope in children's satisfaction and happiness, and recent children's picturebooks that allow EC teachers, children, and their families to find and elevate hope in seemingly hopeless times.

## **Hope actually defines the study of children's literature**

First, my scholarly studies and research of children's literature points me to a basic and critical distinction embedded in the definition of children's literature. Bader (1976) first offered a definition of picturebooks that elevated the field of children's literature: "A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document, and foremost, an

experience for a child. As an art form, it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page” (p.1). Shulevitz (1985) added that picturebooks cannot be experienced in an oral form only for they are more than storybooks; the visual text is equally as important as the verbal text.

Alongside Shulevitz (1985), Wolfenbarger and Sipe (2007) insist that the inextricable linkage between text and illustration demands a one word compound: picturebook. Often a distinction is made between literature for adults and literature for children that hinges on the essential element of hope; literature for adults is often devoid of hope, while literature for children may hold an ambiguous or sad ending, but must offer caring and hope in its inherent messages (Bader, 1976; Shulevitz, 1985; Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007; Wolk, 2013; Yolen, 1973). In seminal work studying Victorian children’s literature, Humphrey Carpenter (2009) first highlighted this notion noting that all children’s fiction books present an idealistic world that holds hope for the future. Notably, today’s picturebooks for young children do not shy away from laying out the reality of worrisome contexts from the current pandemic to our nagging worries, from environmental disasters to human disasters, or violent and peaceful protests, yet, they all must offer hope for the future (Wolk, 2013).

## HOPE

### **What about hope? Hope as a necessary construct**

As an academician, I recently was introduced and began to study Snyder’s Hope Theory (1994; 1995; 2002). Hope Theory considers Hope through the lens of psychology as a cognitive construct as well as an emotional construct that can be measured, studied, and leveraged (Synder, Harris, et al. 1991). Hope, as a psychological cognitive construct, rather than merely an emotion (Seligman, 2002), opens a window to teachers and researchers to leverage Hope. In innovative ways, a focus on Hope as a necessary construct can engender agency and empower the young children in our care. Likewise, as teachers and researchers providing instruction during a global and deadly pandemic, Hope offers a necessary construct in these frayed and worrisome days to guide young children and families living in precarious times.

The seminal work regarding Hope Theory was enacted by Snyder et al. (1991) when his team worked to define the construct as “a positive motivational state” through three essential and interrelated components: goals, agency, and pathways (p. 287). Later, the Adult Hope Dispositional Scale (ADHS) was developed to measure high, medium, and low levels of Hope. In this model (Snyder, Ilardi, Michael, & Cheavens, 2000), Snyder’s ADHS levels relate to the presence of a goal as well as the intensity of a person’s goals, agency, and pathways. These three streams or components of Hope: goals, agency, and pathways parse the means by which one can think about Hope. Later, in the children’s picturebooks highlighted, goals, agency, and pathways are modelled in the books provided. To show the importance of Hope and the studies using AHDS, Hope levels predict academic achievement (Lopez, 2013).

Similarly, Chang (1998) first found that students with high Hope levels also reported more academic satisfaction. Other research studies on Hope show that effective problem solving and academic performances, even happiness, are closely associated with higher levels of Hope (Chang, 1998; Lopez, Bouwkamp et al., 2000; McDermott & Snyder, 1999, 2000; Snyder, Hoza, et al., 1997).

Through annual Gallup Polls, Lopez (2009) measured the Hope levels of high school students on Free and Reduced Lunch programs versus students living in higher income families finding no correlation between income levels and hope levels. “The hopeful don’t necessarily have money and the rich aren’t necessarily hopeful,” Lopez (2013, p. 96) concluded. Both Grissom et. al (2020) and Halpin’s (2001) work focused on the pathway thinking that emerged in populations facing serious adverse conditions to find personal agency and persistence toward educational goals. Hope levels have also been shown to enhance coping skills, particularly in those who suffer from PTSD (Gilman, Schumm, & Chard, 2012). Likewise, research analyzing the Hope levels of Hurricane Katrina survivors by Glass, Flory et. al (2009) found that individuals with lower levels of Hope exhibited avoidant coping strategies, and were ranked with more intense psychological distress. Glass, Flory, et al. (2009) found that dispositional Hope levels “moderated the relationship between avoidant coping and general psychological distress” (p. 779). For people experiencing natural disasters, perhaps even global pandemics, high hope levels have been found to serve as a psychological buffer that soften the blow of trauma (Grissom, et. al, 2020; Valle, Huebner, & Suldo, 2006).

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*- Grissom, et. al, 2020; Valle, Huebner, & Suldo, 2006*

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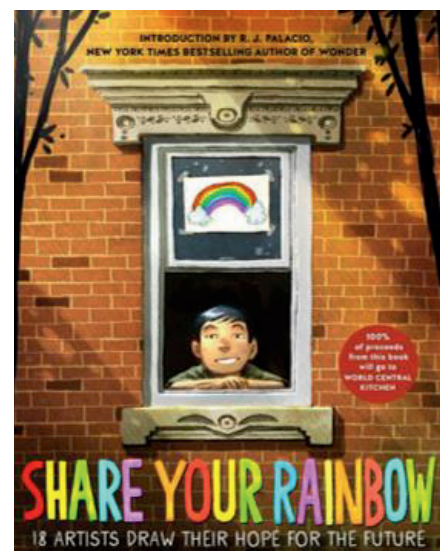
Seligman’s early work (2002), supported by Miller and Nickerson (2007), parsed out the triad of positive emotional constructs, satisfaction, gratitude, and Hope to align with a person’s wellness, past, present, and future. With hope aligning to the future state, one can easily see how Snyder took that emotional construct and shifted it to the domain of cognition, because one can only think about the future, not feel in the future. More recently, Lopez (2013) characterized hope as “being like oxygen and we cannot live without it” (pp. 181-185).

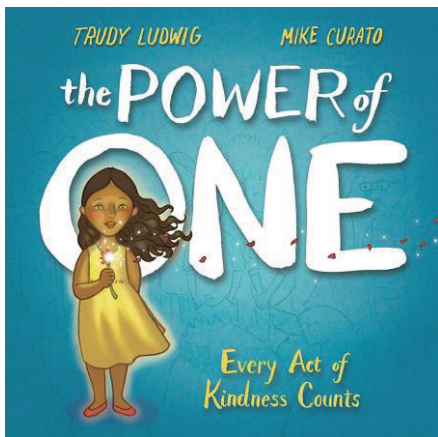
In general, the early work of Snyder et al. (2002) showed that high Hope participants tended to remain goal-focused, created ways to evaluate their progress toward goals, and perceived themselves as being able to reach their goals. Research has also shown that persons with high Hope levels also exude and can convey Hope to persons within their social circles (Lopez, 2013; Lopez, Bouwkamp, et al., 2000; Lopez, Rose, Robinson, Marques, & Pais-Ribeiro, 2009); thus, elevating collective Hope levels. The basic premise of this paper is that children's picturebooks might serve in this vicarious capacity to model, exude, and convey Hope in a way that elevates impressionable young children's hope levels.

### Finding Hope in recent picturebooks

Therefore, this article highlights recent picturebooks that can serve as tangible ways to remind us of the salient and essential role that Hope offers. School psychologists recommend that, in normal times, teachers, parents, and EC educators must find ways to insert Hope in the daily lives of schoolchildren (Lopez, Bouwkamp, et al., 2000; Lopez, Rose, Robinson, Marques, & Pais-Ribeiro, 2009), whether through read alouds and discussion on Zoom or face-to-face. One of the first picturebooks that pulled my young readers to its magnetic illustrations is entitled *Share Your Rainbow: 18 Artists Draw their Hope for the Future* (Various illustrators & Palacio, 2020).

While R. J. Palacio advances a thoughtful introduction, young readers will be drawn to the famous illustrators who contributed to this book. With 100% of the book proceeds going to the World Central Kitchen, everyone wins when this book is purchased and its powerful message shared. This book was inspired by young children, housebound during the Covid-19 pandemic, drawing and displaying rainbows and posting them in their windows as an enduring symbol of hope. Young children will also love finding hidden rainbows in every full page spread. Even though rainbows themselves are fleeting in nature, their symbol offers hope for all of us that will persist no matter our circumstances. Every page, like each day, reveals another reason to find hope in a rainbow. The agentic message of the book is that we can influence and raise the hope levels by sharing simple straightforward messages to keep looking for hope.

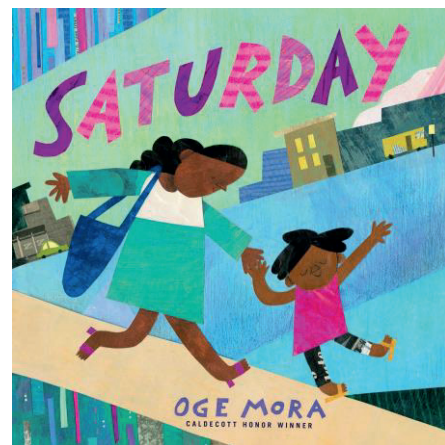




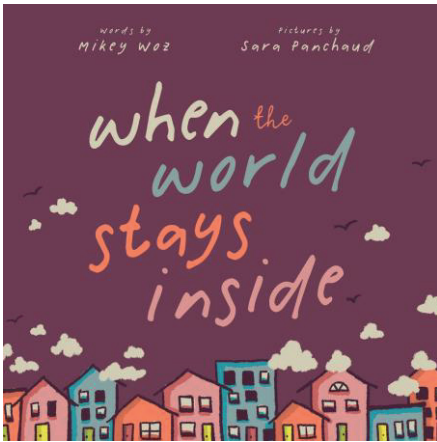
The award-winning author-illustrator team of Trudy Ludwig and Mike Curato, who brought us *Invisible Boy*, bestows another great picturebook. *The Power of One: Every Act of Kindness Counts* (Ludwig, 2020) resonates in today's pandemic context on so many levels. This simple, yet beautiful book, lays out the ripple effect of small kindnesses. Like the other picturebooks in this article, this book clearly gives readers definitive steps for enacting goodness in the world. For example, the book expounds, "One warm hug / can lift our spirits

when we are down" (n.p.); readers will be reminded of the power of hope as well as the power of one as they follow the episodic travels of kindness. Small good deeds at home and in our community lead to larger impacts and to reservoirs of hope. Creative illustrations provide children with tangible linkage to the chain reactions that are possible when one person, even a small person, acts with kindness. Focused on the pathway thinking that inevitably leads to high hope, Ludwig's last line of the book sums up the theme, "Acts and words of kindness DO count, and it all starts with ONE." (n.p.).

Oge Mora's pre-pandemic book, *Saturday* (2019), entered the world of children's literature at a prodigious time. The message of surviving the dashed anticipation of a wonderful, entertaining, and much-needed Saturday was never needed more than when families and children stared down the small, yet grievous disappointments that post-pandemic world presented to us. Children and families were unable to celebrate and enjoy the benchmarks of life including Saturday family rituals, kindergarten to high school graduations, birthdays, weddings, and so much more. Like



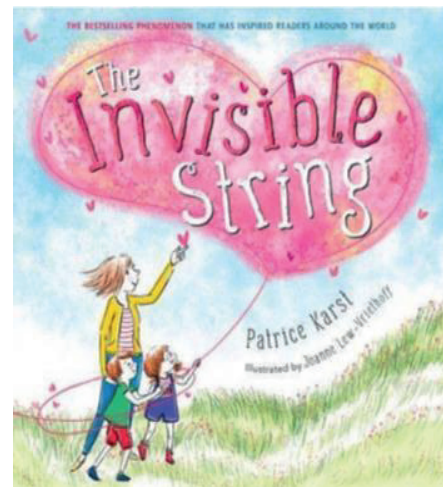
*Saturday*, the lessons we learn as we cope with life's disappointments will remain with us for our lifetime. We learn that what is most important, despite ruined plans, is that we have each other's love. This link to the award-winning author and illustrator's read aloud of *Saturday* further explains and will delight and inspire our hope levels: <https://teachersbooksreaders.com/2020/03/17/oge-mora-reads-aloud-saturday/>.



Another book that will surely bring hope to this weary and worrisome world is Woz's (2020) picturebook *When the World Stays Inside*. The message of the book is set in rhyme which contributes to the lighthearted and whimsical way of approaching our need to remain indoors or away from people. The author and illustrator work together through a lovely artistic font to convey the empowering theme of the book in this way: "When the world stays inside, / there's so much we can do. / There is fun to be had / and it's all up to you." (n.p.). This encouraging

book suggests myriad of ideas for young ones and their families to enjoy learning and growing through their movement, crafting, curiosity, creativity, and even appreciating. Woz and Panchaud (2020) inspires pathways to envision the future through our actions today, at home and inside, and remind us of the transitory nature of difficult times.

Last, the millions and millions of deaths from Covid-19 that continue to span the countries of our world have ushered children and their families into untimely and unanticipated grief and loss. Although this next book was published in 2018, its recent popularity shows evidence of its profound usefulness in this difficult and sad times. Although Karst (2018) wrote *The Invisible String* as a simple response to address her child's separation anxiety as they started school, this engaging picturebook works to explain the unbreakable connection that remains no matter what comes. The book's allegorical nature allows



for young children to embrace the layers of the book's open-ended message wherever they happen to be developmentally and for any kind of loss they happen to be facing. This thoughtful picturebook offers hope by explaining, "Even though you can't see it with your eyes, you can feel it deep in your heart, and know that you are always connected to the ones you love." (n.p.). Sadly, during a global pandemic, in order to restore hope amidst the severe and continuing loss of life, children of all ages, including adults, will appreciate the compelling and echoing message that the invisible string will always bind our relationships in today's uncertain times.

### Concluding remarks

As teachers and families search for ways to latch onto the emotion of Hope as well as the cognitive construct of Hope, Snyder's Hope Theory (2002) reminds us that procuring and sharing picturebooks with characters and themes that exude the psychological construct of Hope is even more important than once imagined. In seemingly hopeless times, Hope emerges in the whimsical, delightful, and beautiful pages of a children's picturebook. More importantly, in their own way through the total design of text and illustrations, these picturebooks can be leveraged to model goals, agency, and pathways for teachers, families, and our little one as we navigate difficult times.

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# OUTDOOR PLAY AT AN ANJI KINDERGARTEN IN CHINA

Wanqiu Meng



*In Anji play, the role of the adult is to create human and physical environments that embody trust in the child as a capable learner, that are safe, accessible, consistent, honest, open, predictable, and are defined by clearly articulated, simple, and reasonable expectations.*

*- Anji Play website ([www.anjiplay.com](http://www.anjiplay.com))*

HOPE

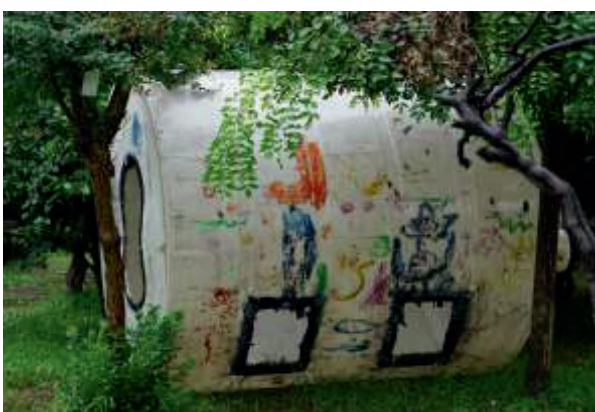
In South China Zhejiang province, in a town named Anji, a kindergarten program has introduced specialized outdoor equipment to support and extend children's outdoor activities. This "Anji Play" is recommended by the Chinese Ministry of Education for all of the country, and has captured the attention of early childhood education experts from around the world. I recently had an opportunity to undertake fieldwork in one Anji kindergarten.

## **Outdoor Play at Ji Guan Kindergarten**

The Ji Guan Kindergarten in Anji is a garden-style, multi-functional kindergarten with a diverse ecological environment. It is a model for kindergartens in Zhejiang Province and an experimental base for education and scientific research regarding Anji Play.

In Ji Guan Kindergarten, children spend at least two hours playing outdoors every day. At approximately 9 o'clock in the morning, the outdoor space comes alive with hundreds of children playing and talking with each other. Children climb up and down on the barrels and large cubes in the safe environment they created themselves; play with sand and water in the natural environment; and paint on walls, cars, drums, etc.

The outdoor area of Ji Guan Kindergarten is divided based on different types of materials and equipment: climbing area, sand water area, construction area, swing area, rolling plastic barrel area, painting area, and role playing area. The rolling plastic barrel area is a subtly designed area. The plastic barrel has enough space to accommodate a number of children at the same time. As the children inside the barrel roll it along, they can observe the situation outside through small windows and enjoy the pleasure and risk of hiding in a semi-closed space. In the painting area, creativity is allowed to happen in many unexpected places. Children can doodle on the ground, on a graffiti wall that can be rinsed, and on an old van.



*Outdoor areas with different materials and functions in Ji Guan Kindergarten.*

Rich in variety and quantity of play opportunities, the Ji Guan Kindergarten provides minimally structured, open-ended materials of all sizes. These materials include both highly designed and found objects that invite children to engage in large-scale construction, design, combination, recombination, revision, imagination, and self-expression. Some ladders and boards are taller and longer than the children. Anji educators and teachers point to the benefits of engaging a child's entire body in the process of problem-solving by manipulating materials.

### Play Sharing at Ji Guan Kindergarten

Reflection about the outdoor play is a fixed segment of every school day in Anji. This semi-formal teaching opportunity is organized by teachers, but dominated by the children. Children are supported by teachers, parents, materials, and the environment as they reflect on their experiences in three ways: (1) reflection during play, (2) recording play stories by drawing, and (3) play sharing.

After the outdoor play, the children go back to the classroom to draw the impressive play scenes and describe them in their own words. Because the child cannot yet write Chinese characters, the teacher helps each child to write down their reflections.



*Children challenge themselves by walking or sliding on their self-built combinations of ladders, climbing cubes, and planks.*

After recording play stories by drawing, children take the initiative to discuss their play of the day, what interesting things they encountered, and the challenges that were difficult to solve. Other children help come up with ideas and solve problems. A group of 6-year-old children in one class conducted the following discussion:



“I caught a bug that I didn’t know what it was. It was big and round. I turned on the bug catcher and the bug ran away.”

“Guo and I caught spiders, watermelon worms, and all kinds of insects.”

Teacher: “How can we catch insects?”

“I use my hands to catch insects. Some are soft, some are hard.”

“Some worms suck blood, leeches and vampires.”

Teacher: “Well, this method is a little dangerous.”

“Use insect catcher to scrape and dig on the ground.”

“The little lizard in my house is dead. The fish is dead. The little wild insect is dead. It’s dead in the sun.”

Teacher: “Other small animals help.”

(The children start chattering.)

Teacher: “Did you listen carefully?”

(The classroom is quiet. The teacher asks the children to continue their discussion.)

“Shovel some soil with a shovel. If there is a bit of mud on your hand, you don’t have to touch the insects.”

“It’s too dirty.”

Teacher: “Wash it with water.”

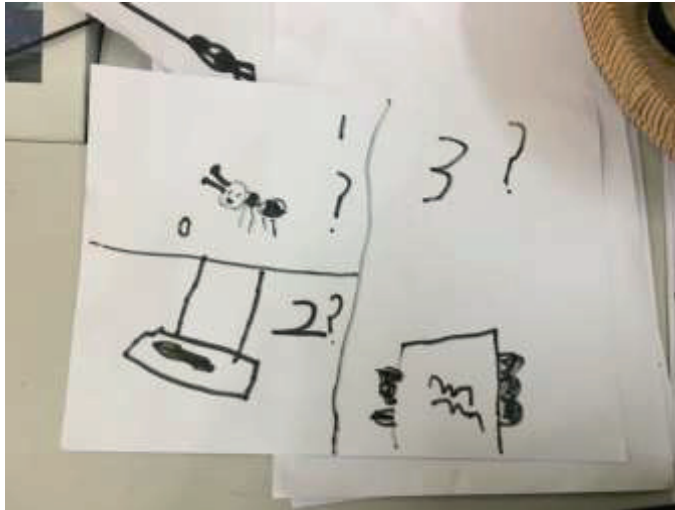
“When the mud is dry, it can’t be washed.”

(The teacher shows a picture of the children putting ants on the leaves.)

Teacher: “Let’s have a look at this. What’s your method?”

“I catch insects with leaves. I found an ant, like leaves, in order not to let it run, I caught it with leaves.”

Teacher: “This is also a good way.”



Teacher: "Tom has three questions to discuss with you. He has recorded them on paper. Now please let him talk about them."

Tom: "The first question is, what do ants like to eat?"

"Sweet things."

Teacher: "How do you know that spiders are sweet?"

"Put sweet things. Ants eat very little. They starve to death."

"The big ant ate all the food, but he didn't have to eat anything else."

"At my grandmother's house [she] puts a small piece of sugar. After supper, a group of ants were eating it."

"I saw it on TV."

Teacher: "Let's discuss the second question."

Tom: "What is the long thing on the balance beam?"

"It's a connected mushroom."

Tom: "The third question is, Why do mushrooms grow on wood?"

Teacher: "These two problems are very difficult. Let's go back and check the data to solve them."

The play sharing lasts about half an hour. After that, the children prepare for lunch. After physical and mental activities, the children enjoy their meals very much.

As a teacher assistant who had the opportunity to observe these children at play in nature, I recognized that our youngest learners bring their own thinking to the process of discovery. The students' comments that they recalled their grandmother's advice or had viewed a topic on television affirms that early learners absorb so much more from their own lived experiences. When they share their knowledge with us (peers/researchers/teachers), there is a ripple effect of discovery.

*While the COVID-19 pandemic continues, CE International recommends that all education program personnel follow their local health experts' recommendations to ensure the safety of all the children in their care.*

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HOPE

## LESSONS FROM NATURE AND THE BENEFITS OF GROWING YOUR OWN EDIBLES

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### (A) Introduction

The NPark launched the *Gardening with Edibles* initiative on 18 June 2020 to encourage the public to garden at home with edible plants.

This *Gardening with Edibles* initiative is also aligned with Singapore's national strategy to strengthen our food resilience. The "30 by 30" goal led by the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) aims to produce 30% of Singapore's nutritional needs locally by the year 2030.

Second Minister for National Development Desmond Lee said: "The potential risk of disruption to our food supply during the Covid-19 situation underscores the importance of our local food farms and growing more food locally, as part of our strategy to strengthen food security and build greater social resilience." (Cited in Begum, 2020).

The National Parks Board (NParks), which encourages the community to enhance the environment through plants and gardens, also fanned the flames of the growing movement by sending out free seeds under the *Gardening With Edibles* initiative from June to this month.

During the ECDA conference this year, it was noted that the coronavirus has increased the stress levels of teachers and forced pre-schools to come up with creative ways to ensure pupils adhere to safe distancing and keep their masks on from 7am to 7pm (Yong, 2020). In the context of the coronavirus, there will also be a stronger emphasis on educators' and pupils' social and emotional well-being by ECDA. In addition, more outdoor learning is in the works for pupils, as an occupational health and safety assessment to improve teachers' well-being at their workplace is under way.

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Speaking on the initiatives at the first virtual Early Childhood Conference on 10 October 2020, Minister for Social and Family Development Masagos Zulkifli said: "The priority is to help all teachers deepen their expertise and develop fulfilling careers in the sector. This will ultimately benefit both teachers and children." (Cited in Yong, 2020).

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The following are some suggestions of the benefits of gardening and growing one's edible. Lessons learnt and shared from the experiences may serve as a possible provocation to how gardening may serve as a hobby or be applied in the early childhood profession.

#### **(B) Research findings and the benefits of gardening**

According to Soga, Gaston and Yamaura (2017), there is an increasing awareness among researchers and health practitioners of the potential health benefits derived from gardening activities. Previous studies have shown that gardening increases individual's life satisfaction, vigor, psychological wellbeing, positive affects, sense of community, and cognitive function. In addition, reductions in stress, anger, fatigue, and depression and anxiety symptoms have also been documented.

To add, engagement with gardening has increasingly been recognised as not only a cost-effective health intervention but also a treatment or occupational therapy for those with psychological health issues, so-called "horticultural therapy".

There is growing interest and research on horticultural therapy - which taps nature's benefits for human health. It involves a planned programme where trained professionals use plants as a therapeutic medium.

Horticultural therapy is well established around the world and, in some countries, it has been introduced in educational institutions including kindergartens and special-needs schools. It is well accepted in medical care facilities, especially in rehabilitation hospitals, psychiatric services, palliative care and aged homes as a means of providing patients with graded and carefully designed gardening activities to improve their quality of life. Such therapy has also been noted to promote social functioning and self-esteem in patients with psychiatric conditions (Cited in Heok & Sia, 2016).

In a trial here, conducted with the Department of Psychological Medicine at the National University Health System, elderly participants planted vegetables such as lady's fingers and learnt gardening techniques like composting and transplanting. When the crops were ready for harvest, they cooked them together. They also had guided visits to the Singapore Botanic Gardens, Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve and Gardens by the Bay.

In preliminary results after three months, the elderly on horticultural therapy did better than a control group in scores for life satisfaction, memory and psychological well-being. In addition, it was found that cytokine interleukin-6 (IL-6), a pro-inflammatory protein, which lowers the body's immune system, showed significant reduction in the horticultural therapy group, compared to the control group.

The outcomes of this study provide empirical evidence for the effectiveness of horticultural therapy in improving the psychosocial and cognitive well-being of the elderly (Heok & Sia, 2016)

Having dirt under your fingernails may be a sign of poor hygiene, but scientists say it could also be a mark of good health. The beneficial bacteria found in soil, can increase levels of serotonin and reduce anxiety. Gardening is said to help improve one's immune system, helping individuals to be sick less and fight off infections easier, according to research, including a 2015 study published in *Immunotargets and Therapy* (Anderson, 2020; Hutchins, 2020; Gillihan, 2019; Soga, Gaston and Yamaura, 2017).

Gardening can help reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety. According to Hutchins (2020), gardening would give individuals a chance to focus on something and allow them to work their mind with a goal and have a task in mind. This he added which was helpful especially now, with so much illness, just to see things growing and things thriving is a positive thing to do.

Gardening would give individuals a chance to focus on something and allow them to work their mind with a goal and have a task in mind.

- Hutchins (2020)

A healthy dose of vitamin D also increases one's calcium levels, which benefits the bones and immune system. Exposure to sunlight is helpful for even older adults to achieve adequate amounts of vitamin D.

Eating what you are growing lets you know that the fresh produce that you eat has not been treated with pesticides. “It’s essentially as farm-to-table as it gets, if you are eating what you’re growing.” (Hutchins, 2020).

**(C) Other lessons learnt**

During Covid 19, tending to my edible garden gave me a mental break while working and these times away from the computer screen although brief was helpful for keeping my wellbeing.

Besides the health benefits shared, gardening has taught me on a personal level the following:

(i) Developing a Growth Mindset

According to Dweck (2006), “In a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work - brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment.”

The inability to garden perfectly helped me cultivate a growth mindset. For example, when the seeding method did not seem to work, I told myself I could look for other ways to germinate a seed. They included germinating them on a wet towel or rooting the plant from the cutting of an adult plant.

In addition, given the lack of control one can have, gardening can be a good antidote for perfectionism as suggested by Gillihan (2019). No matter how carefully you plan and execute your garden, there are countless factors such as the invasions by bugs, or the unpredictable weather. Gardening can offer an endless supply of challenges.

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Given the lack of control one can have,  
gardening can be a good antidote for  
perfectionism.

- Gillihan (2019)

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Gardening taught me not to be stressed about needing to do something the right way from the start, but if I do the best I could do, and I would learn something for my gardening efforts.

(ii) Gives hope for the future

Another interesting perspective that I have learnt was that gardening can help individuals to restore their faith in the future (Anderson, 2020). This happens when the seed is planted and watered and having the faith that the seed will grow. Being able to see that faith come to fruition, it would help carry the same kind of faith and hope into everyday life.

(iii) Connecting with others

To help me with my gardening efforts, I joined a gardening group on the virtual platform suggested by my friend. I found the members accepting, supportive and extremely willing to share their experiences with others.

Interestingly, gardening helped me to connect quickly and easily with others in the group. I guessed because we shared the same hobby and we believed that we are all better together when we shared our experiences. Knowing that there are others there to support and root for you, together for a common interest and similar purposes, has been most encouraging.

(iv) Being kind to oneself

Self-compassion involves treating yourself with the same kindness, concern, and support that you will show to a good friend, the children you are teaching, or in this case the plants or edibles you are caring for. An example of showing compassion to self could include taking the time, to engage in some self-soothing or enjoyable activities a few minutes a day.

Another and equally important reason why individuals are encouraged in this quest is the impact it can have on individual happiness (Senge, 2006).

Besides, finding fulfilment at work, according to Covey (2004) individuals also need to strive for a sustainable lifestyle that affords them time to recuperate, recharge and be effective in the long-term.

#### (D) Implication for practice

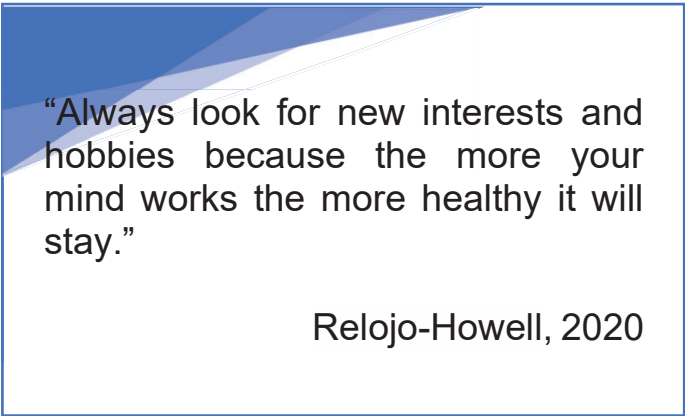
The meta-analysis by Soga, Gaston and Yamaura (2017), has provided robust evidence for the positive effects of gardening on health. The results presented in their study suggested that gardening can improve physical, psychological, and social health, which can, from a long-term perspective, alleviate and prevent various health issues facing today's society. Understanding the benefits of gardening and growing your own edibles, you may want to consider picking up this hobby for yourself or with the children in the preschool.

According to clinical psychologist, Dr Carol Balhetchet, turning to nature in a time of isolation at home during Covid-19 is an understandable reaction as plants would give you the feeling that they are still connected to nature. It could be an extension of one's own space into the outside world. She added that on another level, picking up new interests – be it plants, crafting, baking or learning a new language – is a natural way to adapt to the circuit breaker measures (Cited in Begum, 2020).

Relajo-Howell (2020) the editor of *Psychreg Journal of Psychology* shared hobbies are crucial for well-being and mental health. A hobby is the best way to spend your spare time and unwind from our daily routines. Research has shown that people with hobbies rarely suffer from stress, depression and low mood and so it is vital for our mental health that we find activities that will get us out, make us feel happier and more relaxed. The main goal of a hobby is that it gives you the opportunity to express yourself and relax at the same time. Always look for new interests and hobbies because the more your mind works the more healthy it will stay (Relajo-Howell, 2020).

Thus, a hobby or activity such as gardening and growing your own edibles may just be one of the ways to promote wellbeing in the early childhood community.

This is consistent with the helpful reminder by Ms Jamie Ang, chief executive of ECDA, who shared with pre-school teachers at the ECDA conference 2020: "The work you do is vitally important but not easy. Do take care of yourself first so that you can continue in this calling of helping others." (Cited in Yong, 2020)



"Always look for new interests and hobbies because the more your mind works the more healthy it will stay."

Relajo-Howell, 2020

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## Appendices

Photos from my gardening experience and lessons learnt.

- (i) Different soil serves different purposes.  
The NPark website provides helpful suggestions on how to prepare the soil for planting.



- (ii) Rain water is good for your plants

There are many benefits from using rainwater for your plants. Knowing where the catchment area is in the building will help you to collect it faster and safely on rainy days.



(iii) Many ways to help a grow a plant

Experimenting and comparing processes on what works best.

(a) From soil



(b) Using a napkin with water to germinate seed



(c) Rooting from existing plants



(iv) Self pollination

Learning, researching and problem solving when the need arose.



(iv) It is a joy to watch your harvest grow

Waiting patiently for the plants to grow. Learning that there is a time for everything.



# PROFESSIONAL CONTENT KNOWLEDGE IN EARLY YEARS MATHEMATICS TEACHING: RETHINKING 3 COMMON CONCEPTIONS

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## Introduction

Teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) of mathematics is known to be a critical factor of children's mathematics achievements (Lee, 2010). Teachers should possess not only mathematics subject matter competence and knowledge but also 'the ways of representing and formulating the subject that makes it comprehensible to students' (Schulman, 1986). Hence PCK encompasses both content knowledge of mathematics and pedagogical knowledge of how to teach mathematics, both of which are important factors to high quality mathematics teaching.

In the past year, my work involved guiding 48 undergraduate in-service early childhood teachers in Singapore to design and conceptualise preschool mathematics experiences that facilitate children's mathematical thinking. In the course of working with the teachers, I found that the teachers' conceptions of mathematics content influence the way they plan for lessons and experiences for their class which sometimes may not result in the learning they anticipate for the children.

In this paper, I hope to share three of such conceptions or misconceptions which may derive from certain thinking in the content matter or the pedagogy of teaching mathematics.

Teachers should possess not only mathematics subject matter competence and knowledge but also 'the ways of representing and formulating the subject that makes it comprehensible to students'

- Schulman, 1986

### The Use of Calendar Time

Calendar time is commonly used during circle and assembly sessions in the morning at the start of the school day. Children may be taught to recite the days of the week, months of the year, number sequences and number positions using the days of the month and concepts of time like yesterday and tomorrow. How we use calendar time will affect what the children learn. Are they learning to recite numbers and days/months by rote? Do they understand the concept of time? Why is it many preschool children cannot answer the question 'what day is it today?' even when it is clearly shown on the calendar that the days leading up to the present day have been crossed out? To answer this question, we have to examine young children's understanding of time.

According to Beneke, Ostrosky & Katz (2008), young children at Nursery level may be able to talk about events that have happened (past) or will happen (future) but they have yet to understand the occurrences of events in terms of units of time or sequence of time. Some calendar activities may require understanding of distance in time, for example children are shown on the calendar that the school's Christmas party will be held on 21<sup>st</sup> of December, that is next Tuesday or in 6 days' time. The children are invited to countdown the number of days on the calendar till the party. Freidman (2000) posits that the ability of a child to judge or understand the relative distance in time until a future event occurs in a calendar does not happen for a child until he/she is around 7-10 years of age. Preschool children may be able to grasp the concept of 'before and after' but an understanding of dates, time and calendar happens with maturity.

In light of this, early childhood teachers may need to consider their expectations in terms of what the children can learn or understand in calendar time and what may be developmentally appropriate. The calendar can be used as a visual tool to learn concepts other than time, like numeracy, vocabulary (days of the week, months of the year), patterns and sequences. Young children can be taught sequences of the school day's activities through pictorial schedules but introducing concepts relating to time may be better left till the children are at Kindergarten 2.

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*Freidman (2000) posits that the ability of a child to judge or understand the relative distance in time until a future event occurs in a calendar does not happen for a child until he/she is around 7-10 years of age.*

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## Counting

Children love to count, it is part of their daily lives. Counting, however is more than just 1,2,3...it may seem simple but it is not. Counting involves learning about 'how many' in a collection and involves learning the rules about counting including one-to-one correspondence, cardinality, stable order and order irrelevance principles (Brownell, Chen & Ginet, 2014).

Let me share a lesson plan for counting to number 10 which one of my in-service student-teacher Martha designed for a class of 4 year olds. Her class had already learnt how to count to 10 by rote and she was going to introduce the concept of 'how many'. The children were asked to stand in 2 straight lines and were introduced to a counting song. After the song, the first child will call out '1', the next child '2' and so on until child number 10 who will sit down after he calls out '10'. The next child will start with '1' again and the activity continues till the next child numbered '10' sits down. The children were also invited to count backwards. After the activity, Martha

Counting involves learning about 'how many' in a collection and involves learning the rules about counting including one-to-one correspondence, cardinality, stable order and order irrelevance principles.

- Brownell, Chen & Ginet, 2014

asked the class 'who is number 3'? The children were expected to name the child who called out number 3 earlier.

The lesson presented above involves rote counting which can help children learn to recite number names from memory. Rote counting helps children recall numbers in a sequence and has its place in the process of learning to count but it should

not stop there, especially when Martha's aim was to introduce the concept of 'how many' in her lesson. Rote counting's function is limited (Brownell, Chen & Ginet, 2014) and Martha's class should progress to rational counting which involves matching each number to an object in a collection or set in order to understand 'how many'.

Rational counting is a foundational concept to children's working with numbers. By asking 'who is number 3?', Martha is suggesting that number 3 is a name or a label, not a quantity. Martha could have asked each child to sit down once they have called out their number and after child number 10 calls out his number, the children will be asked to sit in a group of 10. Martha can then ask the children 'how many children are there in this group?' to which the children can chorus '10!'. The children will see one-to-one correspondence (1 number for each child), cardinality (ending with 10) and 10 children in a set or collection (how many).

Martha can extend this activity by varying the numbers. Instead of 10, she can ask children to number themselves 1 to 3 and form groups of 3. This helps the children to understand '3' or three-ness in a set as a quantity, not as a name or label. She could further extend this activity by giving the children different materials to arrange and sort according to sets of 3 or 4 so that they realise the concept of 'threeness' or 'fourness' has little to do with the particular things they are counting but the number names are used temporarily to attach to objects so that they are included in the count. This will move the children away from the idea that 'Jason is 3', 'Amy is 4' in the counting activity that Martha had planned in the beginning.

Constance Kamii (1995) suggests that counting can be incorporated into children's daily routines to make it more meaningful for children. Be it morning circle time when the teacher asks 'how many children are here today?', or 'how can we give 3 biscuits to each child?' during snack time, or 'let us vote for the story book we will read at story time today!' When children can see and use counting in their daily activities, they will naturally be more motivated to learn the skill.

### Patterns

Children naturally look for patterns and crave regularity so they can predict what comes next as they make meaning of things around them in their world (Brownell, Chen & Ginet, 2014). Bedtime routines, schedules at school and at home, days of the week, musical rhythms, repeated movements and visual designs involve patterns that young children encounter daily.

Children naturally look for patterns and crave regularity so they can predict what comes next as they make meaning of things around them in their world.

- Brownell, Chen & Ginet, 2014

I have observed from my work with teachers' lesson plans on patterns that many involve children copying templates of patterns, for example AB patterns and extending them. Teacher Albert's lesson for 5 year olds starts with getting the children to demonstrate a pattern with movements like alternating a clap with a stomp of the feet as a song is played. This is followed by Albert showing children a repeated pattern on the board and asking the children to chorus after him A..B..A..B..and the children get to extend the pattern by verbally continuing the pattern when Albert asks 'What comes next?' Children then use a worksheet template to draw or use materials like counters to form an AB pattern on the worksheet template copying the pattern that has been presented on the template.

If a child successfully fills up the template worksheet with the correct pattern, does it mean the child has demonstrated that he/she has learnt the AB pattern? Maybe, but maybe not. What are the fundamental concepts to be learnt in the topic of patterns? Brownell, Chen & Ginet (2014) suggests the following Big Ideas in patterns:

1. Patterns are sequences governed by a rule
2. Identifying the rule of a pattern brings predictability and allows us to make generalisations.
3. The same pattern can be found in many different forms.

Kamii & Lewis (1990) believe that mathematical concepts cannot be taught in a didactic manner or by rote but children have to construct the concepts on their own through active learning. Albert's plan appears to have a few didactic elements and may need some work on the way it is set up.

Firstly, a music and movement session is a great way to reinforce the concept of patterns provided the children can see the same pattern found in other forms. But if the children had no prior experience or knowledge about patterns, then the movement activity would be limited to a physical experience rather than one that helps children learn patterns. By asking children to chorus the pattern and then demonstrate they could arrange materials following a template, Albert had expected the children had learnt the lesson. If we compare the Big Ideas in patterns to Albert's lesson plan, we will notice that the plan does not necessarily involve the children demonstrating they have learnt a rule which can be found in other forms. Albert may want to engage in 'math talk' with the children to find out if they had learnt the rule of the pattern.

Another student-teacher Annie chose to start a pattern lesson by getting children to talk about patterns in common items they retrieved from a feely bag, like a leaf or a patterned cloth. Firstly, the children are introduced to patterns in everyday objects that they encounter and they talk about the patterns they see, hence constructing their own conceptions and deducing the rule of pattern themselves. They also make comparisons between materials and realise that the same pattern rule (AB) is present in different materials. They also construct in their minds the idea that this rule is predictable.

Annie then asks the children to move around the class to pick out similar patterns in objects or use materials to form the pattern using the AB rule. The children make their own patterns and show and tell their pattern formation to the rest of the class explaining how the AB rule is formed. As they explain their creations, they learn that the rule of pattern can be generalised. The lesson extends to a pattern hunt around the school compound where children seek out patterns that fall within the AB rule. This allows them to translate their conceptions of the rule of pattern to other forms.

Annie's lesson ends with the rule of pattern being demonstrated in yet another form, that of movement. She asks the class for ideas on how the AB pattern can be demonstrated with body movements and together, they explore the different ways in which this pattern can be displayed through the children's actions.

Annie appreciates her role is facilitating mathematical thinking for children through their active participation and through open-ended questions to encourage children to engage in math talk and formulate their own meaning to make sense of mathematics around them. She is also quick to catch teachable moments during daily routines to engage her class in spontaneous math talk like pointing out the AB patterned stripes of a child's shirt or the way the construction blocks or toy cars are arranged in a pattern when the children play at the learning centres.

### Conclusion

From the above examples of mathematics lesson plans, one can conclude that a teacher needs to understand how children make meaning and construct mathematics concepts in order to plan meaningful and developmentally appropriate mathematics experiences and activities with clear objectives, and to promote mathematics thinking in the classroom. Early math is basic and foundational, but it is not simple because mathematics concepts can be abstract and complex (McCray & Chen, 2011). Yet, most early childhood teachers know that early math competence is critical for children's success in their schooling years across the curriculum (Brownell, Chen & Ginet, 2014). Hence, it will help early years teachers to be informed about fundamental math concepts and develop adaptive expertise in professional content knowledge to make math truly come alive for eager young minds.

**Early math is basic and foundational, but it is not simple because mathematics concepts can be abstract and complex.**

**- McCray & Chen, 2011**

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## INTRODUCTION TO ARTFUL CONVERSATION

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In my years of teaching as a preschool educator, I have come to realise that beyond knowledge and skills, practitioner practices are also crucial factors in determining how a child learns (ECDA, 2013). The quality of preschool education depends mainly on the educators and the training they have undergone. Hence, the need for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to maintain high quality practice is widely identified as an “implicit responsibility of professional today” (Fried & Phillips, 2004, cited in Webster-Wright, 2009, p. 702). CPD is a lifelong learning process; educators should strive to apply the skills or knowledge from what they have learnt into the facilitation of children’s learning.

“In my years of teaching as a preschool educator, I have come to realise that beyond knowledge and skills, practitioner practices are also crucial factors in determining how a child learns.”

- ECDA, 2013

As a Senior Teacher, I have observed a common practice in my preschool where, after conducting art sessions with the children, some educators would simply display their work in class without facilitating the children on how to appreciate their own or others’ artwork. As educators, the facilitation to guide and support children to talk about the art elements or to comment on their friends’ artwork indirectly teaches the child the skills in appreciating art and building awareness of their own art skills in the long run.

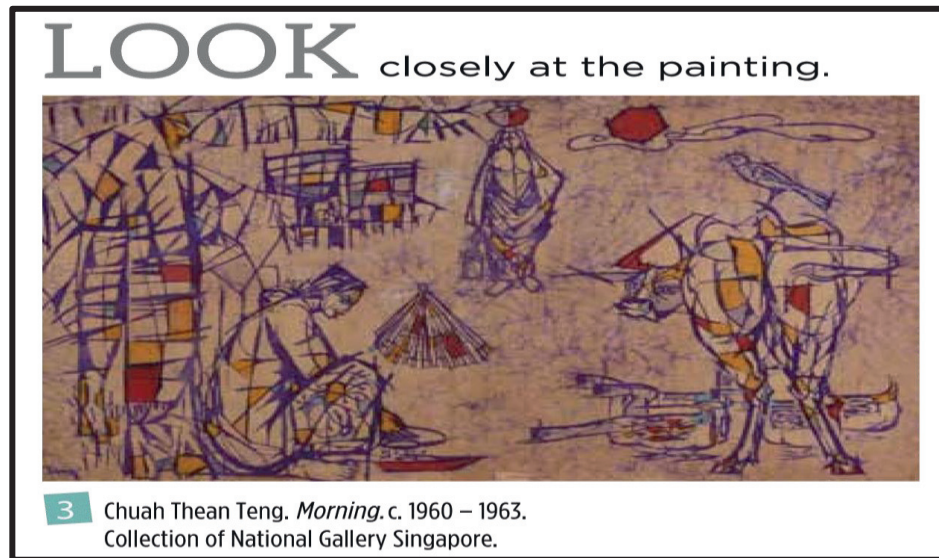
I crafted an in-house customised CPD workshop for educators in the centre to help them build knowledge, develop skills and apply them to practice. The goal of the training was to strengthen educators’ facilitation in art appreciation and conversation with the children. The desired outcome of the workshop was to enhance educators’ learning in art and application of teaching strategies and activities. In addition, two objectives were set up to achieve the desired outcome. First, this workshop aimed to equip educators with facilitation skills to develop children’s appreciation of art and the elements of art. Second, it also aimed to provide opportunities for children to talk about what they see, think and feel about their peers’ artwork.

The content of the training was as follows -

Activity 1 – ‘Let’s Look and Talk’

In a joint initiative, the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), National Library Board (NLB) and National Gallery published a resource kit in December 2016 with an objective to engage children in fun and interactive learning experiences during the visit to the National Gallery. There are activity cards in the kit that educators can utilize to nurture children’s appreciation of art and recap their knowledge on elements of art.

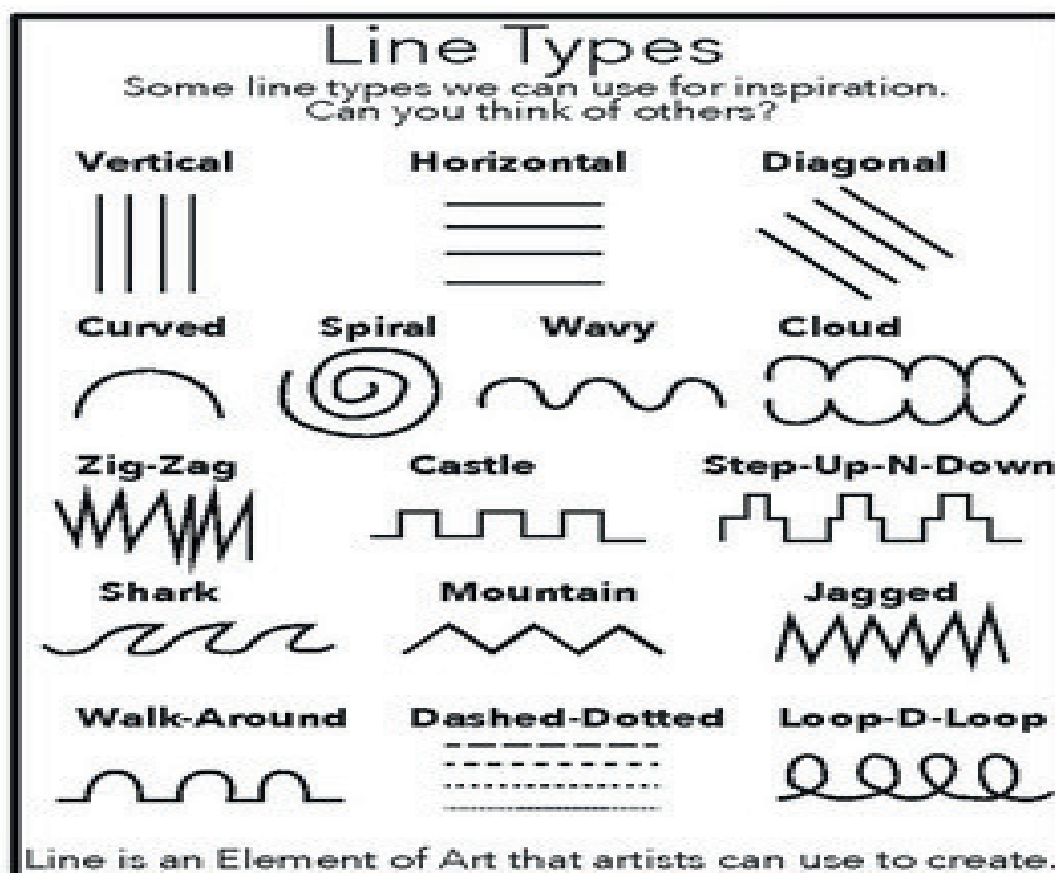
To kick-start the session, I selected an activity from the resource kit, a batik painting by a Malaysian artist, Chuan Thean Teng. He painted a kampong scene with banana trees, kampong houses and villagers going about their daily routines. Educators were invited to comment on what they saw in the painting. Most educators described what they observed, namely the animals, humans or houses. This activity revealed a common reaction or response when an art piece is shown to adults or children.



Activity 2 – Recapping the elements of art

In this activity, educators, in their small groups, were asked to recap what they knew about elements of art. This activity helps to draw out educators’ prior knowledge. The importance of knowing these elements helps educators to effectively express the essence of art activities into valuable learning experiences for the children (MOE, 2013). Educators were given some time to discuss what they remembered and they wrote them down on paper. Next, I elaborated on individual art elements and highlighted on the different vocabulary that were used to describe the elements. For example, for the element of lines, there were wavy lines, zig-zag lines as well as shark lines etc. When educators introduce or recap these elements with the children,

they can encourage children to use their imagination to describe the lines. This is a crucial process as educators role model, support and introduce more vocabulary so that children can articulate during the sharing of their artworks.



Retrieved from <https://ecdn.teacherspayteachers.com/thumbitem/Line-Types-for-Art-Class-3399175-1505853952/original-3399175-1.jpg> on 12 August 2018

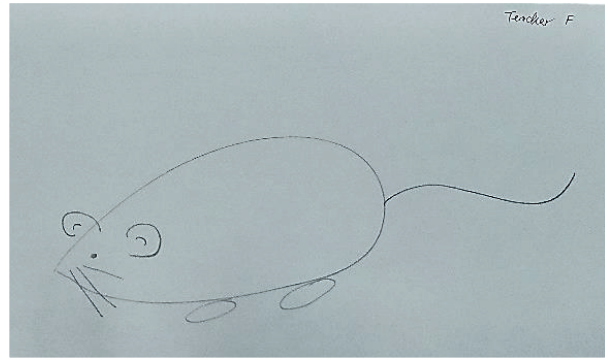
### Activity 3 – Applying vocabulary on art masterpieces

The next activity was an individual activity whereby the same famous art masterpiece shown in Activity 1 was displayed and educators were encouraged to describe the paintings using the vocabulary learnt earlier. In this activity, educators were aware about using appropriate art vocabulary to describe the painting. For example, an educator described the chicken coop as “triangular in shape.” Another educator highlighted that “the artist used straight lines to draw the houses.”

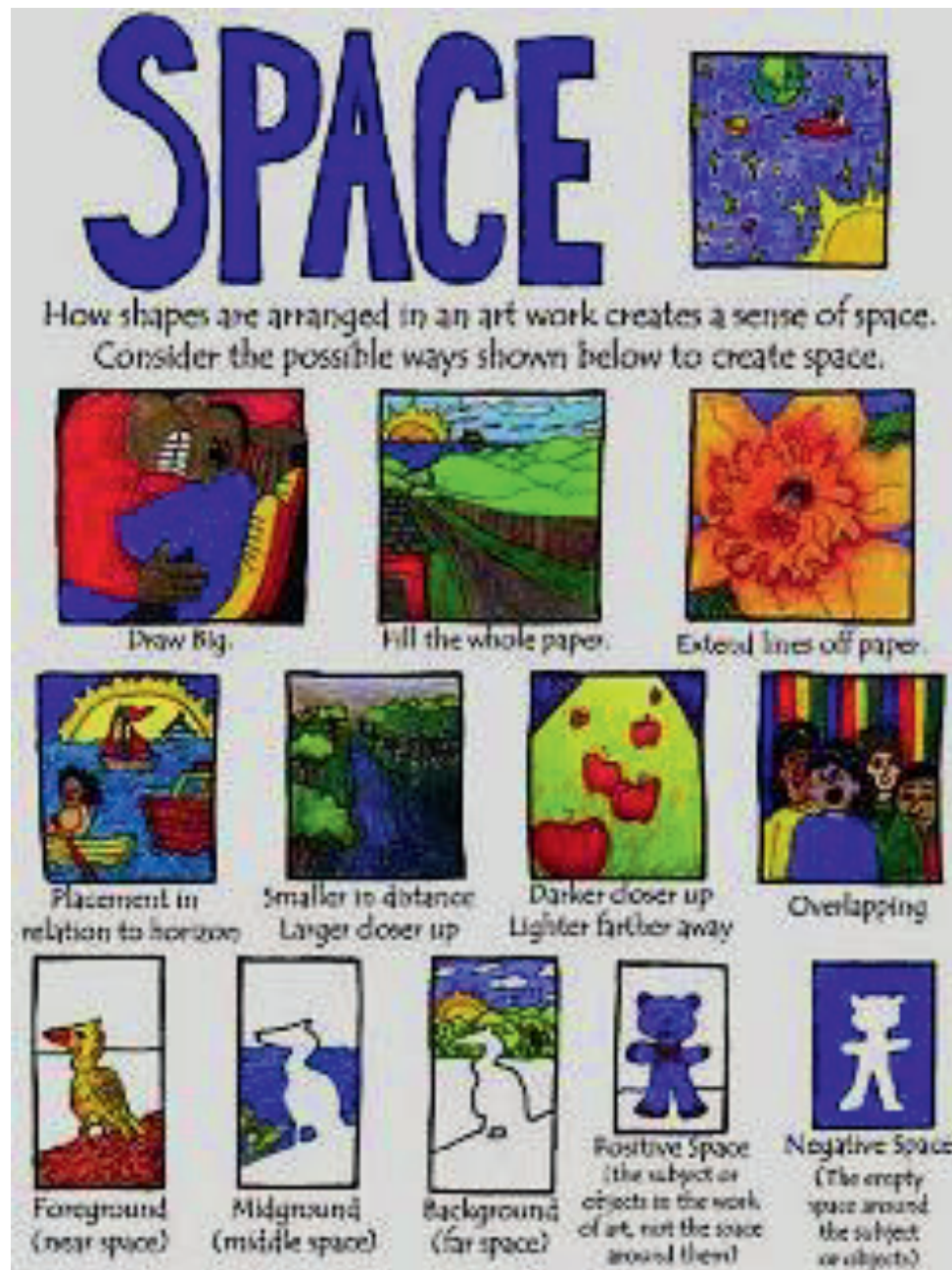
A game of ‘I spy with my eyes’ was played as the educators were encouraged to actively look for animals in the painting. Educators could use this game to play with their students as it would help to enhance their observation skills and prolong their focus levels.

#### Activity 4 – Hands-on drawing

For the hands-on session, educators practised drawing an animal using shapes and lines. Educators took turns and shared about the elements they applied in their drawings. An educator who had drawn a mouse shared that she used ovals for its body and legs. She also used straight lines for its whiskers and a curvy line for its tail. In similar fashion, educators can encourage children to describe their artwork/drawings. They can facilitate children with probing questions, for example “What is the shape you chose to draw the head?” or, prompting them with art vocabulary such as “Look at the tail, I can see a \_\_\_\_\_ line.”)



Next, I introduced to the educators an art element which was rarely used – space. Space can be as defined the position of the object (near and far) or the space around the object (background) or space on the paper. As younger children tend to print only on one corner of the page, educators can facilitate them to spread out their printing to utilise the whole paper. Educators can also encourage children to paint the background or draw an object in the middle of the paper. Bringing children outside the classroom to draw is an activity that can promote observation skills and experience positions of object. Educators can first get children to draw an object closer to them and then direct their attention to draw objects that are further away.



<https://i.pinimg.com/474x/08/f5/02/08f50269a573dd9b7deb8364bf6b4fe5--elements-of-art-space-elements-of-design.jpg> on 12 August 2018

Activity 5 – Observing and Sharing

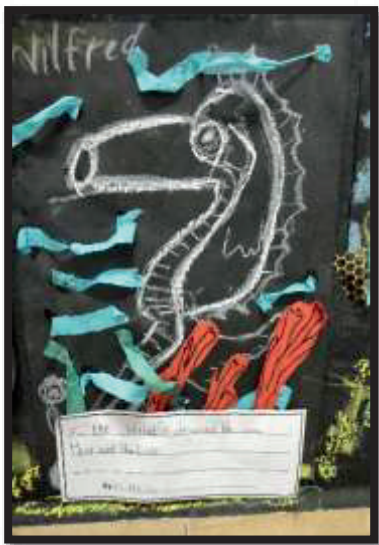
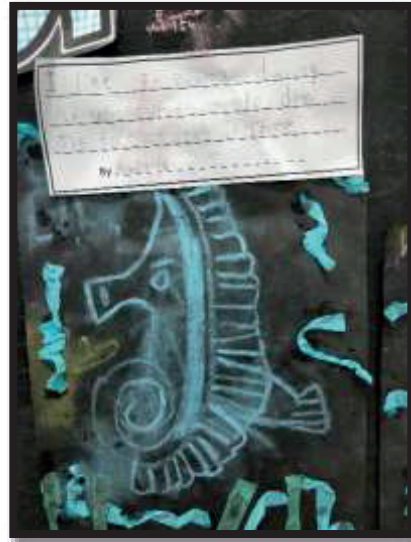
For the last application activity, educators observed a K2 child’s artwork (Pg 42) and each was given an opportunity to share about what they saw, thought and felt about the artwork. An educator shared her observation on how the child blended yellow and red to get the sun-setting effect. Another shared that the child displayed a sense of space as he/she drew the trees smaller to indicate that the trees were further away.

# REFLECTIONS



I took the opportunity to further elaborate on how to facilitate children in sharing what they see, feel and think about their own and/or their peers' artwork. The pictures below are some examples of K2 children sharing about what they liked about their peers' artwork, using the art vocabulary.

*Child A commented on his classmate's artwork, "I like my friend's drawing. She uses curve lines to draw the face of the seahorse."*



*Child M commented, "I like W's drawing. He used thick and thin lines."*

At the end of the workshop, educators took turns to share about their own takeaway from the session. The final activity was a game called Kahoot! where they recapped the art vocabulary and ended the session in a fun and relaxed manner.

Throughout the training session, educators were constantly encouraged to share their thoughts, feelings, ideas and experiences. They were actively engaged in the activities set up for them. In their feedback on the workshop, they suggested having more hands-on activities, providing each participant with an opportunity to work on individual art pieces and even requesting to learn about 2D / 3D art. These suggestions were definitely useful for planning future training sessions. In sustaining CPD, these summative evaluations documented the first level of Kirkpatrick's (1994) four levels of evaluation - where positive reactions were observed, it will lead to increased skills and changes to attitudes, increased self-esteem (intrinsic) and eventually increased quality in teaching.

The workshop could be extended with more topics, such as

- the elements of colours,
- looking at more children's art, particularly those that are 2 and 3D. These would make good case studies for them to apply their skills.
- art techniques - for example, enhancing a simple painting by adding salt or sand to create texture in the painting
- Exploring paints – colour blending with different media or tools This would help educators in facilitating vocabulary for the changing of value in colours when we add more water in the paint.

As educators, it is in our hands to mindfully seek and plan every possible opportunity to awaken children's appreciation for art.

The poet, Robert Frost (1874 – 1963) declared "I am not a teacher, but an awakener".

- in Tammy, 2019

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## COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

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Teachers plan lessons and execute them with children's benefits in mind. Parents love and care for their children, wanting to give them the best within their abilities.

Teachers plan lessons and execute them with children's benefits in mind. Parents love and care for their children, wanting to give them the best within their abilities. These two groups of people have the best interest for the same target person and hence they should be great partners, but in reality they are often at opposite ends.

Why is it that parents and teachers cannot see eye-to-eye and often accuse each other of not playing their part? Through years of observation, the root of the problem in most cases is the lack of effective communication.

Case 1: Teacher A has been calling the parents of Z during her precious 1-hour lunch break (12.30pm-1.30pm), wanting to discuss Z's behaviour in class but no one picked up the phone. "Are they trying to avoid my call knowing how their child behaves in school?", Teacher A wondered. Meanwhile, Z's parents returned the missed calls at 4.00pm after the customers at their hawker stall dwindled. However, they could not speak to their son's teacher as she was in class at that time. The parents were worried as they wondered if their son had an emergency situation or the teacher just wanted to complain that they forgot to hand in the excursion indemnity form and make payment. "Why does the teacher always choose to call us when we are busy?", the parents lamented. Undoubtedly, Teacher A is a dedicated teacher wanting to work with parents to help the child. The parents are equally concerned, otherwise, they would not have returned the teacher's call. What is lacking is the understanding of each other's situation. With effective communication, both the teacher and parents would know each other's schedule and the teacher would be able to find an appropriate communication channel and time that is ideal for both parties to share information about the child. The teacher could seek help from the Centre Leader or the child's other caregivers whom she meets regularly e.g. grandparents who send the child to school, to understand the parents' schedule better. She could also leave a note in the child's communication book that she would like to discuss the child's progress with the parents and list down her available time slots for them.

Case 2: Y's mother was concerned when she saw mosquito bites on Y's legs as the cases of dengue fever in the area was reported to have spiked. She wondered if Y had been bitten in school or on the way home. She took a photo of Y's legs with the bumps and sent it to Teacher B, asking if she was aware that Y had been bitten by mosquitoes. Teacher B felt insulted that the parent would accuse her of not taking good care of her students and she replied "This is definitely not from school because we fog our premise once every 2 weeks." The parent who did not blame the teacher initially now felt that Teacher B was trying to evade responsibility. Digital communication tools may be very convenient and popular but it may not be the best communicative tool under all circumstances as it has its limitations. If the teacher had called the parent back to find out her concerns and explained that she did not see the bumps on the child's legs when she last checked her, the incident may have been resolved differently. Hence, choosing an efficient way to communicate is also a crucial part of effective communication.

As educators, it is our duty to impart and share our professional knowledge with the parents of our students.

Case 3: Child X fell as he was climbing up the steps of the outdoor play station. Teacher C attended to the child and realized that the rain boots he was wearing were slightly big and hindered his movement. When X's parents came to pick him up, Teacher C informed them of the incident. She then suggested that they leave a pair of outdoor shoes in the school so that in future if X wore the rain boots to school, the teachers could let him wear the outdoor shoes when they go outdoors to prevent similar incidents from happening. Teacher C was glad that she found the cause of the accident and was able to provide a viable solution. Upon hearing the teacher's report, X's father looked at his wife and said "I told you not to buy.". Upon hearing that, X's mum turned to Teacher C and lashed out: "If you do not know how to take care of my child, just say so. Don't blame my shoes. There is nothing wrong with the shoes." Teacher C felt very demoralized and unappreciated. This incident showed that understanding parents' perspectives and family dynamics is also crucial in maintaining a cordial relationship with parents. Knowing who to discuss certain topics with, when to raise the issues and how to convey the message are all essential when it comes to effective communication.

As educators, it is our duty to impart and share our professional knowledge with the parents of our students. After sharing, we expect them to go back and immediately act on our advice. Sharing child development information with parents is encouraged but we often expect parents to adhere to our suggestions without considering their situation and perspectives. When the parents cannot execute what we had proposed, we attribute it to their uncooperativeness or indifference without reflecting if our recommendation was appropriate for their situation.

What is effective communication? With reference to John Halloran's 7 Effective Parent Teacher Communication Tips (in <http://www.lennections.com/lennections-connection/2016/9/2/effective-parent-teacher-communication>), there are 7 steps in effective communication:

**1) Set objectives – Child's interest first!**

Inform parents of the purpose of each communication, emphasizing on the child's interest. Is the meeting or phone call or email about the child's behaviour, learning and development or just a reminder of an upcoming event? Keep the list short, about 1 or 2 items per communication. Setting objectives generally establishes the tone and mood for the communication and may put the parents at ease. The order and combination of the objectives will also affect the effectiveness of the call e.g. if you start off with a reminder to bring an item, followed by a discussion about the child's behaviour in school which would take up much of the whole conversation, it is likely that the parent might forget about your initial reminder. Hence, it would be good for the teacher to do a re-cap of the objectives of the call and strategies or tools that will be implemented before ending the call so that both parties are in sync.

**2) Communicate high and realistic expectations**

Describe what the child has achieved, illustrate issues at hand and seek parents' suggestions for feasible solutions. Discuss other possible solutions with parents and jointly decide on a viable solution that can be done by both parties. Finally, portray your aspiration for the child and affirm the parents for what they have done. This way of communication will send positive vibes, raise hopes and encourage parents' participation and collaboration. The 'Sandwich Feedback Method' would be an effective tool to use here. For instance, you can start off by talking about the child's strengths and affirm the parents for their effort to hone those areas. After that, bring out your concerns and proposed solution(s) to help the child e.g.: the child is not speaking in sentences yet, thus the teachers have been trying to help in school and one way that the parents can help at home is to read to their child and play language games. Lastly, you can say that you believe the child has great potential and with strong language skills, he will be able to express his creativity better and will propel his love for learning. In this way, the parents will be able to feel the teacher's concern for the child and would be more likely to work with the teacher to benefit the child's development instead of viewing the conversation as an accusation by the teacher for not parenting the child well.

**3) Communicate early and often**

Parent-Teacher-Meetings should not be the first time in the year that parents hear from the teacher. Photos and notes, newsletters, text messages, lesson feedback and the communication book are some communication tools that teachers can use to update parents on a regular basis. They can be sent out weekly, bi-weekly or monthly. For schools that use School Management Systems, the photo album and lesson update

functions are fantastic and easy tools for building regular communication. The parents would be most appreciative of teachers who spend time and effort to inform them regularly of what their children undergo and experience. There will also be many more common topics for conversations between the parent-child and parent-teacher when the parents are attuned to what the children do in school or during field trips.

**4) *Communicate about entire class as well as individual student***

During the regular communications, talk about what the whole class did. Highlight how the child fared in the activity but do not compare his ability with the rest of the class. This will help the parents feel that their child is an integral part of the community and realise the importance of social and emotional development. It can also help parents understand that every child in the class is equally important and precious to the teacher. For example, the teacher could report that during the dough session, every child was given a lump of dough and they shared a number of dough-cutters, which gave them a chance to experience turn-taking, an important social skill. The children had fun rolling out the dough and using the dough-cutters to press out different shapes. XXX enjoyed the rolling process as he would repeatedly flatten his dough to make sure it is thin and smooth before he used the dough cutters. He applied good strength to cut out the shapes, displaying appropriate motor co-ordination and he was able to name all the different shapes he made. He is also very organised and would arrange the cut-out shapes in a neat row. He was observed asking his friend before taking a dough cutter, which showed he is learning social grace. In this way, the parents will be able to know what the children did in class and specifically how their child is developing and coping in class.

**5) *Be aware of school-wide communication***

It is in the teacher's professional interest to be aware of school policies, schoolwide announcements and communication, which will also gain parents' trust and elevate the teacher's professional standing. Be in tune with what your colleagues and management practise and why certain policies are in place. When in doubt, say "Let me check and get back to you" but do not say "I don't know" or try to speculate or assume.

**6) *Choose communication tools that work for parents***

Explore a variety of communication tools and check with parents on their preference, based on their lifestyle and availability. Email, text message, apps, phone call, face-to-face meeting, communication book and letters are some of the communication tools that are available. You may need more than 1 tool as different families may have different preferences. Remember that the tool should not only benefit the teacher but it should be an effective tool for 2-way communication.

### 7) **Measure response**

Effective communication has to be both ways, not one-directional because that would be instructional. You must ensure that you follow up with the parents to check how the child has made progress at home and explore other strategies to help the child. In addition, checking-in with parents can also provide continuous support for them as well as encourage and affirm them for their collaboration. This will help to build a good relationship with the parents.

In conclusion, effective communication is key in building a positive parent-teacher relationship. To communicate effectively, it is essential for teachers to consider the family's situation and for parents to understand the teacher's perspective so that both parties can work together for the benefit of the child's development.

Effective communication is key in building a positive parent-teacher relationship.

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## NEVER TOO YOUNG TO ENJOY LEARNING

Dr Christine Chen is the founder and current President of the Association for Early Childhood Educators, Singapore. As the principal of the first workplace childcare centre for factory workers' children, she learnt the importance of having qualified teachers to ensure quality education for all children. As a result, she has advocated for teacher development, continuous learning and career pathways for early childhood educators for more than 25 years.

### **Fulfilling a Demand**

I studied social work in the National University of Singapore. Soon after graduation, I married my husband Prof Chen Charng Ning and went to New York City with him as he was taking up a post there. However, I could not do social work there because of licensing issues so I decided to go into education, as I had previously wanted to be a teacher.

Eventually, I applied to study at the Bank Street College for Education, which is a progressive School of Education. They paid for my course fees and gave me an internship, and that was how my career in early childhood began. Thereafter, I taught in a nursery school there for six years.

At that time, Nanyang Technological Institute, later re-named Nanyang Technological University (NTU), School of Civil and Structural Engineering invited my husband to be its first dean. By then, we had four children aged between 2 and 8, and I was keen to return to Singapore after being away for 10 years.

When I returned in the early 1980s, women were in demand in the workforce, hence workplace childcare centres were much needed as well. Because of that, my friends at the then Ministry of Social Affairs, asked me to help start the first workplace childcare in Chartered Industries of Singapore located at Jalan Boon Lay. While running the centre, I realised that it was important for teachers to undergo a good preparation programme in order to ensure that children all over Singapore receive quality early childhood education.

“I realised that it was important for teachers to undergo a good preparation programme in order to ensure that children all over Singapore receive quality early childhood education.”

Soon, other workplace childcare centres were in operation. The second childcare centre was at the Tanglin Barracks of the Singapore Armed Forces and a third one at the Monetary Authority of Singapore. We were the three principals (called supervisors in those days) who started the Association for Child Care Educators (ACCE) in 1990. In 1999, PSTA (Preschool Teachers Association for kindergarten teachers) and the ACCE came together to form the Association for Early Childhood Educators, Singapore (AECES), of which I then became the Founding President.

### **Quality Preschools and Outcomes for Children**

The outcomes depend not only on the schools but on the families of young children as well. By the age of four, there is a 30-million word gap between children from families of higher socio-economic background and that from the lower socio-economic one. We hope that we will be able to narrow this gap with quality programmes in preschools.

AECES considered itself to be fortunate to be given the opportunity to co-ordinate the Ministry of Education's programme called the Focused Language Assistance in Reading (FLAiR). FLAiR was started in 2007 to help Kindergarten Two children who require additional support in learning the English Language. These are children whose home environment lacks listening and speaking opportunities as well as reading materials in the English Language. The Association has been carrying out professional development for the ProFLAiRs who would go to about 400 Preschools daily to carry out the FLAiR programme.

“ The outcomes depend not only on the schools but on the families of young children as well.”



With the establishment of the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) in 2013, it signals a significant change of perspective from early childhood education to early childhood Development. This entails the involvement of other professionals in the early childhood playing field.

AECES partners ECDA in the KidSTART programme which gives children from low-income families a better start in life. It provides age-appropriate child development programmes, enhances parent-child interaction and promotes earlier enrolment and preschool attendance.



### Quality Teachers for Quality Preschools

In the early 1980s, the Ministry of Community Development was the regulating Ministry for childcare centres, including 2,000 teachers with educational qualifications ranging from Primary 6 to Secondary 2. With the initial goal of raising the entry qualifications to three O-levels and then to five O-levels, the Association was involved in offering the Bridging Programme, Basic, Intermediate and eventually the Certificate and Diploma programmes. Now, such teacher education programmes for early childhood educators are being offered by the National Institute of Early Childhood Development (NIEC).

Quality teachers engage in continuous PD and since NIEC is now the national institute for early childhood teachers, the Association focuses on continuing education. We organise overseas trips for practitioners to learn from other countries. For those who prefer local experiences, we organise visits to different centres so that we can learn from each other on home ground.

Our signature programme is the AECES Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Practitioners. It has been put online in collaboration with the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS). During the Circuit Breaker period we facilitated sessions with our Community of Practitioners (COP) which evolved into AECES Conversations.



### Characteristics of a Quality Preschool

Over the years, teacher qualification and preparation as well as accessibility, availability and affordability of childcare centres were addressed. However, quality of preschool centres is a work in progress.

When we talk about the quality of preschools, we refer to its structure (regulation and hardware) and processes (the software). Structure refers to the framework in which children are learning in, such as the scheduling of their timetables, adult-child ratio, staff qualification, equipment and materials, to mention a few. The structure and hardware of centres have come a long way and centres today look very different from the early days.

On the other hand, processes or the software are what actually goes on in the day-to-day activities, such as how teachers relate to the children, their families, their colleagues and even their management—all these contribute to quality. While it is easier to provide the quality structure, the processes within the structure are what ultimately make the difference in quality preschools.

The processes include the professional communication and relationships that transpire between the practitioners and the children as well as among all stakeholders. The AECES Code of Ethics addresses the obligations and responsibilities of practitioners toward children, families, the community, profession and employer. The Code of Ethics defines the quality of care and education and will provide the bedrock on which we would be building the next wave of quality and professionalism.

“While it is easier to provide the quality structure, the processes within the structure are what ultimately make the difference in quality preschools.”

### **Sensing the Quality of the Preschool**

When I walk into a preschool, I sense its organisational culture, in which the centre's leader plays a significant role. I believe that the principal is the leader, but every teacher is also a leader as she influences young lives. As such, who the leader and teachers are as persons is very important and this includes being a kind and respectful individual. Some basic traits that a kind and respectful person possesses include empathy, persistence and a deep sense of responsibility. These basic traits are really critical in teacher selection. Preschools with teachers and leaders exhibiting such traits will make a visitor feel the quality in the relationships that transpire within the learning community where children will be able to develop a bond with their caring adults.

### **Children as Learners**

In a rushed and fast-moving world today, children appear to lack the attention that they need. We are seeing more children with challenging behaviours as they struggle with paying attention in class. As family units break down with rising divorces, children may be experiencing an atypical life-style and strapped with worries. Other children especially those coming from non-English speaking homes may not have the vocabulary to express their feelings. Children come from diverse households with different cultures. As such, teachers should be respectful and kind towards the children, work along-side them with empathy, persistence and a deep sense of responsibility.

“Some basic traits that a kind and respectful person possesses include empathy, persistence and a deep sense of responsibility. These basic traits are really critical in teacher selection.”

Hence, it is not just about teaching the children, but also handling many other issues that require the teacher to develop the quality of empathy and persistence. It is important to note that children look up to their teachers, so teachers should also be aware of their own background issues so as to better adjust their approach to work with children from backgrounds which are different from theirs.

“It is important to note that children look up to their teachers, so teachers should also be aware of their own background issues...”

### **Children and Families after the COVID-19 Circuit Breaker**

During the Circuit Breaker, children and their families experienced online learning. For the first time, teachers and families met in the home and not in the school. We meet families in their home ground and not in ours. This levels the playing field, giving us better insights into the lives of the children; and creating better understanding and bonding among all stakeholders.

From our COP sessions, we learnt that online learning has gained us greater respect from families on the work that we do as well as involve them more in the teaching and learning process. Previously, we send “homework” for families to complete with children but through online learning we work collaboratively for the benefit of the child. When preschools re-opened, we had this renewed positive relationship with families and we built on it by communicating timely information on the safety measures to be taken. During the AECES Conversation sessions, practitioners reported that the transition, from home back to school, was a smooth one for the children. On the other hand, practitioners while preparing for the children’s arrival were worried and fretful about the wearing of masks and implementation of the various safety measures.

However, children adapted very well to the wearing of masks, sanitising, washing of hands and social distancing (though more challenging for the younger children).

Children can also help in the sanitising of materials. They are resilient learners and more adaptable than adults. But we also realise that the close collaborative relationship between practitioners and families contributed to the well-being of the children. Because the practitioners and families made the preschool ready for the children, the children just sailed smoothly back into the preschool after the Circuit Breaker.



### **The Future of Preschool Education**

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to slow down and windows of opportunities were opened to innovative practices. Online learning has been introduced and it appears to be working well. It should be maintained to sustain the bond that has been developed between the school and home. We need to build on it and ensure that these learning strategies can be shared, not only by teachers but by families as well. In this way all children, teachers and families can learn through the learning community which will enhance learning for all.

We also learnt that children are resilient and have good coping strategies. Perhaps we should learn from the children. We used to think that children need to learn from us but this pandemic has shown us that we can learn from the children. Children are resilient, accepting, creative and innovative beings!

The future for preschool education also has to go beyond pedagogy and the four walls of the classroom. Through online learning we have brought learning into the homes. We do not take children coming into our classrooms at face value. With the diverse challenges faced by children and their families, teachers need to understand the contexts outside the classroom.

“We also learnt that children are resilient and have good coping strategies. Perhaps we should learn from the children.”

As such, teacher preparation needs to address diversity issues, not only in differences in cultures of different races but the differences in cultures of childhood and adulthood; differences in gender; differences in socio-economic status; religion and what it is like living in a trans-culture family.

Today, children are being supported with added programmes like FLAiR, KidSTART and the Developmental Support Programme. These herald a new era where the issues addressed is a developmental one. It is time for all professions to work together for the development of children. It takes a village to raise a child and communication and collaboration are keys to enabling the child in achieving his/her potential.



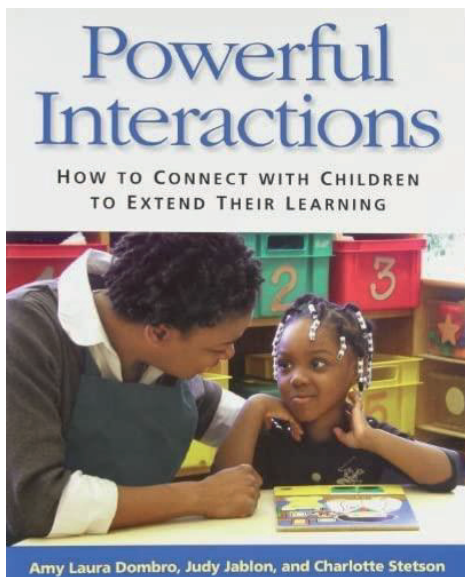
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# POWERFUL INTERACTIONS: HOW TO CONNECT WITH CHILDREN TO EXTEND THEIR LEARNING

BY AMY LAURA DOMBRO, JUDY JABLON, AND CHARLOTTE STETSON

Christine Soo

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*Powerful Interactions: How to Connect with Children to Extend their Learning* is an easy-to-read, reflective guide that helps teachers understand *what* powerful interactions are, *how* to make them happen, and *why* they are so important in increasing children's learning, and to improve their effectiveness as a facilitator. This 150-page letter-sized practical guidebook includes dividers that describe three steps to enable powerful teacher-child interactions. Included within the sections are nuggets of actions or behaviours that guide teachers to develop concerted efforts to have intentional interactions with individual children, think creatively at that moment in time in

order to extend or scaffold the child's learning and development. The importance of such support, undoubtedly, sustains the child's curiosity and to persevere to explore to construct new learning and develop a sense of agency.

The authors leveraged on Lev Vygotsky's theory that explained the vital connection between interactions and learning. The content is grounded in the reality of teachers' everyday lives and the research on effective teaching and child development, and packaged much like a face-to-face workshop format to provide the flexibility for readers to take a breath, step back, and take a careful look at how he or she is interacting with the children. The variety of case studies and a smorgasborg of strategies allow teachers to take tiny steps to become conscientious, to be present, to make connections with what the children are exploring, and promptly use appropriate questions to stimulate the children's thinking and sustain the children's interest to be more attentive and engaged in exploring, thereby extending their learning. This approach rides on the premise that teachers will become more intentional and effective, and consequently the children will achieve new accomplishments while the teachers will gain the professional satisfaction of knowing the important role they are playing in developing the children's competency.

The authors unpacked the definitions and principles throughout the book extensively to reach out to novice as well as experienced teachers. In addition, there are ample reminders for teachers to recall and relate to their current classroom practices, and encouragement for teachers to reflect and identify gaps that can be improved to address the children's inattentiveness or classroom misbehaviours. The lengthy explanations and repetitions cause a lag when the authors try to help readers link their knowledge to the next level. However, readers have the option to scan the paragraphs to quickly move on to the next pocket of information. To help visual readers to stay on course, photographs can be strategically placed to correspond to and explain the essence of the examples. I like the *Reality Check* pauses that help readers to set realistic expectations to embrace the step by step approach.

I concur with the authors' observations that in the typical classroom that most everyday teacher-children interactions are warm, caring and encouraging, sometimes happening spontaneously, sometimes in a rush, often with little thought about a purpose, and that not every interaction can be or even needs to be an interaction that promotes learning. What this alludes to is that teachers who intentionally promote learning are few and far between. The book effectively creates the awareness that it is necessary and possible for teachers to promote both incidental and intentional learning throughout the time the children are experiencing the programme in group care settings. The crux of the issue is whether teachers are aware and if they know how to capture these golden interactions to transform them into powerful interactions in order to make a positive difference to the children's learning.

### Turning Everyday Interactions into Powerful Interactions

To turn an everyday interaction into a powerful interaction, the authors recommended three sequential steps:

- Step 1: Be Present
- Step 2: Connect
- Step 3: Extend Learning

In Step 1, the teacher needs to be 'present' in the moment and be aware. To achieve this, the teacher needs to physically and mentally slow down for just a few moments, to pay better attention – to be in the frame of mind that allows for intentionality – before he/she acts, to tune in to what the child is doing at that moment. The teacher also needs to be aware of how he/she is feeling and what he/she wants to accomplish. Being intentional really means the teacher thinks about what to say and do in the

interaction to be most effective as a teacher for that child. This Step is akin to joint attention or shared attention where the teacher and child focus on the same object or task by eye-gazing, pointing or other verbal or non-verbal indications, and the evidence-based Abecedarian Approach's 3Ns strategy: Notice, Nudge, Narrate.

Then, the teacher promptly takes a few seconds to collect his/her thoughts before joining the child in Step 2. To connect with the child at this stage, the teacher needs to acknowledge and validate the child by letting the child know that he/she is looking and is interested in what the child is doing, and wants to spend time with the child. The authors explained that by connecting in this way, the teacher awakens the sense of trust and security of the child, leading to continuous development and strengthening of interactions with the child. Consequently, the child will feel more confident and focused, and be more open to learning from the teacher. This is aligned to the guiding principle for nurturing adults to develop secure attachments and confidence in the developing children to motivate them to be involved, engaged and inquiring as outlined in the *Early Years Development Framework* by the Early Childhood Development Agency.

The authors pointed out that at this juncture, the optimal condition is created for the teacher to teach and for the child to learn. In Step 3, the child is open to the teacher adding to his/her knowledge, encouraging him/her to try new things and think in new ways, modelling language, introducing interesting new vocabulary, and other learning opportunities. When practised consistently, these sequential Steps will flow naturally as the teacher develops the habit of being present to intentionally connect with the child and swiftly apply a teaching strategy to extend the child's learning.

Typically, teachers will focus on content. However, teachers ought to be mindful that extending the children's learning is more than facts. Extending the children's learning includes the well-being, identity, connection and contribution to the group community and being a learner. Hence, beyond the cognitive domain, extending learning also encompasses providing opportunities for the children to develop independence; negotiating, teamwork and leadership skills as well as learning dispositions such as perseverance, reflectiveness, appreciation, inventiveness, sense of wonder and curiosity, and engagement (PRAISE) which are reflected in the Ministry of Education's, *Nurturing Early Learners – A Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens in Singapore: A Guide for Parents*.

In addition, the teacher will be able to draw upon his/her knowledge of both the individual child and of how children typically develop, and learn to respond deliberately, use individualised instructions, and improve the learning climate in the classroom.

Furthermore, the teacher becomes more effective in supporting the children's learning as he/she can anticipate how transforming the powerful interaction can impact the

child and self. A ripple effect would be the children will demonstrate curiosity in making discoveries and practising new skills, resulting in enabling the teacher to provide ample progress updates to the family members. This, in turn, will strengthen the school-partnership with families. Importantly, the teacher's teaching practice will grow richer and teaching will become more enjoyable as the children reveal their individual interests and personalities, and showcase their growth and development.

### **Achieving Powerful Interactions**

To embrace Step 1: Be Present, the authors recommend that teachers quieten the 'mental noise static' that hinders thinking clearly, remembering and drawing upon the personal qualities and experiences that they bring to their teaching, their knowledge of the individual children in the group, and what they know about how children typically develop and learn. With a quieter mind, teachers can think and focus. Also, they can decide how to respond with intention and give full attention to the individual child. Pausing to be 'present' puts teachers in a clear and open frame of mind to think and prepare intentional and deliberate 'just right' responses, actions or decisions to enable a powerful interaction. Essentially, teachers are advised to tune up their emotional intelligence, appreciate the children's strengths, respect their explorations, and make quick adjustments to connect with the individual child, and be aware of their own actions or inactions.

To get better at 'being present', the authors advised teachers to take a few deep breaths, do a quick stretch to relax, use their 'real' voice by focusing on the children's needs, and ensure a conducive and comfortable place that will enhance the children's trust to want to connect positively with them.

#### **Benefits of Powerful Interactions for Teachers**

The authors highlighted several advantages when the teacher develops a second nature 'powerful interaction' approach. The teacher will be

- more thoughtful and alert;
- more attentive to self and self-emotions;
- more selective in the actions that follow; and
- use more encouraging and affirming words to communicate, encourage and motivate the children.

Next, to connect with the individual child and launch a powerful interaction, teachers ought to stay calm and be open, approach the child, harness the trust and security that exists between the child and them. Within this trusting and secure relationship, teachers who are alert to how the child would respond will swiftly go about connecting with the child in a unique way. For example, for the energetic and enthusiastic child, the teacher may perk up a little to match his excitement. Conversely, the teacher may need to be calmer or slow down to help a child who requires time to settle down. The authors explained that it is important for teachers to observe the signals when the child is ready to connect – how the child looks and smiles at you, reach out to be picked up, involve you in the play, show or tell you something, or ask a question – before making the connection with respect. This is where teachers will need to tune out distractions and tune in to the child and what the child is doing. In doing so, teachers will keep learning and listening to the child to notice the interesting and significant things a child is exploring. To optimise learning about the child, teachers can add something new to the classroom or observe the child in different interest areas and on different areas of development, personalise interactions and provide positive guidance to continue to grow the trusting relationship. The book includes numerous bite-sized practical tips on how to keep learning, listening, connecting, personalising interactions and showing respect to enhance trust and to make children feel safe and secure, and using positive guidance strategies to transform a potential behaviour problem into a learning opportunity.

Following a nurturing relationship, teachers can then stretch the children’s knowledge and understanding – to extend their learning and development beyond their current level. The authors highlighted three guiding questions for teachers to examine and make informed decisions about the individual child’s learning needs.

1. What’s the right content to teach in this moment?
2. What’s the next step in this child’s learning?
3. How do I make learning meaningful for this child?

The authors suggested these practical strategies to extend the children’s learning:

• Help children see themselves as thinkers	• Support children’s curiosity
• Have verbal and non-verbal conversations with the children	• Collaborate with the children to solve problems
• Provide inspiring and fun imaginative play	• Provide constructive feedback to the children
• Use rich vocabulary	• Laugh and celebrate with the children
• Ask the right type of questions	• Link the new concepts to the familiar

In addition, there are ample examples for teachers to practise each of these strategies during the powerful interactions.

I find it interesting how the authors viewed the connection between humour and powerful interactions. They reiterated that laughter, silliness and playfulness can help to make interactions with the children powerful. They explained vividly that humour is play for the brain, and humour often involves playing with language such as tongue twisters, silly rhymes and puns. Through humour, children can develop phonological awareness and add words to their vocabularies. As children learn to use humour to interact with others, they are learning a lifelong social skill. Certainly, injecting a sense of humour not only energises the interactions but sets the stage for development across ages and stages of development. What's more, children like to have fun when interacting with teachers and the environment.

### **Putting into Practice**

Teachers can use the templates in the book for self-directed learning and independent practice. By adopting the sequential Steps, they can transform every interaction into a powerful interaction, and inch towards making minute positive impacts on the individual children. With consistent practise and discipline, teachers will become more aware of self and their actions to enhance the children's learning and experiences in group care settings, and enjoy meeting the diverse needs of the children confidently and effectively.

And to master the art of creating powerful interactions to connect with the children to extend their learning, it will be ideal for teachers to reflect on their powerful interactions. They can leverage on these reflections to savour the little successes, for self-improvement and to identify pockets of opportunities for follow up actions to develop powerful interactions with an identified child or a group of children. It takes courage to be an exceptional teacher and there is no better time to be receptive to trying new strategies that are detailed in this book.

### **Summary**

I strongly believe that the approach is simple and easy to adopt, and the rewards will depend on the teachers hunger for self-improvement to enhance of their effectiveness as champions of the young children. For a quick revision, the authors could include a succinct summary to link the information to the next chapter or Step. They could provide suggested ways to address some challenges that teachers may face when cruising to connect to extend the children's learning. This will entice teachers to persevere to continuously reflect on their practice and to adopt alternative strategies to achieve small successes as they improve their capability to habituate the swift steps towards powerful interactions to become more effective teachers. Nonetheless, the book is a good read for all teachers who work with young children. It also provides systematic steps for leaders to mentor or coach teachers to support meaningful and purposeful interactions, and to become more effective facilitators. Parents and caregivers, too, can benefit from the tips and strategies to make a significant difference to supporting their children's learning and development.

Certainly, the quality of the children's learning is determined by the extent to which teachers recognise the potential in the connect and extend opportunities and capitalise on them. However, they should not be overzealous in being too instructional. One may argue that there is risk in over-attending to extend learning. Teachers ought to remember that children need time to consolidate learning and to enjoy being able to do something that is new or that they have been trying to learn. Teachers may face a dilemma as extending children's learning may sometimes interfere with developing the children's interests. The winning practice is to strike a balance of encouraging independent exploration and implementing what the authors advocated.

