



From the Editor

As 2023 comes to a close, I would like to announce a new start for 2024 with a new editor, Ms Vanessa Kong. Vanessa is our editorial teammate and I know she will bring a fresh insight and perspective to the journal.

I am bidding all of you adieu. It has been a wonderful 12 years, learning all the time about early childhood education, what makes it tick in Singapore and in various parts of the world. The scope and depth of Early Educators expanded beyond what I could have imagined to what it is today. I have many people to thank for this, from Dr Christine Chen to the many peer reviewers, the editorial teams, AECES staff and also the huge amount of writers and contributors I have met over the years. My journey has been interesting, challenging and satisfying.

Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Warm wishes

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Editor

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The views expressed are not necessarily those of the Association.

Front Cover: “Floral Vases (Recycled bottles)” by Kindergarten 2 class children, Kids & Kins Child Care Centre.

The children were inspired by nature around them and each crafted a unique flower vase using recycled glass bottles, paint markers and paper. They carefully sketched and colored intricate floral designs on sheets of paper before cutting them out to adorn their recycled glass bottle vases.

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Eco-Schools: Engaging the Youth of Today to Protect the Planet of Tomorrow

Kristina Madsen

Silvia Mugnaini

Foundation for Environmental Education

Eco-Schools is the largest global sustainability school program, with over 59,000 schools that engage 20 million students and 1.4 million teachers across 93 countries. The program was developed in response to the needs identified at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (also known as the Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Officially launched in 1994 in Denmark, Germany, Greece, and the United Kingdom, with the support of the European Commission, Eco-Schools has grown to become a global model for environmental education (EE) and education for sustainable development (ESD) and has been recognized by UNESCO and UN Environment.

REPRINT



The most effective education puts children at the center, directing their own learning about issues that affect their lives and futures.



Today, the Eco-Schools program is coordinated internationally by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), an umbrella organization with over 100 members worldwide. A total of 72 member organizations have the license to implement Eco-Schools on a nationwide scale. The program is an ideal way for schools to embark on a meaningful path toward improving the environmental footprint of both the school and the local community while at the same time having a life-long positive impact on the lives of young people, their families, school staff, and community members.

Seven Steps for Continuous Improvement

The Eco-Schools program relies on its unique Seven Steps framework to plan and implement an ongoing learning journey. Using a whole-school approach and project-based learning pedagogy, the Seven Steps framework helps schools meet both environmental and educational objectives. It also recognizes that environmental education needs to be integrated into the existing curriculum. The Seven Steps are designed with the learner at the center; the teachers act as facilitators and co-learners.

REPRINT



The program then expands to a wide range of stakeholders, both in the school and in the local community. In a nutshell, every school establishes an EcoCommittee, carries out an environmental review, makes curriculum linkages, creates an action plan, monitors and evaluates their progress, spreads awareness of their actions within their local community, and develops an Eco Code of values. Usually after two years of implementing the program and establishing a high level of achievement within each of the Seven Steps, schools can apply for the prestigious Green Flag award, which involves a rigorous assessment process.



An Adaptable Program With Students at the Center

One of the most important aspects of the Eco-Schools program is the uniqueness of each school's journey. The themes followed and the actions taken are decided by the EcoCommittee and reflect the circumstances, culture, and challenges of each community. The Seven Steps framework is flexible enough to accommodate any school setting and local context.

The methodology is a means to bring about change through active involvement of young people while applying a rigorous pedagogical process—the whole-school approach toward ESD. The nature of each of the Seven Steps and the order in which they are implemented allows for incremental change in sustainability literacy through active learning.

Students' actions improve the environmental performance of the whole institutions, starting with their behavior. This process empowers them with the confidence to make the world a better place in which to live.

“

“Eco-Schools provides the methodological tools for schools to evaluate their own challenges, assess risks, and develop the solutions within a structure of ongoing improvement. The schools are guided to re-orientate existing curricula around sustainable development themes and develop practical projects which draw upon local knowledge and skills from their own communities as well as resources from national NGOs, and regional and international expert organisations.”

> Urvashi Dabysing, *Eco-Schools National Operator, Mauritius*

The Seven Steps methodology enables projectbased learning and hands-on experiences that empower students with a greater sense of agency. This is particularly important, considering that media coverage of global environmental challenges, including climate change, often leaves children with feelings of despair, anxiety, and apathy. Through the Eco-Schools program, young people are able to engage in their local environment and actively protect it by taking positive action on real-life sustainability issues.

Advancing Global Citizenship Through Eco-Schools

One important aspect of the Eco-Schools program is global citizenship. The program twins schools from different contexts through a common environmental theme. A few years ago, the Eco-Schools program linked up a school in Northern Ireland with a school in Madagascar to do an inquiry-based project on the issue of water. In normal circumstances, the school in Northern Ireland would only have looked at the topic of water from the source, consumption, and wastage perspective and the school in Madagascar only would have looked at it from the access, quality, and sanitation perspective. The program exposed students to different realities of the world and they were able to consider water from different perspectives - consumption, access, quality and quantity, hygiene, and sanitation.

The learning did not stop there; the students considered how to solve the problems they identified. The students in Northern Ireland decided to collect funds for the installation of a water hand pump, so that the students in Madagascar would have safe access to quality drinking water. This is empathy in action, as students went beyond awareness of a problem to feeling motivated to solve it.

A Key Contributor to ESD

The Eco-Schools program makes a major contribution to ESD across the world. Formation of an Eco-Committee ensures that the process and decision-making is participatory. Environmental issues are integrated into every aspect of the school life and involve all concerned stakeholders along the way. While conducting the Environmental Review, students gain awareness of environmental themes and associated problems that are locally relevant. Moreover, when students develop the Action Plan to engage with identified environmental issues, they acquire understanding and practical experience related to those issues in an interdisciplinary and holistic way. They gain 21st century skills, such as critical and creative thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and decision-making. In this way, the Eco-Schools program becomes ESD in action. Through the Eco Code, students showcase a new acquired set of objectives, values, and attitudes concerning environmental improvement and protection. While many formal education systems around the world see ESD as an extracurricular activity, Eco-Schools is a vehicle to adopt a whole-school approach toward ESD.

Countries involved in the Eco-Schools program

For more information, visit www.ecoschools.global/national-offices

Argentina	Dominican Republic	Madagascar	Singapore
Australia	England	Malaysia	Slovakia
Bahamas	Estonia	Malta	Slovenia
Belgium – Brussels	Finland	Mauritius	South Africa
Belgium – Flanders	France	Mexico	South Korea
Belgium – Wallonia	Georgia	Mongolia	Spain
Bermuda	Germany	Montenegro	Sweden
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Ghana	Morocco	Switzerland
Brazil	Greece	Netherlands	Tanzania
Bulgaria	Iceland	Northern Ireland	Thailand
Burundi	India	Norway	Turkey
Canada	Ireland	Poland	Uganda
Chile	Italy	Portugal	Ukraine
China	Jordan	Puerto Rico	United Arab Emirates
Comoros	Kenya	Qatar	United States
Croatia	Kuwait	Romania	US Virgin Islands
Cyprus	Latvia	Russia	Uzbekistan
Czech Republic	Lithuania	Scotland	Wales
Denmark		Serbia	Zanzibar





“

I am very impressed by the Eco-Schools programme. It helps the child move away from the bookish knowledge and apply what they have learnt. The environment has become a cause of grave concern today. This programme sensitises children to the importance of preserving and conserving it. Please keep up the good work!”

> Neeta Roy, Parent, Army Public School, Bangalore, India



“

It changed my perspectives on things that I once turned a blind eye to and it widened my view, enabling me to think outside of the box rather than just staying in my comfort zone. The Eco-Schools programme taught me that despite having different beliefs, different dreams, different races, and just being different in general, we humans are still living on ONE planet. Throughout my four years of being in this programme, I also realised that changes are possible and it is up to us to help make our world a better place so that our future generations could have a chance to live in a world filled with wonders of mother nature.”

> Nojuel JC Soluku, Student, SM St Michael Penampang, Malaysia



REPRINT

The Impact of the Eco-Schools Program

From its modest beginnings in a few European countries, the Eco-Schools program has expanded and demonstrated its effectiveness in many countries across the globe. Over the last 27 years, FEE and its member organizations have worked relentlessly and diligently to ensure that education is recognized as a critical driver to achieve sustainable development—an objective that requires continued action.

The impact of the program is well-recognized and respected by institutional partners, such as UNESCO and UN Environment, as well as corporate partners, such as Mars Wrigley Foundation and Alcoa Foundation. For three years in a row, Eco-Schools has been selected by HundrED as one of 100 inspiring innovations that are changing the face of K-12 education. In 2021, the program was included in the HundrED Hall of Fame, a collection that gives special recognition to education innovations that have demonstrated sustained growth of impact and scalability.

A key publication documenting the impact of Eco-Schools was released in 2019 in connection with the program's 25th anniversary. The "Changing Together" publication can be found on the Eco-Schools website (ecoschools.global/changingtogether-download).

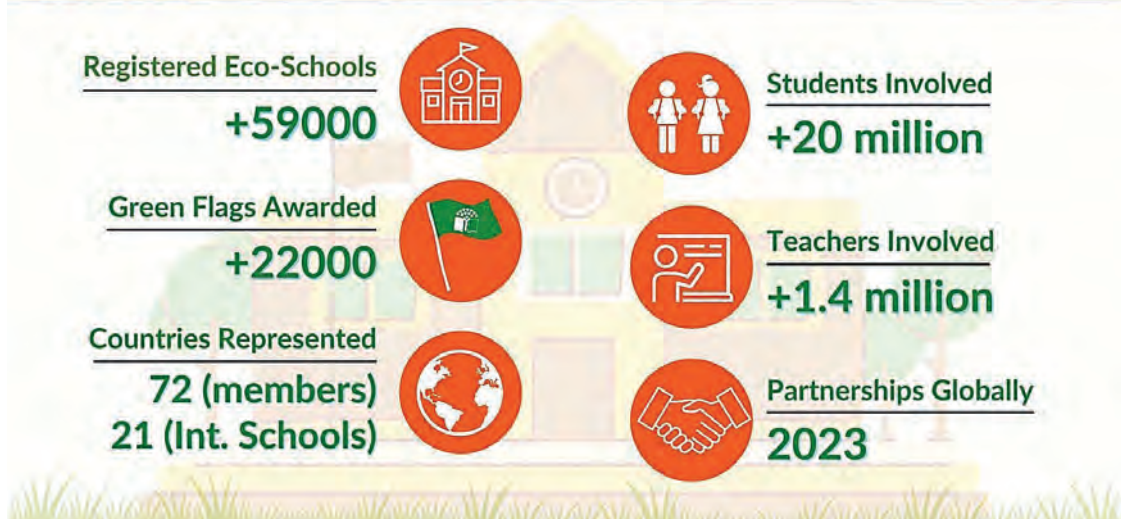
Looking Forward

According to UNESCO, education is the most powerful path to sustainability. Yet, 47% of the national curriculums of 100 countries make no reference to climate change. Eco-Schools represents a way for schools to directly overcome national barriers to ESD implementation. The program recognizes that sustainability will be a key factor in years to come and calls for the expectation of achieving a sustainable transition to be reflected in the education system.

As part of FEE's 10-year strategy GAIA 20:30, the Eco-Schools program will contribute to addressing three major challenges of our time by: Empowering Climate Action, Protecting Global Biodiversity, and Reducing Environmental Pollution.

“The innovation is scalable and has already demonstrated its effectiveness to many countries. The Seven Step Methodology is a series of carefully engineered measures to help schools maximise the success of their Eco-School ambitions. This method involves a wide diversity of individuals from the school community—with students playing a primary role in the process.”

> The HundrED Research Team



Joining the Eco-Schools Network

If you are inspired to implement the program, you can reach out to an Eco-Schools National Operator in your country. The list of member countries can be found on the Eco-Schools website. International Schools in countries without an FEE member organization have the option to run the Eco-Schools program directly with the FEE Head office, along with two other FEE educational programs: Young Reporters for the Environment (YRE) and Learning About Forests (LEAF).



“Our students have become more aware and passionate about the environment, and, in turn, they are driven to protect our planet. Eco-Schools provides incredible opportunities for students to collaborate, deepen their observation skills, increase their questioning skills, and learn that they can make an impact, no matter their age. Our students have increased their environmental literacy and are eager to share what they know with younger students and our wider community.”

> Jennifer Hertzberg, *Principal, Flint Hill Elementary School, USA*

Foundation for Environmental Education Principles

- Ensure that participants are engaged in the learning/teaching process.
 - Empower participants to take informed decisions and actions on real-life sustainability issues.
 - Encourage participants to work together actively and involve their communities in collaborative solutions.
 - Support participants to examine their assumptions, knowledge, and experiences, in order to develop critical thinking, and to be open to change.
 - Encourage participants to be aware of cultural practices as an integral part of sustainability issues.
 - Encourage participants to share inspirational stories of their achievements, failures, and values, to learn from them, and to support each other.
- 
- Continuously explore, test, and share innovative approaches, methodologies, and techniques.
 - Ensure that continuous improvements through monitoring and evaluation are central to our programmes.

<https://www.fee.global/>

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Promoting Prosocial Behaviours and Emotional Regulation during Shared Book Reading

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Introduction

As book reading takes place in a preschool setting every day, this research explored how teachers can be more intentional and purposeful in promoting emotional literacy (prosocial behaviours and emotional regulation) in young children during Shared Book Reading (SBR) sessions. Questioning strategies, more specifically the reflective, distancing and predictive types, were implemented in this action research to understand how it can promote prosocial behaviours and emotion regulation in children. The two research questions are (1) How can questioning strategies during shared book reading promote prosocial behaviour? and (2) How can questioning strategies during shared book reading promote emotion regulation?

This research took place in a preschool in Singapore. There were a total of four participating children. The participants were five years old, in the Kindergarten One class. The children were selected at random to promote an unbiased representation of results. Before the first implementation and following the final implementation, observations were conducted twice, pre and post, to note the frequencies and descriptive occurrences of children's prosocial and emotion regulation behaviours during their free play.

For five weeks, two storybooks were read to children every week on Tuesday and Thursday during their scheduled language and literacy lesson. Questions reflecting the reflective, distancing and predictive types of questions were posed. The discourse between the teacher-researcher and children were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Inductive content analysis was conducted where themes emerged from the pre- and post- implementation notes as well as the transcripts of each SBR session.

The findings of this research demonstrated an increase in the occurrences when children engaged in prosocial and emotional regulation behaviours. This indicated that questioning is of paramount importance during SBR in supporting these emotional literacy skills. This may inform practices of early childhood educators to seize opportunities during daily SBR sessions to enhance children's emotional literacy development.

Literature Review

Shared Book Reading (SBR)

Shared Book Reading (SBR) is an interactive way of reading books to children where teachers would encourage children's involvement and engagement in book-related conversations (Milburn et al., 2014). This contrasts with traditional book reading styles where teachers would simply read books and children are expected to stay quiet and listen. SBR adopts a dialogic style to reading which involves posing of different kinds of questions to increase children's participation and engagement (Walsh & Blewitt, 2006).

Definition of Emotional Literacy

Emotional literacy is the ability to understand and recognize one's own emotions and the emotions of others, while being equipped with social skills and prosocial behaviours can help one to manage oneself in social situations (Harper, 2016). Utilised purposefully, SBR can open doors for dialogues about social, emotional and moral development, while fostering children's understanding about their social world (Ng & Sun, 2021; Otaiba, 2004).

Quality of SBR

However, studies have cited how it is not the frequency of shared book reading that improves children's development, but the teacher's ability to engage children in conversations (Milburn et al., 2013). The quality of interaction is determined by the amount and types of discussions initiated by the teacher, which is a product of the kind of questions posed when reading (Walsh & Hodge, 2018). This is in line with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory which emphasizes the importance of reciprocal conversations between adult and child (Antonacci, 2000). Vygotsky advocates that learning takes place in social interactive contexts.

Questioning Strategies

CROWD Acronym

According to Walsh and Hodge (2018), adults can utilise the acronym CROWD to engage children in extended conversations and to make interactions meaningful. CROWD comprises of Completion prompts, Recall Prompts, Open-ended Prompts, WH- prompts and Distancing prompts. Completion prompts occur when the teacher pauses and allow children to fill in the blanks. Recall prompts help children to understand the plot and sequence of the story. Open-ended prompts pave the way for richer discussions. WH- prompts contains where, when, why questions that are open-ended, which focuses on introducing new vocabulary to children. Distancing prompts help the child make connections between the story and their own lives. The CROWD acronym can be used to enhance emotional literacy. For example, a distancing prompt could be "Have you ever felt angry just like Annie? What did you do?" which would help children to relate to the story and consider the perspectives of others.

Reflective Questions

Reflective questions can be posed to stimulate higher-order thinking as well as to help children think of the rationale for their responses (Stone-Macdonald et al., 2015). Examples relating to emotional literacy include, “Why do you feel this boy is this disappointed? Why do you think Tilly must learn to wait?” Being reflective helps children think deeper about their thinking, the purpose of their actions and the possible consequences (Wasik & Bond, 2001). These form the basis for developing emotional literacy skills.

Prediction Questions

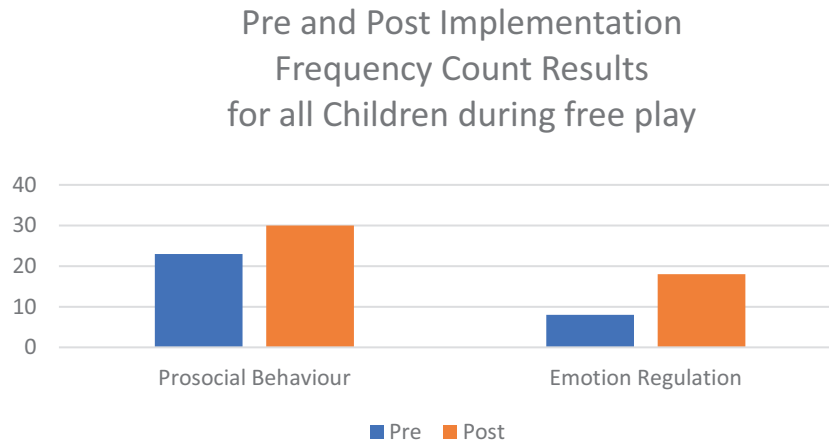
Prediction questions allow children to make judgements and speculate how the characters in the story would feel (Walsh & Hodge, 2018). Moreover, predicting what would happen next helps children to be more cautious and to think of the possible consequences of their actions. This is further supported by Baker (2014) who cited how prediction questions, which are also conceptual or valuing questions, provide children opportunities to develop an opinion, judgement and preference which would naturally guide children into a sense of acceptance for others’ opinions, further promoting emotional literacy.

In the current action research, the teacher researcher focused on three main types of questions namely Distancing from CROWD, as well as the Reflective and Prediction questions to pose open-ended questions that would elicit a greater amount of response as compared to close-ended prompts.

Results

Before and after the SBR implementations, children’s prosocial behaviours and emotion regulation were observed and tallied using the observation checklist and frequency count during their free play. Presented in Figure 1 below, all four children displayed more frequent prosocial behaviours and the ability to regulate their emotions following the final SBR implementation session. This suggests that questioning techniques posed during SBR can facilitate children’s emotional literacy.

Figure 1. Pre- and Post-Implementation Frequency Count



How can questioning strategies during shared book reading facilitate children’s prosocial behaviours?

To address the first research question, we look into discourses where children’s emotional literacy were facilitated during the SBR sessions, reflecting the four themes which have been identified through the analysis process- *Cooperation, Negotiation, Increased social awareness and Child-initiated strategies.*

Theme 1: Cooperation. Cooperation entails working, sharing and playing together (Parten, 1933). The inability to work together may cause fights or solitary play. This transcript was extracted from a SBR session when “Wait For Your Turn, Tilly!” was read which focused on reflective questions, asking “why” questions to further probe thinking when children had answered a question.

Excerpt 1. Example of Cooperation

Teacher Researcher: Why should Tilly and us not snatch?
Andrea: Because if we snatch, our friend or the baby will be hurt and they will start crying. It is mean. Just share the game console.
Dave: If they snatch and pull together, later the game console spoil and nobody can play anymore.
Peter: I know. We cannot snatch but we can ask nicely and say “5 minutes” then after 5 minutes, the baby brother can give the game to Tilly.
Dave: Ya can. I also think Tilly can ask her mommy nicely to buy 2 game consoles so can play together and won’t fight.
Teacher Researcher: Why do you think it is important to share?

Chase: Because sharing is being kind and if you are kind, you will get the game console when you wait for your turn.

Peter: When you share, the feelings inside will be good. Happy. I share my Hot Wheels car together with my brother at home. Also when you share, mommy will be very happy and I like it when mommy smile and be happy.

Dave: If don't share then friend will be sad because nothing to play with. The friend will be lonely. If share can play happily, right?

Andrea: Ya, play together. No fighting will be more fun!!

In excerpt 1 above, the two questions posed by the teacher researcher assisted children in exploring the root of their thinking and helping them understand and internalize why certain actions should be carried out respectively. For example, the teacher further probed with “Why do you think it is important to share?” Together, the children came to a common consensus that sharing helps prevent fighting, thus facilitating cooperation and prosocial behaviours.

Theme 2: Negotiation. Negotiation occurs when there is a disagreement between two children but harmony is restored through mitigation and resolving of disputes (Iskandar et al., 1995). This episode in excerpt 2 occurred during one of the SBR session where we started discussing about what can be done when we are feeling frustrated. The book read was titled, “Everyone...” This book explained how every human being have a plethora of emotions and that it is normal to have emotions. The teacher researcher focused on distancing question where she had asked children questions such as, “Have you ever felt frustrated? What happened?” to help them relate the story into their everyday lives.

Excerpt 2. Example of Negotiation

Teacher Researcher: Wow, you remembered! That's a great solution to help yourself not feel frustrated.

Dave: I tell the teacher that Noel took my toy so teacher can scold him.

Andrea: Oh oh and we can take deep breaths too!!

Chase: I will destroy Noel's toy if he destroy mine.

Andrea: No cannot. Remember teachers always say he is special?

Chase: But he always make me very angry so I want to destroy.

Dave: Ya. Noel has no words in his mouth, he cannot talk, he don't know what he is doing.
Teacher Researcher: Thank you Andrea and Dave for understanding Noel. Yes, Noel is a special child. He is unable to talk like us. He has feelings too. Can you imagine that you are hungry and yet you can't tell teacher Brittney you are hungry for me to give you food? How do you think Noel will feel?
Peter: Frustrated. Because cannot talk. Chase: Next time I will tell teacher to look at him. Peter: Yes cannot destroy his toy because you will only make him cry and scream louder.
Teacher Researcher: Yes, he would be feeling frustrated too because he cannot talk like us to tell other people how we feel.

There were instances where children did not agree on what each other had shared, such as the actions they can take when dealing with their friend with special needs in this excerpt presented. Through negotiation and sharing more of their thoughts, the children managed to find a common ground and agree with each other how they could respond, in a socially appropriate manner where they are courteous with their words and actions.

How can questioning strategies during shared book reading facilitate children's emotional regulation?

Theme 3: Increased Awareness of Others' Emotions. Social awareness in early childhood and the adult world entails being able to comprehend the emotions of others through verbal means and non-verbal expressions (Son, 2018). The understanding of emotions will then lead to a better understanding of how others would feel, better relate to others and empathise with them (Ferreira et al., 2021). The book read was titled, "Can I Join Your Club?" to encourage prosocial behaviours by helping children to understand the emotions involved when friends are rejected to join others at play. The following episode in excerpt 3 demonstrated the use of both distancing and prediction questions, where children were provided with opportunities to develop an opinion, judgement and preference through connecting to real-life situations.

Excerpt 3. Example of Increased Awareness of Others' Emotions

Teacher Researcher: Duck wants to join snake's club but because he could not hiss. Snake says no! How do you think duck feels? Why do you think so?
Peter: Sad because his face is sad.
Dave: He will feel upset because he wants to join but cannot.
Teacher Researcher: Next, Duck approached Lion but because he could not roar, Lion said no! Have you wanted to join your friends before but they did not allow you to join too? What happened?
Dave: Yes, happen before. Last time I wanted to play with (another child's name) but they don't like me and they bully me. I feel sad and I wanted to cry.
Chase: Same. Last time I wanted to play with (another child's name) and (another child's name), they tell me cannot. I also wanted to cry because they say cannot join and they don't want to share with me.
Andrea: Ya we will feel sad because very lonely if no friends allow us to play.
Teacher Researcher: And how does feeling sad feel like for you?
Andrea: I don't like the sad feeling because I will cry.
Dave: Ya I feel lonely when my friend don't play with me lor because no friends.

Through the use of prediction and distancing questions, children shared how they would feel if they were in the shoes of Duck, which was a character ostracised and rejected by fellow animal friends. As they shared, children got to understand how each other would feel if they do not allow each other to join them at play. This instance thus provided children with the opportunity to gain social awareness as they understood how certain actions could elicit negative emotions in them and their peers.

Theme 4: Child-initiated Strategies. An interesting finding throughout the five weeks was that children had demonstrated independence in being able to initiate strategies learnt by generalizing skills learnt into other settings; such as from the SBR discussions into their free play time, which had reduced conflicts between children and emotional outbursts.

Excerpt 4 was taken from the post implementation observation during children's free play.

Excerpt 4. Example of Child-Initiated Strategies

Peter: I want that blue block.
Dave: No, I still playing.
Peter:: I want it please... *teary-eyed* 3 minutes already you give me?
Dave: No, 5 minutes ok?
Peter: Ok. 5 minutes over you must give me. How about I help you build yours together so faster? If not I will be upset.
Dave: Can build together. If upset take deep breaths or play another toy also can. (After Dave had finished building his structure, he gave the blue block to Peter.)

This demonstrated how children were able to remember strategies such as being able to negotiate with their friend when they want what that friend is playing, keep them in mind and then apply them in a different context without adult guidance, reducing the number of conflicts. In this instance, a potential conflict was on the horizon but Peter was able to utilize the concept of using words, negotiating to resolve a conflict that is learnt during the various discussions.

Discussion**Cooperation/Negotiation**

Cooperation The findings of this teacher research demonstrated that there was an increase in the number of times children cooperated and negotiated with one another. For example, instead of teachers simply directing children to share, the discussion through reflective questions (*Why is sharing important? Why do you say so?*) also allowed children to think about the reason to why they should share. Otaiba (2004) highlighted that in asking reflective higher-order thinking questions, children will get to understand the reason behind actions that they should undertake such as the importance of sharing and turn-taking. When children understand the purpose, they would be more likely to internalize these actions and thus exercise these actions such as sharing across their everyday settings.

Negotiation The open-ended questions asked during SBR paved the way for discussion among children to take place where a variety of strategies and ideas were shared among children. Moreover, allowing children to answer reflective questions such as “Why do you think..?” and “What else..” creates space for more discourse to take place which enables children to learn to listen to the responses of their peers,

understand that others may have different opinions from them and at the same time, practice turn-taking and respect which are elements of prosocial behaviours (Victoria State Government, 2020).

Children's Increased Awareness of Others' Emotions

The findings demonstrated that children were able to express how they felt and were also able to identify the feelings of others and point it out to their peers during the post-implementation observation. This was supported by Ghosn (2001) that quality children's literature and the discussion within can help children develop empathy which is the ability to know and care for the feelings of others. Thus, educators should place a heavy emphasis on book characters' emotions to help children construct understanding of the social world.

Child-Initiated Strategies

With the guidance of an adult, book characters' emotional experiences become a means for teachers to model to children how to think and respond to emotional experiences. This offers children the chance to reflect on their own personal emotional experiences, compare their experiences with the characters in the books and think of strategies that the characters and themselves can undertake when faced with different situations (*"What can I do when I am angry?"*). This was only possible when the teacher researcher managed to provide a safe space for children to discuss their emotions and think of strategies they can undertake in the future which promotes emotional competence (Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2006).

Conclusion and Recommendation

SBR should be implemented purposefully in a highly participative manner where meaningful higher-order questions are being posed to engage children while they consistently reciprocate, share ideas and discuss with one another. Teachers need to take on an active role and they should seize these teachable moments by being purposeful in their questioning style to benefit children's social emotional development (Walsh & Hodge, 2018)

Every preschool class consists of children with diverse abilities such as their language ability and pace of learning for instance. As supported by Hindman et al. (2008), children may come from either enriched or less-privileged backgrounds and this may lead to some children being unable to comprehend and answer higher-order thinking questions posed by the teacher during SBR. Thus, future research can investigate how the teacher can vary higher-order thinking questions so that the whole group of children can discuss effectively together.

In summary, this teacher research has provided insights to how employing questioning strategies during SBR may promote children's emotional literacy. This also add on to the repertoire of strategies observed in the early childhood classrooms to promote

social and emotional learning during SBR (e.g., Ng & Sun, 2021). As a teacher researcher and an educator, confidence was built up in using strategies that can be adopted in future practices to make SBR purposeful. There has been a greater awareness of being more intentional during conversations within SBR sessions to meaningfully impact on children's social emotional development.

Appendix: Selected books for the implementation sessions

Edwards, N., & Parker-Thomas, F. (2019). *Mind your manners*. Caterpillar Books.

Eland, E. (2019). *When sadness is at your door*. (Eland, E, Illus). Random House Book for Young Readers.

Glynn, D. (2020). *Rain boy*. Chronicle Books.

Kelly, J. (2017). *Can I join your club?* (S. Laberis, Illus). EDC Publishing; Kane Miller.

Levitt, T. (2017). *Happiness doesn't come from headstands*. (T. Levitt, Illus). Wisdom Publications.

Martin, M. (2017). *Tessie tames her tongue: A book about learning when to talk and when to listen*. (Lehman, C, Illus). Free Spirit Publishing.

Neal, C.S. (2017). *Everyone...* Walker Books.

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Using Picture Books and Hands-On Activities to Promote Epicurean Pleasure for Food

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Introduction

Mealtime routines can nurture valuable knowledge and skill sets pertinent to the holistic development of a child in the long run (Kawasaki & Akamatsu, 2019; Sarwar et al., 2017). Yet, the extant literature—including Southeast Asian literature—and my experiences as a pre-service educator at different preschools in Singapore reflect mealtimes as a potential challenge to both children and adults. When there is a mismatch between adults' expectations and children's eating behaviours, adults may resort to unresponsive feeding practices which have been linked to increased incidence of children neglecting their own satiety cues; in turn associated with the development of health disorders later in life (Lindsay et al., 2017; Rollins et al., 2016). Undesirable mealtime practices may also hinder children's ability to appreciate food and develop ownership for the self-care activity (Nicklaus, 2015; Salvat, 2010).

In Singapore, guidelines are created to encourage preschools to provide a balanced and nutritious diet for children (Health Promotion Board, 2021). The local early years frameworks, Early Years Development Framework and Nurturing Early Learners respectively states the need for children to develop "healthy eating habits" (p.13) and "understand the importance of being healthy" (p.30) (Early Childhood Development Agency [ECDA], 2013a; ECDA, 2013b). However, there could be greater depth and scope to explore how different children can be supported as they navigate their relationship with food.

As a pre-service educator, I conducted this action research to investigate ways to nurture an appreciation of foods through responsive approaches (i.e., reading food-related picture books and facilitating hands-on food experiences). This study was conducted at a private childcare centre that caters to children from middle to high income households. Six participants aged 2 to 3 years old (two males and four females) were engaged. They were selected for typicality via purposive sampling of the class community, with the considerations of the average level of verbal expression, comprehension abilities and independence during mealtimes.

My primary research question is "How can I use picture books and hands-on experiences to support epicurean pleasure for food among children aged 2 to 3 years old in a childcare setting in Singapore?" Secondary research questions arising from this primary research question are: 1) What picture book delivery strategies can I use to aid children's comprehension of epicurean concepts about food? 2) What kind of

follow-up activities can I use to help children become more appreciative of food through exploring colours, social experiences, and food preparation processes?

Literature Review

I conducted a literature review to look into the different facets of food appreciation, as well as the feasibility of various strategies to support joyful mealtimes. Cornil and Chandon (2016) classified pleasure in eating into two forms: Epicurean and visceral. Visceral pleasure encompasses satiety cues, extrinsic motivations, and emotional responses, while epicurean pleasure (EP) responds to the conscious appreciation of food for its “sensory and symbolic value” (p. 54). Notably, visceral pleasure is driven by primitive instincts, and EP is derived from higher-order thinking which instils a higher degree of well-being. Most interventions aimed at helping children become more receptive to foods were conducted beyond Asia, and mainly adopted repeated sensory exposures to target foods. Hence, there is a need for more research on strategies beyond mealtimes to increase children’s intrinsic motivation to consume nutritious foods, particularly for younger children within Asia (Nekitsing et al., 2018; Owen et al., 2018; Rioux et al., 2018; Barnes, 2016).

I scoped my inquiry based on my understanding of tools and topics that might interest my students. I selected three epicurean topics about food (i.e., colour, social experiences and food preparation), used picture books to introduce the topics, and facilitated follow-up activities to reinforce understanding. Picture books are effective tools that help younger children construct knowledge about the real world (Strouse et al., 2018). As active participation can deepen children’s comprehension of book content and potentially lead to behaviour change, I adopted interactive shared book reading to invite a two-way interaction between the children and the reader (Barrentine, 1996; Dickinson, 2001, as cited in, Droog et al., 2014; Whitehurst et al., 1988). Dialogic reading strategies (i.e., PEER, CROWD) were used to scaffold children’s ability to label and retell the contents of the book. PEER is a sequence that prompts, evaluates and expands on children’s verbalizations about the book, before reinforcing the prompt through repetition. CROWD is a list of prompts to be used within PEER and it consists of completion, recall, open-ended, wh-, and distancing prompts (Arnold & Whitehurst, 1994). As play is an integral part of learning, kinaesthetic movement was encouraged during the book reading, and hands-on activities were provided to reinforce the concepts explored (TeGrootenhuis, 2021). My strategies were guided by the self-determination theory which suggests that children develop intrinsic motivation towards food when (a) they participate in mealtime experiences that empower decision-making, (b) their capabilities are acknowledged, and (c) they build trusting and responsive relationships with the people around them (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2019).

Methodology

The 8-week research was executed in the fourth quarter of 2021, and encompassed three stages of intervention from week two to eight. I collected data about children’s

existing and emerging knowledge and opinions about food through (a) one-on-one facial hedonic scale assessments, (b) semi-structured interviews and (c) observations.

In the first and last week, I encouraged children to identify and rate individual food ingredients based on a facial hedonic scale. Then, interviews were used to understand children's feelings and thoughts about mealtimes and food. Refer to the Appendix for the facial hedonic scale and interview guide.

From stage 1 onwards, observations about children's ideas on food were collected daily during guided (i.e., activity-time, mealtime) and unguided time (i.e., independent-play time). I also used a teacher journal to document my thoughts and reflections about the inquiry process and my interaction with the children to enhance my teaching practice. Digital devices were used to record classroom observations and interviews. Data was organised and coded weekly according to target EP topics, and was used to analyse children's display of pleasure and understanding towards food.

Intervention

During the 8-week implementation, three picture books and accompanying follow-up activities were introduced to the children in three stages. Books chosen were introduced to the class during morning circle time. Most follow-up activities were conducted exclusively with the participants except for those in Stage 2 which was integrated into the routine for the entire class. In the crafting and delivery of each activity, elements of self-determination theory and EP were integrated to ensure alignment with the study.

Stage 1: What Would I Like to Eat?

Book: *Mmm... LET's EAT!* (Koponen, 2013)

Component(s) of EP: Colour

Book-delivery strategies: PEER approach, questioning strategies, repeated readings

Follow-Up Activity: Print-Making

Children expressed their ideas about food through print-making on paper plates using food-toys and paint.

Stage 2: What Is for Lunch Today?

Book: *Mealtime* (Verdick, 2011)

Component of EP: Social interaction

Book-delivery strategies: PEER approach, CROWD approach

Follow-Up Activity (Daily): Phone Call and Food Chart Activity

Circle-Time: Phone Call Activity

- Children were introduced to the school chef through a pre-recorded video interview and kitchen tour. The interaction with the chef and the kitchen was sustained through daily phone calls to enquire about the ingredients of the day, which were to be recorded on the food chart according to colour (Figure 1).

Figure 1

A Completed Food Chart



Note. The plate was displayed at the circle time wall and covered using a transparent plastic sheet after the interaction to secure the food magnets to the board.

- Children volunteered to help place the magnets onto their corresponding colour. Assurance was given that there was no need to be 'correct' to minimize psychological pressure.

Lunchtime: Reviewing the Food Chart

- Children identified and matched the ingredients they received to the food chart. Questions encouraged children to recognise the variety of ingredients based on the colours in their bowl (e.g., "What colours do you see in your bowl?", "What food is that colour today?"). Time was given to acknowledge the different perceptions of colours by emphasizing nuances (e.g., "Are they the same shade of green? Which is a lighter/darker shade?").

Stage 3: Let's Cook Soup!

Book: *Soup Day* (Iwai, 2015)

Components of EP: Colour; social experiences, meal preparation

Book-delivery strategies: Kinesthetic engagement, wh- prompts, visual reference during follow-up activities

Follow-Up Activities: Cutting Activity; Re-Enacting Soup Day; Cooking Soup For Everyone

1: Cutting Activity

- The book drew children's attention to the process of washing and cutting the ingredients to reinforce their understanding of hygiene and safety. Children learned to handle plastic knives safely and use them to cut toy foods that were attached to Velcro (Figure 2).

Figure 2*Cutting Activity*

Note. Child cutting cabbage toy with a plastic knife

- In the experience, children were also asked reflection questions, “Have you (anyone) used a knife at home? What was the knife used for?”

2: Re-Enacting Soup Day

- The book guided children in their reenactment of *Soup Day* with play materials from the previous activity. Children decided what they wanted to cut or pour into their pretend soup. They were provided with materials such as transparent plastic tubs, ladles, stoves, and warm water to mimic the meal preparation processes in the book (Figure 3).

Figure 3*Pretend Soup Day*

Note. Child stirring a pot of pretend soup on a cardboard stove

- After serving themselves their bowl of pretend soup, the children were introduced to the idea of having a real soup day in school. Children suggested the ingredients and pasta they would like to have. These ingredients were purchased and prepared for the finale.

3: Cooking Soup For Everyone

- First, the children helped to wash and separate the mushrooms from their stems. Then, after cutting broccoli, carrot, and baby corn into smaller pieces, they poured the broth and pasta into the pot (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Food Preparation



Note. Children cutting boiled carrots and corn with disposable knives

- The children revisited the book while they waited for the soup to be cooked. They were encouraged to relate their experiences to the book through questions related to the topics of EP. These questions included "What colours do you see in the soup?" (colour), "What ingredients do we have in our soup?", and "How did you help to prepare the soup?" (social experiences; meal preparation)

Figure 5

Bowls of Soup



- When the soup was cooked, the class teacher scooped a bowl for each of them, and their responses were gathered during and after the tasting. The soup and its ingredients were later shared with the rest of the class and the class teachers during lunchtime (Figure 5).

Findings and Discussion

Through facial hedonic scale assessments, semi-structured interviews and observation data, analysis showed fundamental changes through (a) enhanced social relationships, (b) a growing bidirectional relationship between visceral pleasure and EP, and (c) children's increased sense of safety and hygiene. Analysis further showed re-reading of picture books as a promising strategy in supporting EP among children; also, follow-up activities using accessible resources to children as well as capitalising on school community assets as promising in promoting the exploration of food colours, social experiences, and food preparation processes.

Fundamental Changes

Before the intervention, the children showed little awareness of the foods they ate and would confuse food of similar colours. Their understanding of meal preparation was mainly from home experiences and demonstrated little awareness and interest in how food was prepared in school. Lunchtime was generally quiet, with little self-expression or social interaction. Most children shared they were positive towards lunchtime but could not verbalize their reasons. When asked about their likes and dislikes, most responses were based on gustatory perceptions (i.e., “crunchy”, “taste”, “soft”, “sweet”). However, some children displayed signs of EP and understanding. For example, Jerry expressed his preference for foods based on colours he liked and shared his perception of the kitchen as a “dangerous” place, Gin had a positive experience helping with meal preparation at home, and Cleo appreciated vegetables for their nutritional value, which was knowledge shared by her parents.

Apart from an increase in awareness and interest towards topics of EP (i.e., colour), the children started engaging in more food-themed play with me and their peers as the intervention commenced. There were more reciprocations of one another’s initiations to play. Pro-social behaviours such as using toys together (i.e. sharing, turn-taking) and adopting the play ideas of their peers started to become prominent. Next, there was a growing interaction between children’s display of visceral and EP pleasure. The two forms of pleasure were co-constructed and the development of EP positively influenced children’s willingness to consume food they previously had less interest in. Children’s willingness to try foods due to their colours and positive associations shows the potential for EP to lead to visceral pleasure. As the study progressed, the children became more intentional in dramatising meal preparation processes. There was an increase in safety and hygiene themes in their play.

Picture Book Strategy

Re-reading. Re-readings led to deeper child-directed exploration and meaning-making about EP. Children displayed sophisticated play ideas, at times integrating and displaying multiple elements of EP. They also became more flexible in their understanding and recognition of food colours, and shared their knowledge of how the colour of food can change as a result of its preparation (see Table 5).

Table 5

Re-Reading Increases Sensitivity to Food Colours

Anecdote 1

While waiting for a classmate to place the visual of the eggs onto the food chart, the rest of the class started to suggest where they thought the eggs belonged. Some children suggested “white” while others suggested “yellow”.

Cleo: (Hard-boiled) egg is **white** but **after cutting** it turns **yellow!**

Anecdote 2

Jay was observing a piece of Chinese cabbage in her bowl during lunchtime.
 Jay: My Chinese cabbage is white. But also green. **Light** green! Not the same (shade) like (the shade of green used in) the book and rainbow plate (food chart).

Follow-up Activities

Using Resources that Remain Accessible to the Children. The food chart and other materials increased class participation and food-related discussion among peers. During lunchtime, the children actively referred to the food chart to check if the ingredients in their bowls matched the visuals on the chart. They were excited when they spotted new or missing ingredients, which invited more children to share their discoveries. This consistent practice empowered children to become more mindful of the social and physical environment during mealtimes, and created a collaborative climate (see Table 6).

Table 6*Accessible Resources Promote Collaboration*

Ash (raising her spoon): What is this (item in my spoon)?
 Jay (leaning over to look): **Red!**
 Me: That's a goji berry!
 Alex & Gin (raising their spoons): I **also** have!
 Alex (smilingly): Auntie didn't say that just now (during the phone call in the morning).
 Jerry: Apple not in (my) bowl!
 Gin & Ash: I also don't have!
 Alex: Apple is (served) later!

Materials that remain accessible to children beyond planned experiences encouraged them to continue building and sharing knowledge with one another. In Table 7, Jerry shared his knowledge of food, utensils, and food preparation processes, resulting in spontaneous peer learning.

Table 7*Accessible Resources Reinforce New and Existing Knowledge*

Jerry stood in front of the food plate with two peers after circle time. He started to identify the ingredients displayed on the food plate.
 Jerry (pointing to the magnet visuals and **exclaiming** in a high pitch): Long beans!
 Jerry: Rice, chicken, cabbage, and long beans... and the fruit is pear!
 Jerry (pointing to the stem of the pear visual): There's the brown thing over here.
Cannot eat! Need to cut!
 With each tap of his finger on the visual of the stem, Jerry vocalised a cutting sound:
 Tak, tak, tak!
 Jerry (looking at me): Right?

...

A classmate (to me): Teacher Ping, what's that? (pointing to the visual of a chicken)

Jerry: **Chicken!**

Jerry proceeded to point to and name the utensils he could identify on the chart.

Jerry: Fork! Spoon! Rainbow plate! (circling his finger around the chart) Big plate!

Friend (pointing to the visual of a chicken): Cabbage!

Jerry (to a friend): **No, that's chicken!**

Capitalising on School Community. Social relationships were prominent throughout the study. Relationships with kitchen staff, peers, and the teacher, as well as the influence of family, propelled children's interests and learning. Children demonstrated a natural interest in connecting with others through their participation in different play ideas, such as re-enacting social experiences. Table 8 shows children integrating their understanding of their relationship with the school chef and their prior knowledge about food delivery into their play.

Table 8
Exploring New Social Relations Through Play

Jerry and Ash were holding foam blocks next to their ears to **pretend to be calling the school chef**.

Jerry & Ash: Hello Auntie H! Is this Auntie H?

Without putting down his 'phone', Jerry transformed his role into what seemed like a **customer**.

Jerry (to me): Food delivery!

Me (mimicking Jerry's action): What do you want to eat?

Jerry **referred** to the completed food chart of the day that was placed in the distance. He **read** the ingredients on it.

Jerry: Rice and... carrot. And, chicken, and... spinach and egg and cabbage.

The intervention demonstrated the important role of families in supporting children's development of EP. The family's influence was ever-present as children shared their knowledge about food across home and school experiences. Additionally, the families' initiative to share related resources amplified children's interest in food (see Table 9).

Table 9
Family Influences Children's Exposure and Attitudes Towards Food

The Family Propels Children's Relationship With Food Through...	Dialogue
Contributing To Resources For Learning	Jerry brought the book <i>Supertato Veggies Assemble</i> for circle time . It was a book chosen by his parents from the public

	library. While I read the book to the class, Jerry and his classmates actively identified familiar vegetables in the book.
Modelling (Actions)	During follow-up activity – Cutting Activity Me: Have you seen anyone use the knife at home? Alex: Papa (and) mama use the knife to cut fruits. Jerry: Yes! My papa use the knife on broccoli! Ash (cutting mushroom toy): My papa cut mushroom!
Modelling (Positive Attitudes)	Me: What do you think of carrots? Cleo: I like to eat carrot. Me: Why do you like carrots? Cleo: Because can grow tall. Me: How do you know that? Cleo: Daddy likes to eat carrot.

Implications and Conclusions

While this research may be limited (i.e. small sample size, restricted research duration), future studies can expand on it by exploring how positive relationships with food, or EP can be nurtured in school settings for young children from lower economic backgrounds. Additionally, further research could investigate the role of stronger school-community partnerships in promoting EP beyond direct mealtime experiences.

Nevertheless, this is the first research to my knowledge that examines approaches to support young children in developing positive relationships with food using an epicurean lens in Singapore. Centres with tight schedules could adapt book-reading and follow-up activities into their routine and curriculum to create authentic learning experiences about food.

Reflections

It was incredibly humbling to witness the transdisciplinary effects of the project on children's development. This investigation, consistent with existing studies, highlighted mealtimes as opportunities to develop interpersonal and intrapersonal skills in children (Locchetta et al., 2016; Mita et al., 2015). Positive mealtime environments empower children to develop self-regulation skills (i.e. from identifying visceral cues of hunger and satiety) and encourage socialisation as children exchange ideas about food (Harte et al., 2019; Mita et al., 2015; Satter, 2012). Beyond mealtimes, strategies such as culinary interventions also have the potential to enhance children's confidence, self-efficacy, prosocial behaviours, and their relationship with food (Kim & Park, 2020; McCormick, 2012; Pollin & Retzlaff-Fürst, 2021). I am now more appreciative and critical of existing studies and driven to consider evidence-based strategies within my practice.

This experience amplified my belief in authentic collaborations within and beyond the centre. While this is teacher research where my implementation is paramount, the interactions among various stakeholders have increased children's understanding and interest in EP across fictional and realistic contexts. As highlighted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2020), interventions that enlist the strengths of all stakeholders in early education settings are pertinent. This is consistent with the Positive Mealtime Environment Explanatory Framework that advocates for a collective approach to help children build positive experiences and relationships with food (Mita et al., 2015). There is a need for deeper and consistent conversations with centre leaders, co-teachers, and caregivers about child-feeding practices and home-school partnerships. For example, quality partnerships with caregivers to understand children's relationship with food at home can help me differentiate my practices to meet diverse needs in school. It will also potentially invite greater depth in meaning-making about more epicurean concepts (Mou et al., 2021; Murphy et al. 2021).

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Appendix

Facial Hedonic Scale & Interview Guide

Week/Date: _____ Time: _____

Participant Name (Pseudonym): _____ Age: _____

Assessment Objective: To assess the child's opinions and understanding towards school food, including their preferences for each ingredient in the mealtime menu of the day using the facial hedonic scale (Figure 1)

Figure 1

2-Point Facial Hedonic Scale



Note. Adapted from TASTY (Wagner et al., 2020)

Meal/Ingredients	Responses (😊/😐/😞)	Reasons
1.		
2.		
Additional Notes:		

Guiding Questions

1. What do you think about the food you had for lunch today? Why do you say that? (Show picture)
2. What about it makes you (not) want to eat it?

Interview Guide

1. What does lunchtime make you feel? What makes you say that?
2. What do you think about having different colours in your bowl? What makes you say that?
3. Do you know who helps to cook lunch for us in school every day?
4. Do you help to prepare food at home? What do you do?
5. Remember you cooked soup for yourself and your friends and teachers? What do you think about cooking more food together?

Respect for Children in Our Classrooms

Lee Jia Hao

Teacher, Creative O Preschooler's Bay

Respect is difficult to reflect on. Its importance is universally agreed on, but the definition seems intangible and varied. The act of respect can be invisible but easily felt by the parties involved. This poses a challenging notion to educators. As observers of the many events and experiences in the classroom, how do we see respect happen, facilitate its presence and make it a part of our classroom culture?

My reflection started during a conversation among teachers in the Community of Practice (CoP) organised by AECES. As the teachers shared their personal experiences and perspectives on respect, there was one point which stood out: children learn respect by observing their teachers. It led me to think: "How have I shown respect to the children in our class?"

Reflective questions

Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) (MOE, 2022) describes respect as a character trait; a way for people to view those around them as valued individuals with their own strengths, culture and voice. Children would express respect by recognising the words and actions of adults and their peers without judgement but with curiosity. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (OHCHR, 1989) echoes this belief by citing the right of children to think in their own ways, share their thoughts and to be a part of the community. However as mentioned in the CoP, children learn about respect by observing adults around them, such as their teachers in class. Consequently, children will learn about respect by observing our interactions with them. I reflected upon my own interactions with the class, mainly in our group directed experiences and their play time. Using the NEL and OHCHR as guiding points, I came up with three reflective questions (Figure 1).

1. Did I acknowledge their thinking?
2. Did I listen to their voices?
3. Did I recognise their contributions to our community?

Figure 1

Being respectful to children in group directed experiences

Group directed experiences are sometimes known as 'classroom teaching' in Singapore. In my classrooms, we gather as a class at regular times every day.

Depending on our objectives, we might work on a task together, share our thoughts on certain topics or play as a class. The complexity and duration of the experiences is adjusted according to the developmental appropriateness. Typically, the content of the experiences is dependent on the observations of the classroom and the comments made by the children. For example, we may begin a series of experiences by sharing a conversation between children. The children would take the chance to dissect the talk, take the chance to clarify and perhaps have additional thoughts. We would end this experience by deciding on our next steps based on the contributions. This would continue into a chain of activities to reflection and to activities again. Eventually, we would feel satisfied enough to move on to a new exploration or if something else takes our interest. When working with a younger group, we would emphasize observing the children in their engagement to the next activity. Illustrated below are two series of experiences for two different groups of children (Figure 2).

5- to 6-year-olds (September) 19 children	2- to 3-year-olds (February) 12 children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking about having free time before working hard for the graduation performance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Decide to create a village (Inspired by one of their camp experiences) • Sit together to pool ideas for the village <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Decide to create a physical representation of the ideas • Create and share the Legos, puppets and drawings made by the children <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Deciding to expand and populate it with characters living in the village • Consolidating the creations to determine the features of the village <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Deciding to use them for play during play time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children are playing in different spaces in the class, including balls. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Notice the children playing with it in the class • Creating an exclusive space in a larger room for ball play. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Notice a focus on schematic actions • Providing other tools to add into their array of schematic actions with the ball exploration. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Noticing their focus on the effect of their actions when playing with the balls on its own and with tools • Changing the size of the balls to encourage their observations of the effects of their actions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Notice their focus on balls rolling

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing everyone’s experiences with their play. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Deciding to create a class-wide version of the village • Creating a class-wide version of the village and playing in it as characters themselves. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Decide to do it again to tell more stories in the village • Repeating the play with different building designs and stories <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Decide to do it again and continue to make adjustments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting up the playspace beforehand to create spaces where the balls can roll. <p>*Most of these experiences were repeated before new inclusions and changes were made.</p>
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Figure 2

Reflecting on these experiences, I realised that respecting children is a principle of my practice. The nature of the activities is dependent on our ability to recognise the thinking of the children as it is expressed through their actions and words. When I observe them with understanding and make use of their sharing to inform the next part of our activities, I respect them as individuals (AGDE, 2022). To the children, it shows my desire to listen to their voices and acknowledge their importance in our community.

Being respectful to children in play

Rather than calling it play time, I would send the children off after our group directed experience by saying, **“Go and have your own time to do your own thing.”** It was my intention to stress to the children that play was a time and space which belonged to them. Strictly speaking, they could choose not to play but catch up on some work, spend time with their friends or idle after a long day. They had the right to decide as long as two agreements were followed: everyone would try to keep safe and not upset anyone. During this period, I would roam around to talk to the children, take requests for materials and watch over their safety. The principle behind our practice is to communicate our trust and respect for their decision-making. No one would be judged for their choices. Everyone would be safe to try, to experiment and to take risks. Story 1-3 below describe the challenges and realisations faced by the children and I during the play experiences.

Story 1 (4- to 5-year-old)

There was a child who would come to me before a play, saying, ***“I don’t know what to do.”*** Each time, I would furrow my eyebrows and reply, ***“Go walk around and figure something out.”*** Minutes later, he would end up in a play with his friends. This would happen regularly for the next few weeks and became a habit. Eventually, I begged him not to ask me every day.

He asked me the same question the next day. I turned around with my usual furrowed eyebrows in annoyance but before I could respond, he paused and retreated without breaking eye contact. He grinned cheekily as he pretended to mumble to himself, ***“Oh... I know what Teacher Jia Hao will say, ‘Go do what I want!’”*** He quickly ran away to his friends. Since then, he stopped approaching me and went straight to his friends during play.

Although the children were respected for making their own choices, not all related to the freedom easily. This story describes the process of a child who needed time to adjust to the independence which was entrusted to him. It was our way of returning the power of choice to the children; for them to realise they were respected to make their own decisions.

Story 2 (3- to 4-year-old)

Two children were sitting at the table with a board and two sets of manipulatives. Each had one manipulative while the rest were left outside the board. One started to walk the manipulative across the board when the other knocked hers hard on to the board and cried, ***“Who’s that trip-trapping across my bridge? I am going to eat you up!”*** Her friend responded, ***“No! I want to go across to eat some grass!”***

During our group directed experience the next day, I showed the children a clip of the play. The children involved were giggling and clarifying their play while the others watched carefully. In the following days, the children engaged with their own retelling of the story.

Their rendition of ‘Three Billy Goats Gruff’ was a thoughtful and expressive play moment. Talking about it in the classroom was an intentional teaching moment to communicate my joy and respect for the children’s efforts to use their knowledge and skills to express themselves. It encouraged them to continue and tell the others that their play and consequently, their thinking was well-respected.

Story 3 (5- to 6-year-old)

A child was playing on the table. He had built a 2-storey house and was sitting on a chair at the 'top floor' when he fell. I went over to check on him. I was also pondering if I should advise him on further safety precautions or even to stop him from playing.

Before I could say anything, he started to fix his house. Notably, he moved the chair on the 'top floor' to the center of the table, added 'danger' signs and created walls. Although his awkward grin told me he was embarrassed, his actions told me he was ready to take responsibility for himself.

This was a humbling moment that reminded me to respect a child's ability to stand for themselves. His decision to alter his structure to create a safer environment told me he was more than capable of looking after himself and his friends. Acting on his behalf by advising him to stop would have robbed him of that authority. I would have communicated that I did not respect him enough to care for himself.

By defining play time as their 'personal time', I believed I was reminding the children of their right to be themselves in the classroom. They would be free to think, express and do as they wish without being at the expense of the rights of others. This was the meaning behind 'not to upset anyone'. It highlighted the way I respected their right to have and to express their thinking. It created a safe atmosphere that was free of judgement and protected them as individuals with their own voice (Downer, Sabol & Hamre, 2010).

How have the children learnt to be respectful?

As I realised my own efforts in respecting children, I began to wonder about their ways to emulate respect. If children do learn about respect by observing adults, they would have embodied those values in the class. Do the children respect one another like the way I have? The stories below are anecdotes of the children giving space to their peers to express themselves without judgement but with curiosity.

Story 4 (2- to 3-year-old)

The children were playing in an indoor set-up I had prepared. A student had jumped up a bridge meant to encourage gross motor stability but started to sing as 'Let it go' came on the speaker. Her friends moved around her as she sang while others came to join her.

This experience described a scene where children respected one another's wish to play the way they want. Although the bridge was meant for crossing, the children respected the wish of their peers to use it as a stage. They chose to work around her and in turn, she respected the right of her friends to join her or play as they wish.

Story 5 (5- to 6-year-old)

The children created a fantasy village in the class. Each group of friends made a feature or a landmark. There was a pond, a flower shop, a lemongrass plantation tied to a souvenir shop, apartments and a forest.

I watched as they worked on their tasks in their own spaces. Over in the flower shop, two children served customers while another made crafts. A friend who was playing in the apartments came over to buy flowers. In the pond, two friends were making a duck out of large cubes. One of their friends chuckled as they walked by. Someone building a plantation in another area of the classroom exclaimed suddenly, **“I am so silly! I forgot something! Can I go to the room to take some hula hoops?”** Her friends at the plantation watched her in confusion as she returned with some hoops. They supported her as she worked before returning to their roles at the plantation shop.

This scene exemplifies the children’s respect for each other and their work. In a gigantic co-working space, they allocated small spaces to each group by themselves and respected everyone’s right to do as they wished and yet accepted their contributions. They could be with each other, but still remembered to give personal space. They could work on their own play but still played with others.

Story 6 (2- to 3-year-old)

The children sat around a table with their own playdough. A child noticed her friend using a knife and reached for it. When we stopped her, she burst out crying, **“I want the knife!”** **“Yes, you do,”** we replied, **“You want the knife, but look at your friend. She is using it. She wants the knife too.”** We would go on to reiterate this point consistently over many play experiences whenever she was about to snatch. One day, we noticed the child looking at the same friend who was staring at her holding the knife. **“You want the knife?”** she asked. Her friend nodded timidly but smiled as she quickly finished chopping and gave it to her.

Although it took time, children can realise that everyone has a right to play. Just as they had the right to use the knife, others had a right to use it too. Their own right to play does not supersede the right of others. This experience describes the ability of children to learn this form of respect.

Looking back, I realised many of their behaviours reflected our attitudes to the children. As individuals who enjoy doing what they love, they try to ensure their friends are able to do what they love as well. It is our message to them: ‘Everyone has a right to express. While we express, we will empower others to express themselves as well.’

Learning points

Showing respect to children can be tricky when we consider the power relationships between teachers and students. It is easy for adults to overpower the younger ones and undermine their presence in the classroom. To respect children, we have to try to quieten our voice to raise theirs. We must acknowledge their thinking and their desire to express it. We need to take in their sharing thoughtfully. The more we can express this mindset in every bit of our daily activities, the more children can feel our respect for them and, in turn, learn to view the people around us.

As with any quality practice, consistency is key. Building a culture of respect takes time and reparations – especially if we unintentionally disrespected the children. However, if we believe in the importance of respect, the rights for all children to be valued as unique persons with the right to express themselves, then we need to try to be the best versions of ourselves (Veelu, G. & Loh, H.M., 2015).

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23rd Conference of the Pacific of Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA) Bali, Indonesia 7 - 9 July 2023

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‘Strengthening Resilience in Children During Time of Change’ – a timely topic to discuss in the wake of the pandemic that was also closely aligned to my final year thesis. This was the first in-person PECERA conference since COVID19 and it was such an insightful one!

Before the conference, a group of us from the Association for Early Childhood Educators Singapore (AECES), Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), National Institute of Early Childhood Development (NIEC) and National Institute of Education (NIE) visited Open Flow Learning centre.

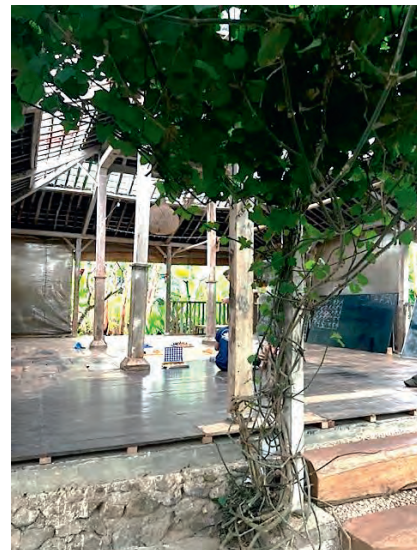


Photo 1: Our group's visit to Open Flow Learning Centre

Open Flow is a niche place of learning that redefines education through co-creating it with nature and with children. Their focus is not on *what* to teach, but rather *how* children can best learn and develop. Open Flow creates education beyond the 21st century through providing children with ample time, a safe psychological space and intentional physical environment to think, feel, be and do. Their dynamic educational model is underpinned by early childhood theories, research, knowledge experience and expertise, which are embedded in their pillars: simplicity in being, curiosity in motion, inquisitive minds, and energetic spirits.

The experiential and intentional focus of the centre is evident in the raw, nature-based yet aesthetically organised environment of the centre. It embodies the phrase ‘the less we do, the more children can’ and provides both the physical and psychological space for children to take charge and lead their own learning and discovery.

I have visited many other early childhood centres in Australia, Canada and other parts of Asia. This was one of the more inspiring and child-centred centres that resonates and aligns with my own philosophy, pedagogy, beliefs and priorities.

We immersed ourselves in an experiential session during the visit, saw children at play and observed first-hand how they cared for animals and cooked. Each child’s choice and developmental trajectory informs the way in which the centre caters to their unique interest and needs. They advocate strongly for children’s best interests and make no compromise. It made me reflect on how we could adapt, infuse, and integrate these elements into our own practices in Singapore.

In my most recent conversation with Dr Nicolene, we discussed Open Flow’s plans for their most recent cycle (term), our shared vision for the future of early childhood education and possible opportunities for collaboration that got us very excited.

At the conference, inspiring keynote and symposium speeches discussed the correlation of quality early childhood to children’s quality of life, life outcomes and development of resilience. We unpacked the definition of resilience, scholarly and otherwise. There was also a presentation on protective and compensatory child experiences (PACEs) (Moris & Hays-Grudo, 2023) by Prof. Yoichi Sakakihara.

My own presentation was on my final year thesis ‘Restoring resilience & SE wellbeing beyond the pandemic: Listening & co-constructing with young children’. Some key points I shared included:

- i) Operationalised child-centered strategies to listen and co-construct outdoor play with children
- ii) Unique insights into children’s voices on what they value and prioritise, their view of teachers, experiences of COVID19, conceptualisation of resilience, embedded child’s perspective
- iii) Recommendations on how educators can support children’s resilience in a COVID-normal world
- iv) Timely reminders to reflect, refine and reprioritise our pedagogies in response to the evolving needs of children
- v) Scalability and contextualisation even in micro ways
- vi) Implications for classroom teacher practices, pedagogical contributions such as child-informed practices, recommendations for teacher training and further research



Photo 2: Taking questions and comments at the end of my presentation

We had many insightful follow-up discussions on ways to sustainably embed the strategies I presented, children's voices, the unique and nuanced insights it offered in my study and our philosophical assumptions of children or 'image of the child'.

My key takeaways from presenting at my first early childhood conference was the enriching dialogue and supportive community. I met students pursuing their PhDs, professors whose articles I had cited and many other inspiring individuals. We networked, discussed and compared practices, advocated for our shared vision and common goal and left each other with questions to reflect on. I learnt about enabling environments for children to thrive in, different pedagogical approaches, research designs and unique perspectives to look at early childhood.

As an early childhood researcher, policy maker, leader, lecturer, educator, advocate, or student, we were able to connect and engage meaningfully through the different stages we were at in our careers and share our diverse international perspectives and experiences.

This experience broadened, inspired, and helped me reflect and remember why we do what we do. The passion was contagious and it was an amazing opportunity to recharge with like-minded individuals amidst the daily challenges we all face. I was impressed, honoured and grateful to be a part of this conference, to share my work and learn from others.

PECERA 2024 will be from August 2 to August 4 in Tokyo, Japan. The theme of the conference is "Community and Reciprocity". I strongly encourage you to attend and present at the conference. I hope to see you there!

The president of AECES, Dr Christine Chen herself accompanied us throughout the school visit and conference. A key reminder she left with me on the last day was that *relationships are everything*. Relationships locally and globally, including with children, families, educators, researchers, academics, or policymakers, have one of the most significant impacts on early childhood and on the children. Relationships are at the heart of our interactions, collaborations, and decisions, both with each other and with children.

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Insights from EECERA 2023

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In this write-up, we present some information and reflective insights about our experiences at the 31st European Early Childhood Association (EECERA) Annual Conference held in Lisbon, Portugal, from August 30 to September 2 2023.

The Centre for Research in Early Childhood Education (CREC), which has been working to improve early childhood provision for almost a quarter century, organised the conference in partnership with the Association of Early Childhood Professionals (APEI), a private non-profit association with around 5000 members. APEI, the CRIANCA Childhood Association, Portugal, and the Municipality of Cascais hosted the event.

The conference theme was "Children's Curiosity, Agency, and Participation: Challenges for Professional Action and Development."

Why EECERA 2023?

We were drawn to the conference mainly due to its theme about children's curiosity, agency, and participation - a subject we hold dear and incorporate into our pre-service and in-service teacher education programme. The themes stated below, and strands were intriguing as they addressed several dimensions of children's curiosity and agency, offering plenty of opportunities to reflect on our teaching and learning practices. Moreover, we were excited to learn about the challenges from various perspectives, allowing us to reflect further and learn deeper (Harrison, 2010).

EECERA conference themes

- What might research reveal about the centrality of curiosity and agency in children's and adult's learning and wellbeing?
- How might curiosity and agency be encouraged in children's play and learning or adult's professional activity?
- What are the challenges and benefits for the early years sector in prioritising the development of curiosity and agency in both practitioners and children?

We were also attracted to the following aspects of the conference:

- The EECERA annual conference regularly draws close to 1,000 delegates from different parts of the world.
- It is the largest research conference in Europe.
- It promotes multi-disciplinary research in early childhood.
- It offers opportunities to network and collaborate with fellow early childhood professionals from different parts of the world.



Conference Programme

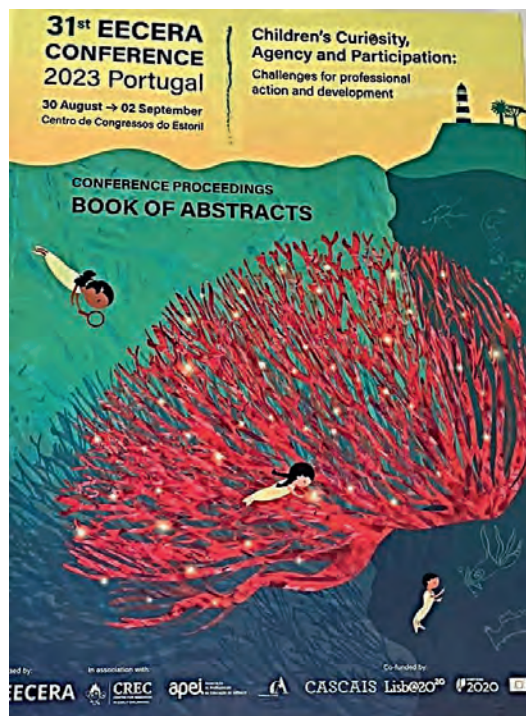
The conference programme included keynote addresses, special interest group meetings, symposia presentations, "PED"agogical talks and poster presentations.

Keynote addresses

There were four keynote addresses:

- The Wonder Approach by Catherine L'Ecuyer, Researcher in children's curiosity, creativity and imagination; author of the "The Wonder Approach"

- No teacher left behind: Pursuing a utopia in the professional development of kindergarten teachers by Luis Alberto Ribeiro, President of the Association of Early Childhood Professionals (APEI), Portugal
- Children's belonging in early childhood education by Johanna Einarsdottir, Professor Emeritus of Early Childhood Education at the University of Iceland
- Curiosity>involvement>deep level learning, and how an experiential approach exploits the wondrous chain of events in practice by Ferra Laevers, Director of the Research Centre for Experiential Education based at the University of Leuven, Belgium; Co-founder of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA)



The keynote addresses were truly remarkable as they offered a wealth of information and insights that provided global and contextual perspectives and gave us an opportunity to reflect on our local practices. For example, the address on the wonder approach highlighted how childhood has often become a demanding race towards adulthood, thus highlighting the importance of facilitating children's discovery of the world and respecting the natural laws of childhood. The speakers presented their ideas with clarity and conviction and promoted a truly inspiring learning environment that promoted several discussions between us (Dumbell, 2017).

Special Interest Group Meetings

We learned about special interest group (SIG) meetings held on the pre-conference day. The SIG meetings are a valuable component of the conference as they offer a unique platform for interested participants who share similar interests to connect with

colleagues, share knowledge and experience, explore complex issues, and generate reflexive research.

EECERA Interest groups	
Birth To Three	Sustainability In Early Childhood Education
Children From Refugee or Migrant Backgrounds	Transforming Assessment, Evaluation, And Documentation in Early Childhood Pedagogy
Digital Childhoods, Multimodality And STEM	Transition
Gender Balance	Working With Parents and Families
Holistic Wellbeing	Young Children's Perspectives
Mathematics Birth to Eight Years	
Multilingual Childhoods	
Outdoor Play and Learning	
Professionalism In Early Childhood Education and Care	
Rethinking Play	

Presentations

- **Symposia Presentations:** These consisted of paper presentations from diverse contexts. The presenters shared essential information about their work and engaged in a Q&A session with the audience, creating a dynamic learning experience. These sessions were valuable opportunities for attendees to deepen their knowledge and gain new perspectives.
- **PEdagogical talks** were 10-minute-long addresses adopting the TED-talk presentation style, during which the speakers pitched their key insights.
- **Poster Presentations:** During the designated poster presentation, we could have one-on-one conversations with presenters and learn about their research through visual aids.

Our Presentations

Our contribution to EECERA 2023 was primarily in the form of three presentations, and we outline their key features below:

Lim, C. & Li, J: Promoting children's curiosity, agency & participation through STEM learning: Experiences & challenges faced by early childhood educators in Singapore	In this presentation, Dr Lim and Dr Li shared the key findings from their study that showed that early childhood educators in Singapore interpreted STEM in both the disciplinary and integrated perspectives, most admitting to having a surface-level understanding of STEM education. They also
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	highlighted barriers to implementing STEM learning such as lack of knowledge, resources, time, and class sizes, thus shedding light on possible professional development that can provide targeted support to facilitate teacher competence and confidence to integrate STEM in the early years' classroom.
Hu, A., Kaveri, G., Almeida, S., & Gomes, J: Challenges for professional action during crisis: Mitigating factors across five countries	In this presentation, Dr Kaveri and her academic collaborators from Australia and Norway shared key findings from their multi-country study that showed teacher identity and pedagogical competence as mitigating factors during crises, thus suggesting a greater focus on teacher resilience.
Almeida, S. C., Kaveri, G: Differing versions of ECEfS: Insights from India, Japan, China and Singapore	In this presentation, Dr Kaveri and Dr. Almeida shared Asian exemplars that provided differing non-Western views of ECEfS.

Opportunities to network

We immersed ourselves in the conference by attending various paper presentations on our topics and fields. We realised that it was an opportunity to connect with colleagues from all over the world. We learned about the meaningful work they were doing with young children and shared our work as well. The interactions with colleagues from Asia and Europe opened possibilities for collaborative research. Colleagues also approached us to form advocacy groups, and the EECERA colleagues invited us to apply to be reviewers for their journal. Reconnecting with some colleagues face-to-face was the best part of the experience, and we truly felt like a part of the global early childhood community (Dumbell, 2017; Potter et al., 2010).

The need for preparation

While attending conferences sounds exciting as it involves travelling to a land far away, we emphasise that to reap the benefit of the conference, we ought to prepare every step of it. While the conference organisers provide us with essential information such as travel and accommodation, abstract submission deadlines, and guidelines for presentation, it is important we plan our journey to every detail. To make the most out of attending every presentation, it is important to prepare beforehand. Reading the abstract and gathering related information beforehand, for example, can help one to

select which concurrent session to attend, actively engage in the session and ask relevant questions to learn more. Learning about the keynote speakers and their work before attending their addresses can also help optimise our experience (Harrison, 2010; Potter et al., 2010).

If we are presenting a paper in a session, we should prepare our slides early, ensure that we follow the technical guidelines for the presentation, prepare the script and rehearse to ensure we keep to the time limits. We also need to prepare to engage with the audience, especially during the Question-and-Answer segment of the presentation. This will ensure quality and active discussions on our research topic during the presentation.

In sum, the EECERA Annual Conference was one of the key highlights of our 2023 academic year. We enjoyed the event, learned a lot, and established new relationships that could lead to collaborative learning opportunities. The sharing sessions were informative and gave us the opportunity to reflect. The conference was a great platform for encouraging the early childhood community and promoting active learning while valuing participation. We left feeling energised and motivated to apply what we learned to our work in early childhood education.

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6th Leadership Forum: Leadership Practices – Impact on Evolving Images of The Child

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The 6th Leadership Forum, which was held on 8 September 2023, was attended by more than 100 Early Childhood Leaders from Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam.

(A) Preschool Visit

The day started with participants visiting various preschools. My own visit to Little Village Preschool was an inspiring one. I learnt how their centre's philosophy and beliefs on the way children learn shaped the learning experiences for their children. One such example was how children from the graduating class were encouraged to identify their personal strengths and to use them to plan for their own graduation concert. This was to show a form of appreciation to those who contributed to nurturing them. I found that helping children to believe in themselves is important, and being able to use their gifts and talents to show appreciation to others is meaningful. It is important to prepare children for life and not just academically. This can be done through meaningful activities based on their interest and also providing room for development in their values, social emotional competencies and learning dispositions.

(B) The Learning Forum



Photo 1: Participants at the Leadership Forum

After the visits to the preschools, we attended the Learning Forum, a platform where knowledge and skills were exchanged and a dialogue among Early Childhood leaders facilitated.

I gleaned many gems from the sharing of the Guest-of-Honour, Mrs Loke Teck Yong (NIEC) and keynote presenter Dr. Mari Mori (Kobe Shinhwa University, Japan).

i) Image of the child in context

It was important to understand one's belief as it would influence one's practices. It must be taken in the context, to address respective cultures and needs of the children's as well as parental and societal expectations. Educators need to work with parents and other relevant stakeholders by mutually supporting each other to help the child with their learning in their context. It may include applying relevant National Guides or Frameworks.

ii) Self-leadership and image of the educator

Besides having an image of the child, being aware of one's definition of the image of the educator is helpful. Every educator is a leader in their own capacity in the classroom. Being reflective practitioners, relationship builders and resilient learners is important. These are core values for educators at NIEC. Educators are encouraged to be practice-oriented, grounded in strong theories, research and partnering with others. Having these hallmarks would contribute to the recognition of a noble profession.

iii) Children are citizens crafting a better life

In learning, children should be given the rights to participation, dialogue, and solidarity. They are protagonists with potential and are competent researchers and connected to society. It is the educator's responsibility to meet children's rights, to listen to them, and to set up an inclusive environment that provides room for children to question and express themselves in '100 languages'.

(C) Panel Presentation

This segment comprised of leaders and staff from (i) Kids and Kins (ii) Little Village (iii) Wisdom Star Preschool and (iv) Little Seeds Preschool.

What I learnt from the generous sharing of the respective preschools:

i) Life skills and character-building through science

The director Dr. Catherine Ong from Kids and Kins shared about her career switch from being a scientist to being in the early childhood profession. Her beliefs in impacting life skills and character-building are evident in her curriculum such as using a mini farm as a natural classroom. What I found encouraging was how she emphasised that children should enjoy a carefree childhood, and also pick up basic skills that will carry them through life.

ii) 'The teacher did not do anything'

The sharing from Little Village highlighted the image of the teacher being someone who is a researcher, guide, listener, observer, facilitator, and social collaborator. Educators need to scaffold learning by setting up provocation and asking open

questions. By modeling curiosity and being intentional in encouraging children to ask questions, children are empowered to have their own voice. It is only when children are empowered to learn that a teacher can proudly say ‘The teacher did not do anything’.

iii) “We play while we learn”

We were reminded by Wisdom Star Preschool’s sharing that giving children opportunities to play is a helpful way for children to learn. Reflecting on where, when, who, how, why are good questions to consider when planning meaningful learning experiences for the children.

iv) Transform vision into reality

Cara and her colleagues from Little Seeds Preschool shared how they help children to achieve their God-given identity through original design, environment as the third teacher and preparing children for life with relevant life skills and learning dispositions. They also shared how leaders are in a privileged position to transform vision into reality. Being clear of one’s purpose is significant as it can help leaders to make their vision into a reality and to make good things happen.

v) You do not walk alone

The leadership journey is not without challenges and difficulties. However, we do not need to do it alone as we have one another. In that journey of many good things to happen it is inevitable for challenges to occur, but we can support each other to achieve our dreams for the children in this noble profession. It was an encouraging ending note for all the participants there.

It has been an inspiring and rewarding session with the opportunity as well to meet delegates from Malaysia and Vietnam who are passionate about their work with children. My appreciation goes to the team who put it together and the presenters for their generous and heartfelt sharing.

Message from our Vietnamese delegates

The school visit and the presentation with photos, video of the schools demonstrated the devotion to children and educators in Singapore and other countries.

Thanks to the forum, it has provided excellent connection for participants in Singapore and abroad. *(Minh Pham Nguyet, Enspire, Vietnam)*

Messages from our Malaysian delegates

The forum was a great one. I am still impressed with the speech given by Mrs Loke. Prof. Mari Mori also gave a speech which was so relevant to the ECE industry. The AECES team also provided great support for this event.

While there are not many differences between Malaysia and Singapore's classrooms, the early childhood scene in Singapore is a good example for Malaysian kindergartens, especially Little Village. The other schools are equally fantastic. I believe that meaningful and authentic learning processes led by the teacher can be applied in the Malaysian classroom. *(Professor Mariani, President of The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Council, Malaysia)*

We were truly touched by the generosity and welcome from the centres we visited. There are similarities in pedagogies between Singapore and Malaysia and sharing was transparent and thorough. Discussion was flowing freely, friendship built. It was delightful to listen to Prof. Mari Mori's keynote on the 100 languages of children of Reggio Emilia, riding through 'slow pedagogy' with her.

We would like to thank AECES for opening 30 places for us. THANK YOU SO MUCH AECES. *(Patricia Teh, Member of The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Council, Malaysia)*



Photo 2: Delegates from the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Council, Malaysia



Photo 3: Delegates from Department of Education and Training, Hanoi, Vietnam

Insights to a Child-directed Curriculum - ECDA PDP Overseas Study Trip to Taichung 2023

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Principal
M.Y World Preschool



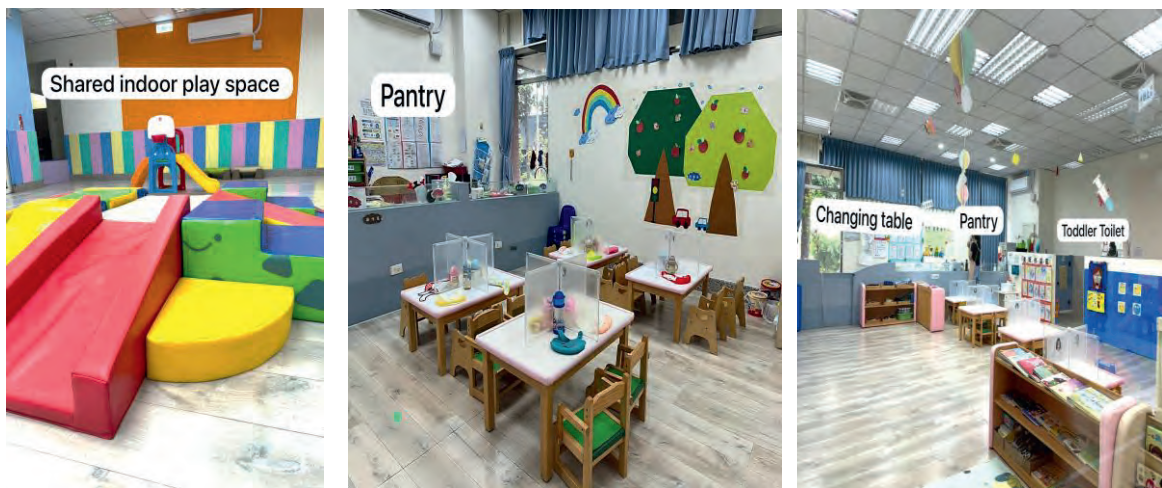
Photo 1: Group photo when we arrived at Taiwan Airport

From 15 to 21 October 2023, I embarked on the ECDA study trip to Taiwan (Taichung) with the aim of gaining insights into the Taiwan Early Childhood Education (ECE) landscape to build my leadership competencies. I had the preconception that most preschools in Taiwan adopt a structured large group teaching and thematic based curriculum. The trip gave me an opportunity to understand the ECE trends of Taiwan. It was an enriching experience as I was given the opportunity to engage in deep and meaningful exchanges with the leaders of the 6 different centres that I visited. Through these interactions, I gained invaluable insights into the gradual paradigm shift in Taiwan's ECE curriculum and pedagogy over the last decade with the strong government support. I also gained firsthand experience witnessing authentic child-directed learning at the learning centres and respectful teacher-child interactions, which reflects the implementation of the curriculum and pedagogy.

Taichung Municipal Dali Infant Center

This is a public infant care centre that caters to children aged 0-3 years old. There are 2 classes of infants and 2 classes of toddlers. The highlight of this centre is each class has their own classroom with a pantry for meal preparation and a changing table or toddler friendly toilet. They have a shared indoor play space outside the 4 classrooms to facilitate gross motor activities. There is a schedule in place to ensure classes take turns to go for outdoor walks as well as to utilise the shared play space.

The key observation I made is how bumbo chairs and toddler chairs do not come with seat belts unlike most centres in Singapore. Children from as young as 2 years old are toilet trained based on ability. The classrooms are designed to be equipped with toddler toilets to assist with toilet training. There is no formal large group teaching, instead they focus on adaptive self-help skills, social and emotional development, early language and motor skills abilities.



Photos 2 to 4 (L to R): Classroom spaces at Taichung Municipal Dali Infant Center

Taichung Municipal Dajia Preschool

This is a public daycare preschool that caters to children aged 2-6 years old. The highlight of this centre is they cater at least 2.5 hours a day to learning centre activity. Their curriculum and pedagogy is solely based on learning centre activities.

The key observation I made was seeing 2-3 year old children using scissors and manipulating with tiny materials which may pose choking hazard, unsupervised. I also observed how a 3-4 year old boy was manipulating with pliers to create a hook for his completed threaded beads keyring. Another boy was seen making cookies at the cookery corner. I spoke with the boy and he said he was making almond cookies, following the hand drawn recipe on the wall. I interviewed the teacher, and she said they did this cookery lesson 2 weeks ago and children were free to try out the recipe at the cookery corner. The children would bring home the cookies once they are baked.



Photos 5 to 7 (L to R): 3 years old manipulating scissors independently; 4 years old baking cookies; block corner in a 5-6 years old classroom

Emile Early Childhood Education Institution

*No photo taking was allowed in this centre.

This is a private daycare preschool that caters to children aged 2-6 years old. The highlight of this centre is the unconventional learning tools and resources made available and accessible to the children. As children engage in learning centre activities with these tools and resources, the teacher's role is to facilitate conversations, take photographs, observe and document children's learning.

The key observation here was that in the 5-6 year old class, some children were engaged in woodwork, manipulating with hammer and nails, with minimal assistance and supervision. In another class, a child was seen using the microscope to analyse a piece of playdough. As there were only 2 teachers in the classroom and more than 20 children, teachers conducted observation in small groups and the rest of the children were meaningfully engaged in the learning centre independently, unsupervised.

Che Lung Pu Elementary School Affiliated Preschool

This is a public Elementary School Affiliated preschool that caters to children aged 2-6 years old. The highlight of this centre is all their classes from 4-6 are mixed age classes. The teachers are given the autonomy to tailor the curriculum and pedagogy approach to fit the needs of the class. The teachers start with a thematic based curriculum plan and move on to project based learning once the opportunity arises. The children spend at least 1 hour of uninterrupted time in the learning centre daily.

The key observation here is the autonomy and support given to the teachers in planning and execution of the curriculum. Documentation of children's participation is displayed outside the classroom to celebrate learning milestones. The teachers take turns to be the deputy centre leader every 2 years. This allows for succession as well as enhanced teamwork amongst the teachers.



Photos 8 to 10 (L to R): Documentation and display of children's work at Che Lung Pu Elementary School Affiliated Preschool

Natural Way Experimental Education Foundation

This is a non-profit preschool that caters to children aged 0-6 years old. The highlight of this centre is the emphasis on creating a home for the children and the integration of nature. The children spend the first 1 hour of their morning in unstructured outdoor play, experiencing nature with their senses. Raincoats and boots are part of their school essential, they are prepared to go out rain or shine. The teacher blows a flute melody to prepare children for transition. The curriculum is planned around the key events and celebrations all year round.

The key observation here is the slow and unhurried pace in the preschool. The classroom is designed like the layout of a house to help children feel at ease. The children respond to the flute melody naturally, no verbal instructions had to be given.



Photo 11: Natural Way Experimental Education Foundation

Double Love Preschool

This is a private daycare preschool that caters to children aged 2-6 years old. The highlight of this centre is the sub centres in each learning centre. The sub centre focuses on the different skills set for each learning area. Despite having a small indoor classroom space, the space is maximised to make provisions for numerous learning centres.

The key observation here is that in relatively small indoor spaces, children are meaningfully engaged in the various learning centre activities. There is also a wide variety of resources available for children to create their own learning. Resources are neatly arranged and organised within each learning centre.



Photos 12 to 13 (L to R): 5 year old classroom at Double Love Preschool

Summary

The key similarity amongst the 6 centres is the common belief and focus on children's needs, interests and abilities. These 3 areas of focus are the foundation of their curriculum and pedagogy, learning environment and documentation of children's learning. We spent an average of 2.5 hours in each centre. When we entered each of the preschools, we were greeted by the peaceful and calm environment. The only sounds that surrounded us were our own voices.

It was an eye opening experience to be allowed into the classes as the children were busy engaged in the learning centres. The children were not disturbed by our presence, they greeted us and went on with their activities. The teacher spoke to children with gentle voices and respectful words. Children were not redirected but instead were given autonomy to have conversations with their friends as they were engaged in the activities. I overheard an interesting conversation between 2 of the 3 year old children engaged in a threading activity. The girl shared: "I fell down at the playground.". The boy responded: "It must be painful, did your mama put a plaster for you?". The girl replied: " Yes,.. " and the conversation went on as they engaged in the

threading activity. Later, the same boy dropped his beads into the spout of the watering can. The teacher who spotted it went near to him, spoke in a low tone, reminding the child that the beads are used for threading, and reminding him the rules of the learning centre.

Reflection

Cultural Differences

What I witnessed is impressionable because children were given the autonomy to have conversations as they engaged in hands-on activities. In my observation across different preschools in Singapore, children were always reminded to stay focused and to keep their voices down. In my opinion, in Singapore's context, adults are often seen exercising control over children while in Taiwan, children are given autonomy and I am impressed by how they are able to exercise the autonomy reasonably.

Debunking Misconceptions

The initial idea of structured learning in Taiwan's early childhood education was a terrible misconception. Conversations with the leaders of the 6 different preschools converged to the common understanding that Taiwan's early childhood education is experiencing a paradigm shift in the last decade from a structured thematic-based curriculum to a child-directed learning centre and project or inquiry-based curriculum.

Protecting vs Preventing

Through this trip, I was able to fully experience child-directed learning in a practical context. Witnessing how children as young as 3 years old are free to manipulate with materials that are deemed as hazardous in Singapore's context, made me rethink how the culture in Singapore is moulding our younger generation. Are young children in Singapore protected from injuries or *prevented* from injuries? Instead of teaching appropriate handling skills, the scissors that can cause hurt are mandated to be kept away beyond reach. Does this do more harm than good to them in their growing years?

While it is mandatory in Singapore for teachers to conduct a thorough visual health check on children first thing in the early morning, the Taiwan teachers do a basic temperature check and follow-up with thorough checks in the classroom when necessary. They greet and receive the children promptly to prevent long queues and waiting time for the parents. While doing this, they practise strict personal hygiene and do not compromise on health protocols or risk any disease outbreak. Again, are we overdoing our preventive measures, wearing our teachers out with regulations and protocols, instead of focussing on spending time connecting and engaging with children and their families?

Curriculum Leadership led by Transformational Leadership

The leaders shared the initial challenges they faced as they embarked on this change. These challenges range from teacher's buy-in, teacher's observation, questioning and documentation skills to school readiness expectations from parents. The leaders from all the schools again converged when they shared how they managed to navigate through the change with their team. They shared the common belief in supporting and empowering teachers as well as a strong emphasis on teacher's professional development.

A supportive leadership is crucial as we continue to advocate for a child-centred curriculum in Singapore. As leaders, it is important to work the ground, listen and empathise with the struggles of the educators. Through supporting and empowering our educators, we will then be able to work towards a common vision to provide a quality early childhood education for the children.

Professional growth and insights

As an emerging curriculum leader, it was heartening to hear from the leaders of early childhood in Taiwan on their success stories in leading the paradigm shift in curriculum and pedagogy in the preschools in Taiwan. As an advocate for inclusionary practice in preschools, I am immensely impressed by the massive support and funding which helps to build a culture of inclusive practice within preschools to support children with added needs, allowing these identified children to receive early intervention. The support they received from the government plays an important role in their practice, this is an area that still requires a lot of work in Singapore.

Personal growth and insights

Beyond the professional learning, this study trip had a profound impact on my personal growth. It broadened my horizons and fostered a sense of appreciation for the strong emphasis on the values system in Taiwanese culture. Witnessing the dedication and passion of the teachers and leaders who advocate for "teaching what the children need, and not what the parents want", inspired me to consider volunteering with AECES, to contribute a voice, to make a difference in the lives of children.

In conclusion, the field trip to Taiwan (Taichung) was a fruitful experience that allowed me to witness firsthand theory in practice across various centres. It deepened my understanding of child-directed learning through learning centres and broadened my perspective of empowering children as capable beings. This ignited a passion for further exploration in using the learning centre as a provocation to an inquiry-based curriculum. This trip has solidified my commitment to raise the professional capabilities of early childhood educators in Singapore; while on a more personal level it has motivated me to lead my team to start inquiry topics from children's creation at the block centre.

The Gruffalo

By Julia Donaldson and illustrated by Axel Scheffler

Darseni Rengasamy

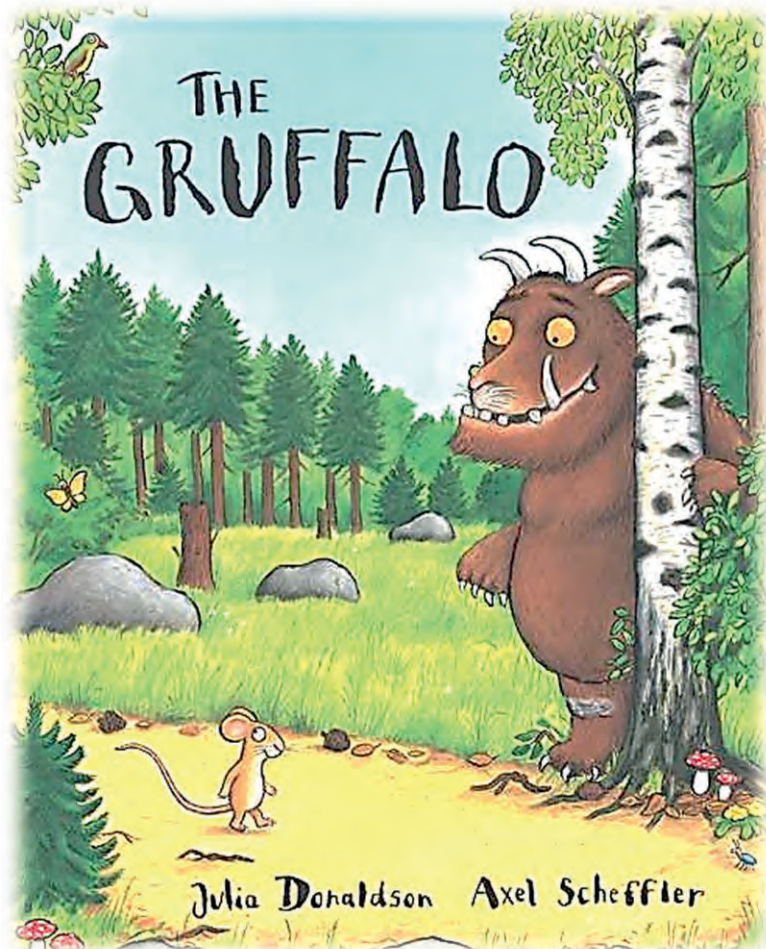
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"The Gruffalo", authored by Julia Donaldson and illustrated by Axel Scheffler, is a timeless children's book that combines captivating storytelling with vibrant illustrations to offer a delightful reading experience for young readers. First published in 1999, this charming story has captivated generations with its endearing characters, imaginative narrative with rhythmic language and meaningful life lessons.

The story follows a tiny clever mouse wandering through a deep dark forest where it encounters several animals that want to make a meal out of it. To outwit them, the mouse invents a fearsome creature called the Gruffalo, a monstrous being with terrible tusks, knobby knees and a poisonous wart at the end of its nose! Ingeniously, the mouse declares that it is meeting the Gruffalo for lunch, sending the other animals fleeing in terror. However, the mouse's elaborate tale becomes a reality when encountering an actual Gruffalo. At every turn, the mouse faces challenges that require quick thinking, keen observation and creative problem-solving skills. Instead of being deterred by its diminutive size, the mouse uses wit and resourcefulness to outsmart its predator. The storyline beautifully underscores the importance of resilience, creativity and a sharp mind in overcoming adversity.

Julia Donaldson's masterful use of rhyming couplets infuses the story with an irresistible rhythm, making it an ideal read-aloud book. The playful and engaging language lures children into the narrative and encourages them to join in the repetition



BOOK REVIEW

in the text, which contributes to its memorability and actively involves young readers in the storytelling process.

Complementing the narrative are captivating illustrations. Axel Scheffler's whimsical depictions of the characters bring them to life, showcasing their emotions and personalities. The Gruffalo is a marvellous creation that strikes a balance between being fearsome and amusing, ensuring that even young children find the character enchanting rather than frightening.

Beyond its fascinating narrative and interesting characters, "The Gruffalo" imparts one valuable life lesson - that size does not necessarily dictate one's ability to thrive in challenging circumstances. The mouse's cleverness and ability to think creatively and on its feet become its greatest assets, highlighting the importance of resourcefulness over physical strength. This theme inspires children to embrace their unique qualities and capabilities. Moreover, the book subtly explores the theme of kindness. Despite the mouse's apparent vulnerability, it does not use cruelty to escape danger. Instead, it uses creativity and wit to avoid harm while treating the other animals respectfully.

Educators can use "The Gruffalo" to foster resilience, creativity and flexible thinking while entertaining and educating preschoolers. The following are suggested ideas to engage children with this book and/or in related follow-up activities.

- **Story sequencing to integrate numeracy and language:** Provide images or puppets representing key events in the story. Have children arrange them chronologically, promoting sequencing skills (numeracy) and understanding of story structure (comprehension).
- **Dramatic play with crafts by children:** Encourage children to engage in imaginative play by setting up a "Gruffalo's Deep Dark Woods" dramatic play corner. Let them unleash their creativity and artistic skills by making their own Gruffalo and other animal masks or puppets related to the story. Encourage them to act out scenes from the story, this fosters quick thinking and creativity and promotes social interaction and language development. This play activity is an excellent way for children to express their imagination and have fun.
- **Mouse's journey – an obstacle course:** Set up an indoor or outdoor obstacle course to simulate the journey of the mouse through the forest. The obstacles can represent the animals in the story or anything children perceive as challenges in their daily lives, for example, encountering a stranger. This activity promotes physical development, fast decision-making, and problem-solving skills.

- **Nature walks and story with scavenger hunt:** Plan a nature walk similar to the mouse's journey through a neighbourhood park. Prepare a list of possible animals that can be spotted in the park and encourage children to take pictures with iPads/Polaroid cameras or draw with markers and clipboards. After observing the animals, have the children create a storyline like "The Gruffalo" story. This activity fosters observation, creativity and language skills, in addition to them enjoying the outdoors.
- **Riddles for critical thinking:** Challenge children with story-inspired riddles, ask them to develop creative solutions using their wit and imagination. Emphasise to the children to be kind and respectful in their responses, like the mouse in the story. The activity requires educators to use effective prompts and questions so that the children will respond with in-depth thinking.
- **Writing and drawing prompts:** Provide prompts like "If I met the Gruffalo, I would..." or "Design your magical creature." Depending on the children's age group and developmental stage, the activity could be customised as a drawing, speaking or writing activity. These prompts encourage language development and imaginative thinking.
- **Online resource for more activity ideas to customise:**
<https://www.teachingexpertise.com/classroom-ideas/gruffalo-themed-crafts-and-activities/>

"The Gruffalo" is an excellent story that brilliantly portrays resilience and creativity in the face of adversity. The clever adventures of the mouse inspire young readers to confront challenges with intelligence and resourcefulness. In a preschool setting, this book is a valuable resource for building resilience and encouraging creative thinking in children. It captures their attention and instils valuable life lessons that will benefit them as they mature.



Honing Our Child-like Awe and Wonder: Reflections from the Inaugural SUSS Early Childhood Education Conference

Eden Lok

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The inaugural SUSS Early Childhood Education Conference marks a pivotal moment in our collective journey toward "Rethinking Play and Learning: Creating Joyful Experiences". The event concluded on 18th November 2023, jointly organised by children's charity Playeum and the Early Childhood Programme of SUSS S R Nathan School of Human Development.

LATEST EVENT

Over 400 early childhood educators and pre-service teachers rediscovered their intentional teaching and play practices, imbued within transformative possibilities of redefining centre-based leadership. These insights fostered distributed expertise and collective creativity through holistic alignment in provisions of play. Equipped with concrete strategies to implement in classroom environments, the curated workshops facilitated cross-sectorial engagements towards tangible outcomes for children's joyful abundance in language and literacy, multimodal meaning-making and effecting knowledge-building mediums.

Prof Jocelyn Nuttall, Executive Dean, Faculty of Education, University of Canterbury, alluded to shifts in mental models to propel transformative pedagogies in play, rooted in foundational theories from pioneers in education. A/Prof Andres Sebastian Bustamante from the School of Education, University of California, highlighted methodologies to engage community stakeholders in co-creating spaces to optimise the environment as a third teacher.

Mr Jeffrey Tan, a theatre director and drama educator, directed fellow teachers to ignite their senses through whole-body expressions to simulate the soundscape of the story. Participants reflected on the utility of immersive experiences for toddler-aged and non-verbal children to develop their emerging understanding of storybook themes.

The repertoire of instinctive and integrated strategies for practitioners to furnish their teaching toolkit expanded with these authentic experiences from cross-sector interactions of academics, researchers, STEM specialists, and creative arts professionals. It was affirming and encouraging to be amongst forerunners in refining dimensions of play to enable children to thrive and flourish. Our endeavour to nourish and edify children runs parallel to our pursuits and personality, to hone our child-like awe and wonder.