EARLY EDUCATORS

A Folio for Educators by Educators

A Practitioner Journal

Issue No. 43: June 2024

A Publication of the Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore)

Front Cover: "Bloom!" by Audrey Jin Ting Paulino (K1), YWCA Preschool @Bedok.

Caption: The story titled "The Bad Seed" by Jory John was told to the children. They shared about various edible seeds, and Audrey shared that she liked eating the sunflower seeds. She meticulously used brush strokes to create her sunflower, adding yellow and a little red paint. As she painted, she said, "The sunflower is happy to see the sun."

Table of Contents

From The Editor

I have been on the editorial team for Early Educators since 2020 and I am truly humbled and honoured to have been selected as the new Editor. Ruth has done such fantastic work with this journal over the years and I certainly have very big shoes to fill. I am thankful that I get to continue to work with my excellent editorial team mates.

In our first online-only edition of the journal, I am recommending the article 'The *Mimamoru* Approach' by Satomi Izumi-Taylor. It talks about how Japanese early childhood educators use the *mimamoru* approach, in which teachers practise minimal adult intervention when it comes to interacting with children. I found it an interesting and necessary read because it is always more intuitive for us adults to jump right in and try to resolve challenges/issues that our children might face. However by doing so, we are actually restricting our children from problem-solving on their own. It is a great reminder for us to constantly review what is our image of the child and what are our beliefs and practices when it comes to reinforcing that image.

This issue has a diverse selection of articles and all wonderfully written - ranging from risky play in a preschool setting, to a book review on a delightful wordless picture book. I am sure that you will find something in this first issue of 2024 that is both an enticing and enriching read. Enjoy!

With my best wishes,
Vanessa Kong
Editor

The Mimamoru Approach

Satomi Izumi-Taylor
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Minimal adult intervention in preschool encourages children's autonomy, problem- solving skills, and self-regulation, fostering independence and a natural inclination for exploration and learning.

Supporting Young Children's Problem-Solving Skills in Japan

Many Japanese early childhood education teachers use the mimamoru approach (mi means "to watch" and mamoru means "to protect/guard") when interacting with children. The approach employs the strategy of watching over children without intervention.

By reducing their own authority as adults, teachers promote children's problem-solving skills.

As I reflect back on my own kindergarten experiences in Japan, the following incident serves as a good example of how my kindergarten teacher implemented the mimamoru approach. When we had a sports day event and were practicing for our class dance, everyone held hands to make a circle but I refused to hold the hand of the boy next to me. I was the only one who refused to do this, and my teacher asked me, "Are you okay? Can you hold Ken's hand?" I answered her flatly, "No!" I participated in the dance practice, but without holding Ken's hand. She said nothing about it to me even after the practice was over. On the following day at the sports event, the dance was observed by my parents and others. I continued to refuse Ken the honor of holding my hand. My teacher still never said anything to me, although I inferred what she wanted me to do because she made direct eye contact with me and had a sad look. Although she respected my wish to not hold Ken's hand, I felt bad because of her sadness. After the event, I held his hand reluctantly because I had come to feel sorry for Ken and also for the teacher. Later, she said, "Look at Ken! He looks very happy now because you let him hold your hand."

My experience illustrates how Japanese early childhood teachers use the mimamoru approach, in which teachers let children develop their sense of right and wrong in a group-oriented environment where they are accountable to others. In my case, my teacher's subtle facial expressions and her direct eye contact led me to internalize that hurting someone's feelings was not appropriate. Because of how she had respected my feelings, I wanted to return the favor by following her directions.

To promote children's internalization of appropriate behavior, teachers ask questions rather than reprimand, and they delegate authority to children so they are responsible for their own actions. Although many teachers do not force children to participate in activities, they do communicate their wishes through non-verbal gestures such as nodding or shaking their head, showing different facial expressions, making eye contact or victory signs, or winking. Teachers also appeal to children's feelings of empathy by discussing others' feelings.

Cultural in nature, the mimamoru approach is based on teachers' beliefs that children are truly autonomous beings who can learn to solve problems by themselves with little help. By reducing their own authority as adults, teachers promote children's problem-solving skills. Understanding teaching methods practiced in different countries, such as the mimamoru approach, broadens educators' views of early education and care and provides opportunities to reflect on their own values and beliefs when working with children.

To provide some context regarding the Japanese early childhood educational system, I note that Japanese preschools are called kindergartens and are attended by children ages 3 to 5. The first two years are equivalent to preschool in the United States, and the last year is the same as the American kindergarten year.

The Mimamoru Approach

Many Japanese early childhood teachers use this approach of observing, watching over, and standing guard rather than taking immediate action. They intentionally take the time to see what develops, and only intervene if necessary. When teachers do inter- vene, they do not solve problems for children. Rather, they ask questions so that children can find new strategies for problem solving. The goal of this approach is to promote children's abilities to solve problems without adults' intervention, which is related the goals of socializing children based on cultural values.

Teachers provide children with integrated guidance and suitable experiences through play in group-oriented environments. They develop respectful relationships with children through various play activities based on children's needs and interests, providing ample opportunities and time for children to interact, to solve problems by themselves, and develop positive emotions toward each other. Allowing children to self-regulate often takes precedence over intervention and control of behavior. Teachers also promote a sense of responsibility in children by involving them in classroom management. Giving children choices fosters their abilities to think about various possibilities that are the most essential in solving problems.

I observed a memorable application of the mimamoru approach in one kindergarten classroom in Kawasaki City. During free-play time in a class of 5-year-olds, two boys named Koji and Jin began fighting over the diminishing availability of LEGO pieces. Soon, construction ceased and the boys had begun throwing the pieces at each other. "I had them first!" shouted Koji. "No, these are mine!" screamed Jin. With LEGO parts flying furiously, the argument intensified, and Koji began crying with Jin following suit. Now, the crying itself had taken on the elements of a competition: the more one boy cried, the louder the other boy became. The noise attracted the attention of two girls, who came to the scene of the pandemonium.

"Why are you crying so hard?" asked Yuko. "Why are you throwing toys at each other, and why are you so loud?" inquired Rika. The boys continued throwing the LEGO toys. Obviously upset at this situation, Yuko screamed, "Stop! You are hurting each other!" Although the girls did their best to intervene, they were unable to stop the escalating hostilities. The crying intensified to the point that Jin started hiccuping uncontrollably, and Koji began coughing. Unable to breathe because of his coughing spell, Koji began drooling in addition to crying. In an effort to bring the situation under control, Yuko threw some tissues to him and said, "Look at yourself, you are crying so hard it made you start coughing, and now you're drooling all over yourself. You're disgusting! Here, wipe yourself off!" Heaving with emotion, Koji was not too successful using the tissues that Yuko had rudely provided. The more mild-mannered Rika attempted to ease the tensions when she addressed both boys to say, "Now, you two stop crying and play nice, okay?" However, the boys not only continued crying, but also began kicking the toys toward each other.

With the situation seeming to be escalating out of control, the girls finally went to the teacher to ask for help. "We don't know what to do!" said Rika. The teacher, who had been closely observing this situation all along, answered, "I think you two are doing a great job in helping the boys. You can help them till the end!" The two girls looked at each other, somewhat taken aback to hear that they had done well and yet inspired to persist in finishing the job they had started.

Determined to bring an end to the conflict, Rika and Yuko returned to the boys, who were still crying, kicking, hiccuping, coughing, and drooling. Rika spoke up first, "I guess you two are going to cry all day long, and when you get home, you'll tell your mothers that you spent the whole day crying." Looking at the teacher for approval, the girls continued to lecture. Swallowing tears, Jin finally managed to speak. "We don't know what to do!" he said. "Maybe you should just stay away from each other for the rest of the day," suggested Rika. Both boys nodded and gulped air as their crying slowly subsided. At this point Yuko, while not entirely accurate in describing how events actually transpired, brought the conflict to a conclusion when she said, "Yes, and don't you both come crying to us again!" Glancing at the teacher for approval, the girls received the confirmation of a job well done when the teacher gave them a hearty wink. With victory signs displayed on their small hands by both girls, they returned a four-eyed attempt at a wink to their mentor.

When I asked the teacher about this incident, this was what she said:

> *Fostering children's problem-solving skills is a slow process that begins when children first enter kindergarten. We tell them that if they try, they can do anything. With our support, children really make an effort. It is also important to realize that it is not the product, but rather the process of trying to solve problems that matters most. We teachers often give children the impression we are not watching what they are doing, so that when they need to solve problems, they will be able to do so on their own.*

The goal of this approach is to promote children's abilities to solve problems without adults' intervention.

The Anatomy of the Mimamoru Approach

The teacher in the scenario above remarked that while many teachers may appear to not watch children's problems, they are quite aware of what is happening in their classrooms. While keeping a distance from children's problems and allowing the children to reach their own solutions, the teachers intentionally and strategically adjust their locations to prepare for arbitration if needed. In the incident above, the teacher gave the non-verbal cue of winking to indicate that the girls were doing well in their negotiations. Such a gesture is another strategy that teachers use to encourage
children to work on their own situations.

However, teachers are well aware that children might not be able to solve some problems. In such cases, they use intentional timing to intervene. Usually, teachers provide children enough time and space to work on problems on their own. Since the teachers are keen observers, they know when to intervene if situations get too frustrating. They talk to children by asking reflective questions, and wait to see how they might problem solve. For example, when some 4-year-olds were bickering about who was going to read a new book, the teacher asked them, "Hey everybody, what do you think you should do with this book so you won't be fighting about it?" When teachers intervene, they appeal to the group rather than to the individual, and thereby avoid doling out individual criticism.

This approach is based on teachers' beliefs that children are capable of solving problems. While empathic about children's struggles, the teachers wait and watch over the children as they work on their problems. This practice comes from cultural beliefs that value children's independence and initiative; thus, they intentionally try not to intervene. In general, Japanese teachers keep their distance, keenly observing, and intervening only when necessary. The teachers do not expect children to master
problem-solving skills overnight, and so support their efforts by watching over them.

Highly skilled teachers are intentional when teaching young children. Excellent Japanese teachers are intentional in their use of the mimamoru approach. Understanding the implementation and value of this approach has universal implications for early childhood teachers striving to nurture children's problem-solving skills.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Risky Play in a Preschool Setting

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Background

With the recent emphasis on outdoor learning in Singapore, the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA, 2019) introduced a national guide for outdoor learning that encourages early childhood educators to provide purposeful outdoor play experiences. These experiences should provide ample opportunities for freedom, adventure, risk-taking, creativity and imagination. However, upon reflection on my experiences in preschool centres, I realised that the risk-taking element in children's play was seldom encouraged.

Risky play is a type of play that brings about challenges and great excitement as well as an inevitable risk of injury to children (Cevher-Kalburan, 2015; Harper & Obee, 2021; Obee et al., 2021). It allows children to explore boundaries, complete challenges and learn from their mistakes (Cetken-Aktas & Sevimli-Celik, 2021). These experiences involve decision-making with regards to risk assessment and risk management that fosters the disposition of resilience, empowering children as social actors of their lives. Assessing and adapting to the risks present during risky play provides opportunities to respond flexibly in their environment when faced with challenging play experiences.

Having worked with children in a forest school in Singapore, I had observed how children were able to manage their risks in a free and unstructured outdoor environment. Educators played the role of facilitators as children explored and experimented with the different natural materials around them. Children were given the freedom to use the materials as they wish, most times children created simple systems to transport water or to have fun – such as a seesaw in the middle of a mud pool. While these were happening, the educators were often observers, stepping in only when safety was an issue. As suggested by literature, engaging in risky play experiences can develop a child's social competence, problem-solving abilities, initiative and a sense of self-efficacy, all of which promotes the development of resilience (Cetken-Aktas & Sevimli-Celik, 2021; Harper & Obee, 2021; Kemple et al., 2016; Little & Sweller, 2015; Obee et al., 2021; Spencer et al., 2021). When children achieve success in challenging activities, they become confident of their abilities and they develop dispositions such as persistence and resilience which empower them to become social actors of their lives (Cetken-Aktas & Sevimli-Celik, 2021).

Current Teacher Inquiry

With these benefits in mind, I investigated the effectiveness of using learning invitations based on the Reggio Emilia approach to encourage 6-year-old children's participation in more outdoor risky play through a play-based approach.

The Reggio Emilia approach (REA) is deeply rooted in the belief that children are capable, competent and active learners who co-construct knowledge alongside peers, teachers and others through their active exploration of richly provisioned environments (Kaynak-Ekici et al., 2021; Senent et al., 2021; Westerberg & Vandermaas-Peeler, 2021). This approach values the importance of developing a positive and strong child image, concept of educators as learners, environment as the third teacher, children's multiple languages, relationship between people and environment, as well as documentation (Kaynak-Ekici et al., 2021; Westerberg & Vandermaas-Peeler, 2021). Learning invitations include purposeful creation of environment and facilitation strategies employed before and during children's risky play (Kaynak-Ekici et al., 2021). Learning invitations were carried out across a period of six weeks, involving four six-year-olds (refer to Figure 1), with the environmental setup influenced by the children's interactions with the different loose parts materials.

Figure 1
Characteristics of the Participants

Child's Name (pseudonyms)	Anna	Sarah	Vin	Zed
Age	6	6	6	6
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male
Risk-Taking Tendencies (based on observations)	R4	R6 (depending on situations)	R2 (requires encouragement)	R8

Note. These observations were gathered prior to the start of data collection.

One play session was conducted with the children each week. The learning invitations each week differed from one another to suggest possible play experiences to the children. Together with the invitation message, the learning invitations served as a tool to encourage the children to explore different possibilities and combinations of a material or equipment. Throughout the play session, my role was as a participant observer where I involved myself in the children's play. The children's levels of risky play were measured using Little and Eager's (2010) categories of risk-taking behaviours (refer to Figure 2).

Figure 2

Categories of Risk-Taking Behaviours

		Categories of Risk-Taking Behaviours (Little & Eager, 2010)
R1	Risk Avoidance	Child avoids the activity and expresses unwillingness in participating in the task. Child may display signs of distress or change his / her behaviour to lower the level of risk involved.
R2	Exploratory Risk Appraisal	Child is hesitant in approaching the material / equipment. Seeks help from adults. Initially tries to complete the task but gives up or is told by adult that the task is too difficult.
R3	Very Low / No Risk	Child confidently approaches the material / equipment and uses it appropriately. Child displays competency in his / her skills and facial expression suggests confidence and enjoyment.
R4	Low Risk (Positive)	Child attempts activity slightly above his / her current skill level independently. Involves a low degree of injury risk if the child is unsuccessful or not careful. Child engages in trial and error to try to complete the task. May seek or receive help from adults to complete the task.
R5	Low Risk (Negative)	Child inappropriately uses the material / equipment but there is no or very little risk of injury.
R6	Moderate Risk (Positive)	Child challenges self to complete task above current skill level. Facial expression suggests determination, concentration, and satisfaction upon task completion. Unsuccessful completion of task may result in a minor injury.
R7	Moderate Risk (Negative)	Child engages in moderately dangerous / inappropriate use of equipment that may result in minor / moderate injury.
R8	High Risk (Positive)	Child displays confidence in challenging current skill level to complete difficult tasks or independently completes task that could result in moderate injury if unsuccessful. Child is in control of the task. Able to take necessary action to prevent injuries. Requires close adult supervision.
R9	High Risk (Negative)	Child uses equipment in a dangerous or inappropriate manner that is not intended but attempts task well beyond current skill level. May result in moderate to serious injury Requires intervention by adults.

Note. Adapted from Little and Eager (2010).

TEACHER INQUIRY

In the following section, I will discuss the findings gathered from my teacher inquiry. My perspectives toward risky play were also explored in this study.

Figure 3
Learning Invitation Setup – Week 4

Note. Materials and equipment used in the setup are child-friendly where the children are free to adjust their own environment to suit their needs and capabilities for risky play.

Findings and Discussion

Throughout the six weeks of learning invitation implementations, I observed a significant increase in risky play levels for Anna and Vin who initially displayed lower levels of risky play. Zed, who had a higher level of risky play sought more risky play opportunities. Social environments encouraged Sarah to engage in risky play opportunities.

Factors influencing Children's Risky Play Levels Increased with Effective Learning Invitations

Loose Parts Materials

The materials used throughout the six learning invitation implementations were a combination of various loose parts materials (refer to Figure 3). These materials include wooden climbing cubes, tyres, long balance beams, moveable climbing structure, styrofoam blocks, gym mats and blocks, rope, moveable mini slide, and hula hoops. Compared to the previous fixed playground structures, the results revealed that loose parts materials diversified children's risky play experiences and afforded more varied, creative and expansive risky play (Sandseter et al., 2021; Spencer et al., 2021). By providing a sense of adventure and danger in the environment, it developed the children's confidence and skills in problem-solving and self-regulation (Flannigan & Dietze, 2017). The moveability of loose parts materials gave the children the freedom to change their environment to suit their desired degree of risks that promoted competency and

risk-assessment skills (Obee et al., 2021). Anna exclaimed during the first implementation, "I love this! There's no rules. Because I can move whatever I want."

Invitation Messages

As I reflected upon the first two implementations, I realized that the children's engagement with the materials were not as deep and sustained as I thought they would be. Recalling prior experiences at other practicum centres, the thought of including invitation messages came to mind to which I decided to introduce invitation messages from the third implementation onwards. The first implementation message was inspired by Sarah's drawing of a swing as she hoped for a swing in the playground:

"Dear SL 1,

Some of your friends suggested having a swing in the playground. How can we work together to build a swing using the materials here? Remember to be safe! Happy playing!

Love, Aunty J"

Figure 4
Sarah's Drawing of a Swing

Note. Sarah shared, "Children need to climb up here (ladder) to the top and get onto the tyre and swing from here (right) to there (left)."

Although the third implementation showed much more problem-solving and collaboration as the children engaged in the play session as compared to the second implementation, I reflected that due to the specific goal that needed to be achieved, the children were engaged in higher levels of problem-solving and collaboration with lower levels of risky play. Even though problem-solving and collaboration could be naturally elicited from risky play, this event of problem-solving was not related to the children's risky play. To observe higher levels of risky play in the children, the invitation message for the fourth implementation presented a problem for the children to solve:

"Dear SL 1,

I really enjoyed how some of you worked together on Tuesday. Have you spotted some new materials (gym mats and blocks) today? We are going to work together to make an obstacle course! Everyone has a part to play. Remember to be safe! Happy playing!

Love, Aunty J"

Compared to the invitation message in the third implementation, this message was much more open-ended, allowing children to think of different ways to engage in risky play. It was observed that there was a significant increase in the levels of risky play in the children.

Social Environment

As I observed the children's risky play, I realised the extent to which social interactions between peers could influence the levels of risky play children engaged in. This was especially prominent for Anna and Vin who were more hesitant in engaging in play experiences that went beyond their current capabilities and comfort zone.

In a risky play session, Anna jumped over a tyre from an elevated balancing beam after much encouragement from her peers. During the focus group interview after the session, I asked Anna how the experience felt. Anna explained that her friends encouraged her to try it and she managed to do it in the end. However, she mentioned that "I (she) will not do it again." Anna's peers played a role in encouraging her to push her boundaries and take the risk, and through such an experience, Anna herself was able to understand her threshold of risks that she was willing to take, and in her own evaluation, she decided she would not do it again.

Gym Blocks Support Children's Engagement in Risky Play Experiences

There was a significant change observed in children's risky play experiences when I introduced gym mats and gym blocks in the fourth implementation. The levels of risky play increased significantly with these materials. Gym mats and blocks also challenged the children to engage in play experiences that were above their current skill level, especially for Anna. In the fourth implementation when the gym mat was introduced, Anna had challenged herself to an experience at a higher level of risk.

The children were found to be more willing to engage in riskier play opportunities. Higher levels of risky play were significantly recorded after the introduction of the gym mat and blocks during the fourth implementation as the children thought those materials acted like a "protector" for them to know that "even if I (Zed) fall, I won't get hurt."

Facilitation Strategies are Effective when Supported by Intentional Observations

The results of this teacher research corroborated with Spencer et al's study (2021), where the observation was identified as a key strategy in supporting the children's risky play. During the six risky play implementations, the strategies employed were directly related to my observations of the children's play experience. With an understanding of the children's comfort levels and capabilities, strategies could be used appropriately to encourage risky play experiences in children. It was also important to note that the strategies were usually not employed independently but went hand in hand with other strategies in the facilitation of children's risky play and risk-assessment.

Collaboration and Communication with Various Stakeholders

Educators' perceptions of risks and attitudes towards children's risky play were vital in influencing children's levels of risky play. In the fifth implementation, there was an accident where Zed ran down an elevated balancing beam and suffered an abrasion on his shin. This led me to fear another accident happening, which led to the sixth implementation to be of a very low risk set-up. Aligned with past research, attitudes towards risks can cause hinderances or barriers in decisions regarding children's risky play, just like how my fear of accidents influenced the sixth implementation of risky play. Research supported the findings that teacher perceptions play a pivotal role in providing adequate opportunities for risky play in preschool programmes (Rooijen et al., 2020; Spencer et al., 2021). Communication and mutual understanding between parents and educators also influence the willingness of educators in providing risky play opportunities for children (Spencer et al., 2021). With parental support, educators may feel less fearful when children are engaging in risky play.

Conclusion

Through this teacher inquiry project, I learnt that risky play did not only happen in the outdoor environment, but also within the four walls of the classroom. Risky play exists in taking risks in the children's decision-making and problem-solving process, in the willingness to try new approaches. Even after this inquiry project, I found myself asking children these questions often: "Would you like to try doing (something new)?", "What's stopping you?", "Is there anything I can do to help you?" These questions help guide the extent to which I could provide children support in risky play, because the children were able to identify their fears. With an understanding of their fears, I was better able to bridge the gap between their fears and taking risks in their play.

This teacher inquiry project, propelled me to encourage educators to be more willing to have children participate in risky play due to the many benefits, especially in Singapore's context. These benefits include improved motor competence, critical thinking skills, risk management skills and positive learning dispositions (Cetken-Aktas & Sevimli-Celik, 2021; Harper & Obee, 2021; Kemple et al., 2016; Little & Sweller, 2015; Obee et al., 2021; Spencer et al., 2021).

When children do not experience age-adequate risky play, it hinders normal child-development and this has been associated with the development of fear, discomfort and dislike of the environment (Lavrysen et al., 2017; Harper & Obee, 2021). Similar to the research done by Obee et al. (2021), including loose parts materials in playgrounds are particularly beneficial in urbanised countries like Singapore, where natural areas that afford more risky play opportunities are not easily accessible in the proximity of the preschool.

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TEACHER INQUIRY

Promoting Children's Interests and Engagement in the Literacy Centre

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Background

The International Reading Association (1998) asserts that fostering literacy skills during the early years of a child's life is imperative for their achievement in both academics and life, as it enables them to navigate effectively in a literate society. However, developing them requires children to be interested and engaged in literacy activities and the literacy environment (Baroody & Diamond, 2016). Setting up an effective literacy centre in a preschool classroom provides opportunities for meaningful literacy experiences as it presents an array of choices, promotes interactions between the children and challenges the children's abilities through differentiated instructions and activities, enabling educators to meet diverse learning styles and abilities (Stefanick, 2005).

Promoting early literacy development in the classroom comes with its challenges as the children showed little interest in reading books and the activities set up in the literacy centre. The educator began to wonder, "How can I support children's interests and engagement with literacy activities in the literacy centre?". Taking into consideration the importance of early literacy development, this teacher inquiry aims to find out how children's interests and engagement in literacy activities can be promoted through the set-up of the literacy centre, the type of books and literacy activities to be provided and the roles an educator can play.

Methodology

Phases of teacher inquiry

This teacher inquiry was divided into three phases - pre-implementation, implementation of the action plan and post-implementation.

In the pre-implementation phase, data was collected through observations and individual interviews to create a 4-week action plan (Annex A) that catered to the children's literacy abilities, needs and interests.

During the implementation of the action plan, the arrangement of the literacy centre was modified, distracting materials were removed and picture labels of the materials were added to the shelves. New books and activities were also added to the literacy centre weekly, which were introduced to the children at the start of each week. Field notes and video recordings were used to document observations of the children's and the educators' interactions with them

at the literacy centre, along with a teacher journal to record the educator's thoughts and ideas.

In the post-implementation, interviews were conducted with the children to gather feedback on their likes and dislikes about the modified literacy centre, enabling the educator to find out what engages them successfully.

Participants

The participants of the teacher inquiry included the entire class of 14 children (9 boys, 5 girls) aged four to five, of whom two are diagnosed with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (ASD). They are all Chinese and exhibit pre-reading and writing abilities as they can all read and write several sight words. However, while all of them are bilingual, they have varying levels of proficiency in English as some participants could read and spell more words independently.

Findings and Discussion

After analysing the data collected, the results were categorised into three main themes which highlight how an educator can promote children's interests in embarking on literacy activities in the classroom. These themes are the set-up and features of the literacy centre, providing a wide variety of books and literacy activities and the significance of educators as an introducer and role model.

Set-up and features of the literacy centre

Firstly, the physical set-up was modified by rearranging the shelves to make the books accessible, with an opening for the children to enter the literacy centre easily (Photos 1 and 2). The books were categorised according to size, genre, and language, facilitating easier navigation and selection for the children. Furthermore, the rotation of books displayed on the open-faced bookshelf every week sparks curiosity and excitement among children, encouraging them to explore and engage with the newly introduced books. Overall, these modifications not only make literacy materials more accessible but also stimulate children's interest in reading through variety and novelty.

Photo 1 (Left): Set-up of the previous literacy centre
Photo 2 (Right): Set-up of the current literacy centre

Upon noticing that certain materials were diverting the children's attention from the literacy activities, the uses and purpose of each material were considered. Subsequently, those identified as distracting were removed while the ones that were actively utilised by the children remained. This allowed a more focused engagement in literacy activities, as children read the books from start to finish or concentrated on doing the activities.

Additionally, picture labels added onto the shelves serve a dual purpose of promoting tidiness in the literacy centre and aiding children, particularly for children with ASD, in locating books and materials more easily. These visual cues provide clear guidance, reducing the time spent searching for desired books or activities and enabling the children to navigate the literacy centre more independently and participate more fully in literacy activities. (Rowan, 2016).

Providing a wide variety of activities, tasks, and books
A wide variety of activities, tasks and books were introduced weekly, of which some of these activities included varied difficulty levels, ranging from easy, medium, to difficult. The wide variety of literacy activities and books provided the children with choices and enhanced their engagement as some children were observed exploring options and deciding on activities while others headed straight to their preferred activity or book. This supported children's interest in visiting the literacy centre as seen in the post-implementation interview data where twelve out of fourteen children stated their liking for the literacy centre due to the diversity of activities and books:

> *Teacher researcher: Why do you like coming to the literacy centre?*
> *Child Xx: Because I like the files.*
> *Child Xy: I like to play with this one (shows book catalogue).*
> *Child Al: Because got a lot of books.*
> *Child J: Because we can do the file activity (referring to 'matching words to pictures' [Annex E]).*
> *Child D: I like to read the books here.*

Two out of fourteen of the children stated that they disliked visiting the literacy centre as one shared that he disliked reading books while another child with ASD stated that he found everything difficult. This may be attributed to his lower attendance in school and thus missing out on some demonstrations of materials and discussions the class had. Still, they both shared the activity and book they like in the modified literacy centre:

> *Teacher researcher: Are there any activities or books that you like here?*
> *Child W: I like the book catalogue activity. Because I love drawing.*
> *Child L: I like the alien book (referring to 'Underpants are awesome!'). It is very funny.*

Hence, with a wide variety of activities and books, all the children found an activity or book that they enjoyed, which increased their engagement in the literacy centre.

Additionally, with the varying levels of difficulty in the activities, children could choose the level they preferred. For instance, while doing the 'matching words to pictures' activity (Annex E), the children matched most or all the words and pictures correctly – some children completed the activity with guidance from the teachers while others finished them independently. Upon completion of the activity, several children exclaimed 'So easy!' with a smile. To conclude, the variety of activities and books ensured that each child found something they enjoyed, thereby increasing overall engagement in the literacy centre. Moreover, introducing differentiated levels of activities helped to increase their chances of success and confidence in their ability to read words, thus this approach not only fostered engagement but also promoted autonomy and confidence in literacy activities.

Popular activities that promote children's interests and engagement
With many activities provided, there were several that were more popular and were completed by eight or more children. These included 'matching uppercase to lowercase letters' (Annex B), book catalogue (Annex C), the task of stamping letters in reading journals (Annex D), and 'matching words to pictures' (Annex E), with children expressing joy while executing these activities and tasks. These activities were interactive and matched children's literacy abilities, enabling children to manipulate the objects while reinforcing their knowledge of letters and sight words.

The book catalogue (Annex C) had 25 entries and was completed by most children (n=11) because they enjoyed this activity:

> *Teacher researcher: Why do you like coming to the reading corner?*
> *Child Xy: Because I can do the book catalogue…Because I like to do drawing.*
> *Child Al: I like the book catalogue because you put the book you like inside (this file)… I want to add more pictures. You have to add more paper because it is finishing soon.*

Children enjoyed doing the book catalogue as it catered to their interest in drawing and adding their favourite books. In fact, one child requested the educator to add more templates so that the children could add more of their work to it.

Next, stamping letters in the reading journals (Annex D) was completed by most of the children. On the day when the letter stamps were introduced, ten out of fourteen children crowded at the literacy centre to use the stamps. It was so packed that the educator had to invite them to do the activity at their tables. In the post-implementation interviews, six children mentioned stamping letters as their favourite activity.

Additionally, nine children practised 'matching words to pictures' (Annex E) in the week it was introduced by choosing a file with the level of difficulty that is suitable for them. Initially, some children required some scaffolding from the teachers. Subsequently they were able to match words to pictures correctly, exhibiting delight and a sense of accomplishment.

Incorporating books with diverse themes
Based on pre-implementation observations and interviews, books that catered to the children's interests were added. They were fairy tales, books about rocks, soil and water, books with humorous storylines and those showcasing the children's culture. These books were read by the children multiple times. They expanded their knowledge of rocks, soil and water, as they were seen reading and discussing the books with their peers, making connections with their prior experiences. The inclusion of books with humorous storylines such as 'Underpants are Awesome!' and 'Superkid' added an element of joy, with children frequently laughing as they immersed themselves in them. In the post-implementation interviews, different children shared about the varying books they particularly liked.

On fairy tales:

Child Al: I like 'Not quite snow white' and 'Cinderella'… because I like the picture.
Child E: I like 'Not quite snow white' because I like dancing.
Child L: I like the 'Aladdin' book.

One child said that he liked books related to the class theme:

Child X: I like the 'Rocks and soil' and 'The rock cycle at work' books because inside got lava rocks.

Many children mentioned 'Underpants are awesome' as their favourite:

Child Xy: I like 'Underpants are awesome' because I see the book is very funny.
Child Zx: I like alien underpants book… Because I wish I can fly.
Child Zq: I like underpants book because I like the alien.

Children also shared that they liked the helpful characters in 'The Great Race: Story of the Chinese Zodiac':

Child Al: Because the dragon help the people and because the ox want to help the mouse.
Child X: I like the dragon because he is very warm-heart(ed).

The addition of books that incorporated various genres and children's interests effectively contributed to their enthusiasm for reading.

Significance of educators as an introducer and role model

At the start of each week, the educator introduced and demonstrated the proper handling of the books and activities by explaining how each activity should be completed as well as where and how the activities and books should be kept. This set clear expectations for the children and helped them to feel confident in participating in literacy activities (Rowan, 2016; Stefanick, 2005), thus generating their interest and active involvement in the literacy activities. This could be seen by their voluntary visits to the literacy centre to engage with the literacy activities for longer periods of time as compared to pre-implementation.

When materials are not introduced, children are less likely to engage with the materials. This can be seen in a post-implementation interview, whereby a child shared why she did not like an activity that was originally in the previous literacy centre:

> *Teacher Researcher: Is there anything that you don't like doing here?*
> *Child X: [looked around and pointed to an activity] "I don't like to do this one because I don't know how to play."*

Therefore, the deliberate role of an introducer and model played a pivotal role in positively enhancing children's confidence and participation in literacy activities.
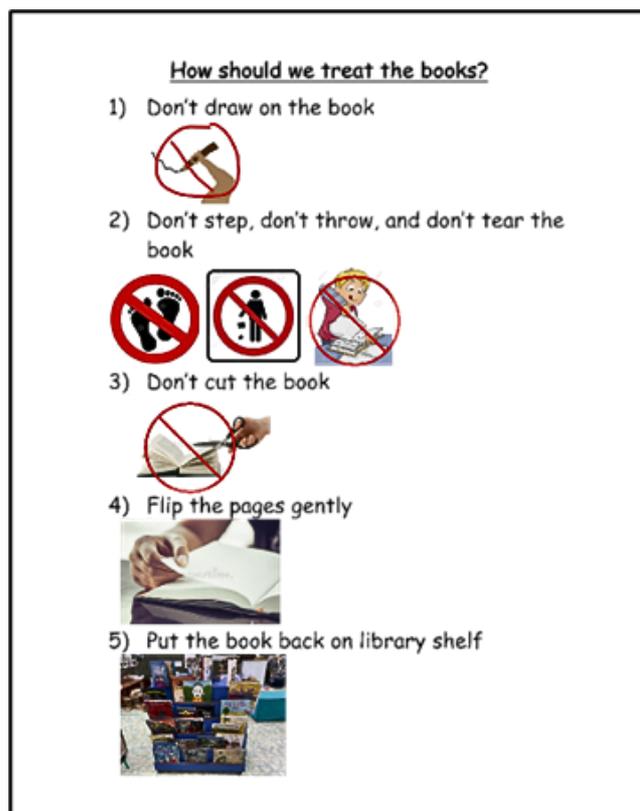
Modelling the right attitude towards books

Other than modelling the usage of literacy activities, the educator also modelled a positive attitude towards books when reading to the children. When educators modelled interest in literacy activities, students shared that they became excited about reading as well (Gambrell, 1996). Hence, the educator demonstrated an enthusiastic attitude towards reading by reading the books with varying pitches, rhythms and expressions and sharing why she enjoyed reading. She also asked open-ended and close-ended questions to engage children in thinking and understanding the story. This increased the children's interest in reading books as there were several times the children requested her to read to them during their free time. They also chose books read by the teachers more frequently than those that were not read (see Annex A for books that were read). In the post-implementation interviews, four children stated that they liked the teachers reading to them. Therefore, the teacher's role in exemplifying a positive attitude toward reading is crucial for heightening students' interest and fostering active engagement in literacy.

Figure 1

Children's rules on how we should treat the books

How should we treat the books?
1) Don't draw on the book
2) Don't step, don't throw, and don't tear the book
3) Don't cut the book
4) Flip the pages gently
5) Put the book back on library shelf

The educator needs to model a respectful attitude towards the way she treats books. Upon noticing how some children threw, kicked and stepped on the books, the educator demonstrated proper book treatment by gently returning books to the shelf and using scotch tape to fix damaged pages. She also initiated a discussion with the children on how they should treat the books and why they should take care of them, this led to the children suggesting rules for the literacy centre (Figure 1). The rules poster was created and displayed on the shelf as a reminder for the children.

The children observed the importance of treating books with respect, with several of them took the initiative to use scotch tape to repair torn pages voluntarily.

One child even expressed her enjoyment of book mending during the post-implementation interview.

Conclusion

This teacher inquiry has provided valuable insights into setting up a literacy centre in my classroom and the roles an educator can play to support children's interests and engagement with literacy activities. While developing literacy skills remains a priority, cultivating the right attitudes towards books and materials is equally important. This was the most significant takeaway for me because it deepened my understanding of myself as an educator, clarifying what I want to teach and how I intend to teach in the future. Beyond nurturing children's literacy skills and their active engagement in literacy activities, I also aspired to instill in them a respectful attitude towards books and materials within the literacy centre. This is essential as it not only fosters respect for literature but also extends to the broader values of respecting other objects and individuals.

TEACHER INQUIRY

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TEACHER INQUIRY

Annex A

4-week action plan that was implemented:

Timeline	Literacy activities, tasks of the week and books introduced and added
Week 1	Activities of the week - Matching uppercase to lowercase letters activity (Annex B) Tasks of the week - Create a class book catalogue (Annex C) - Introducing 'My Reading Journal': Stamp out the letters of known words that they find from books (Annex D) Books of the week - 'Aladdin: A friend like him' by Suzanne Francis - 'Better together, Cinderella: A big sister fairy tale' by Ashley Franklin - 'Not quite Snow White' by Ashley Franklin (read) - 'Pinocchio' by Joy Cowley *Note: books that are read by teachers are indicated by (read)
Week 2	Activities of the week - Matching words to pictures set 1 (Annex E) Tasks of the week - My Reading Journal: Write out known words from books using crayons, colour pencils, or magic pens (Annex D) - My Reading Journal: Draw and label characters from a book after reading (Annex D) Books of the week - 'A world of water' by Lisa J. Amstutz - 'Exploring rocks and minerals' by Greg Roza - 'How water shapes the Earth' by Jared Siemans - 'Rocks and soil' by Rebecca Rissman (read) - 'Spenser and the rocks' by Lawrence F. Lowery - 'The rock cycle at work' by George Pendergast (read)

TEACHER INQUIRY

Timeline	Literacy activities, tasks of the week and books introduced and added
Week 3	**Activities of the week** - Matching words to pictures set 2 (Annex E) - 'I can spell': Arranging letters to form words that match pictures - Read aloud with a friend and add the book's title and author to the list of "read with a friend" after reading **Tasks of the week** - My Reading Journal: Write or stamp out words you know from the magazines (Annex D) - My reading journal: Draw and label the pictures you like from a book (Annex D) **Books of the week** - 'George's dragon goes to school' by Claire Freedman (read) - 'Superkid' by Claire Freedman (read) - 'Underpants are awesome!' by Claire Freedman - Magazines: Fashion magazine and Community magazine - Newspapers
Week 4	**Activities of the week** - 'I can write': Writing letters to form words that match pictures - 'Picture sequencing': Provide pictures from books for sequencing **Tasks of the week** - My Reading Journal: Write out words that you do not know and find out the meanings from your teacher or friends (Annex D) - Share about your favourite book with your friends: I like the book because… **Books of the week** - 'Chinese fables: "The Dragon Slayer" and other timeless tales of wisdom' by Shiho S. Nunes - 'The great race: Story of the Chinese zodiac' by Christopher Corr (read) -'牛郎织女 (The cowherd and the weaver girl)' by Lixin Duan

TEACHER INQUIRY

Annex B

Matching uppercase to lowercase letters activity:

Children matched uppercase letters on the flowers to lowercase letters on the shoebox.

Ice cream box

Shoebox

Flowers

Annex C

Create a class book catalogue:

After reading a book, children drew the cover and wrote the title as well as the author on the template as shown below. Their works were placed in a file as a book catalogue. The book catalogue was placed in the literacy centre so that children can shop around for a good book to read.
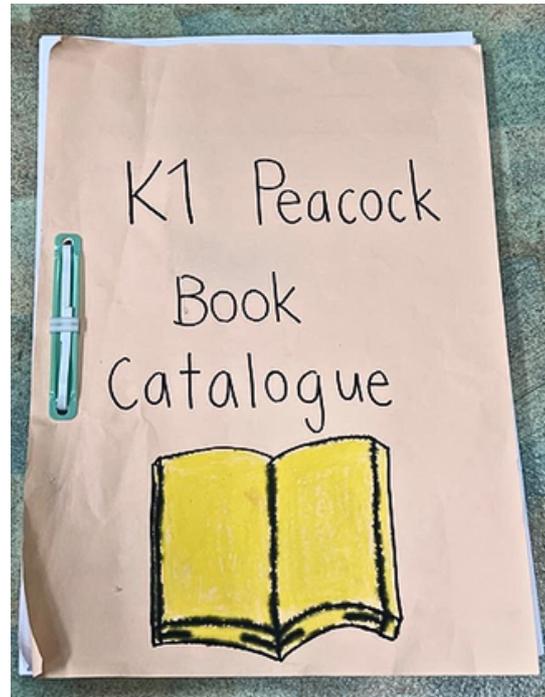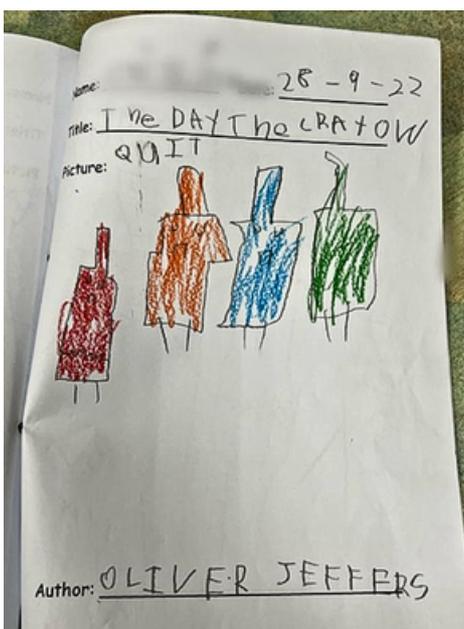

Template for children to write and draw

Book catalogue for children to file in their work

Sample work by one child

Annex D

My Reading Journal:

Each child had his or her own journal to record words and draw pictures, consisting of their own words. This journal showed their progress.

- In week 1, the children stamped the letters of known words that they found from books. Below shows a sample of stamped words in a child's reading journal.

- In week 2, children could write known words from books using crayons, colour pencils or magic pens and draw and label characters from a book after reading.

- In week 3, children could write or stamp words they know from the magazines, as well as draw and label the pictures that they like from a book.

- In week 4, children could write unknown words from books and think of ways to find their meanings, for instance, by asking a teacher, a peer or searching it.
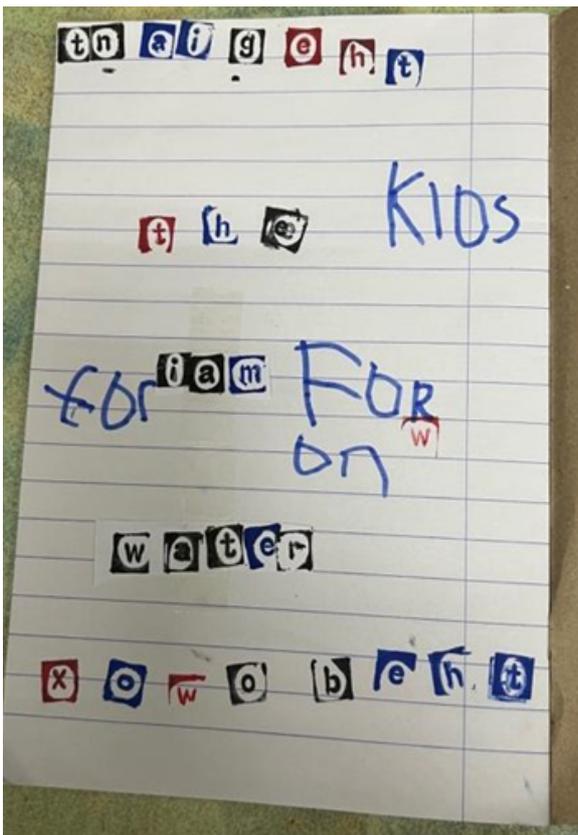
Sample of stamped and written words in a child's reading journal.

Annex E

Matching words to pictures:

Most of the words in this activity are related to the themes and concepts that the children are learning. There are 3 stages of words and pictures to match with varying levels of difficulty.

- **Green** (easy): 6 sets of words and pictures to match
- **Yellow** (medium): 8 sets of words and pictures to match
- **Red** (difficult): 10 sets of words and pictures to match

The pictures were placed in a 2-page file format, printed and laminated as a file while the words were printed, cut and laminated. Velcro was added to the back of the words and on the file so that the words 'stick' to the file as the children matched the pictures. The laminated words were kept in a Ziplock bag glued to each file for better management. There were 2 sets of this activity to provide children with choices, each set consisted of all three colours. In total, there were 6 files, from Matching words to pictures (1) to Matching words to pictures (6).
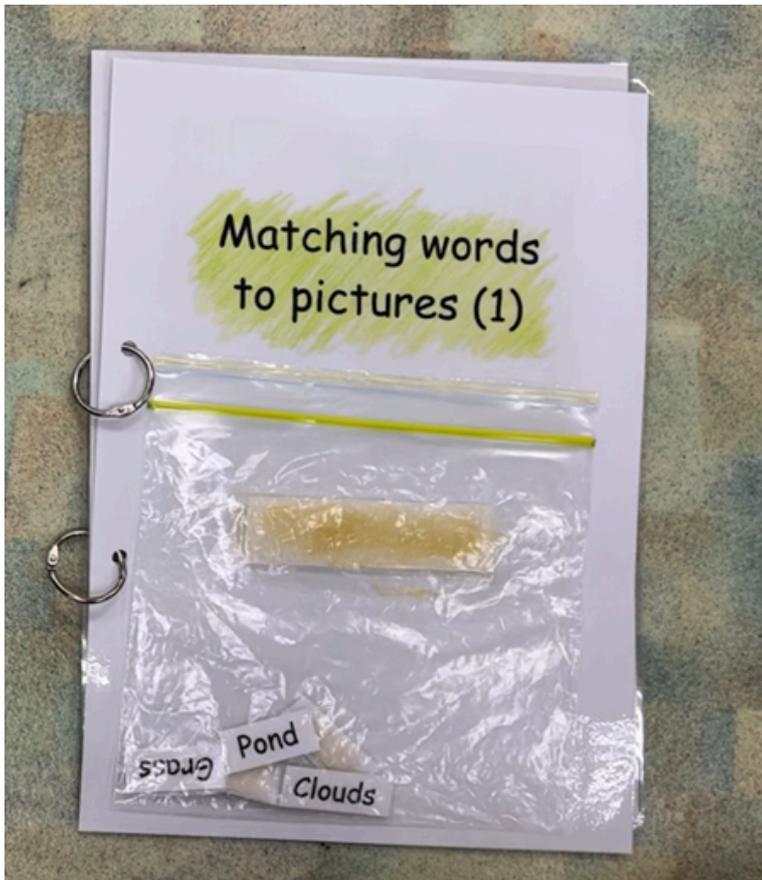
Sample cover page of file: Laminated words are kept in a Ziplock bag. The title is coloured to show children its level of difficulty.

Sample of the pages in one of the files. Children stuck the words in the box beside the pictures to match the pictures.
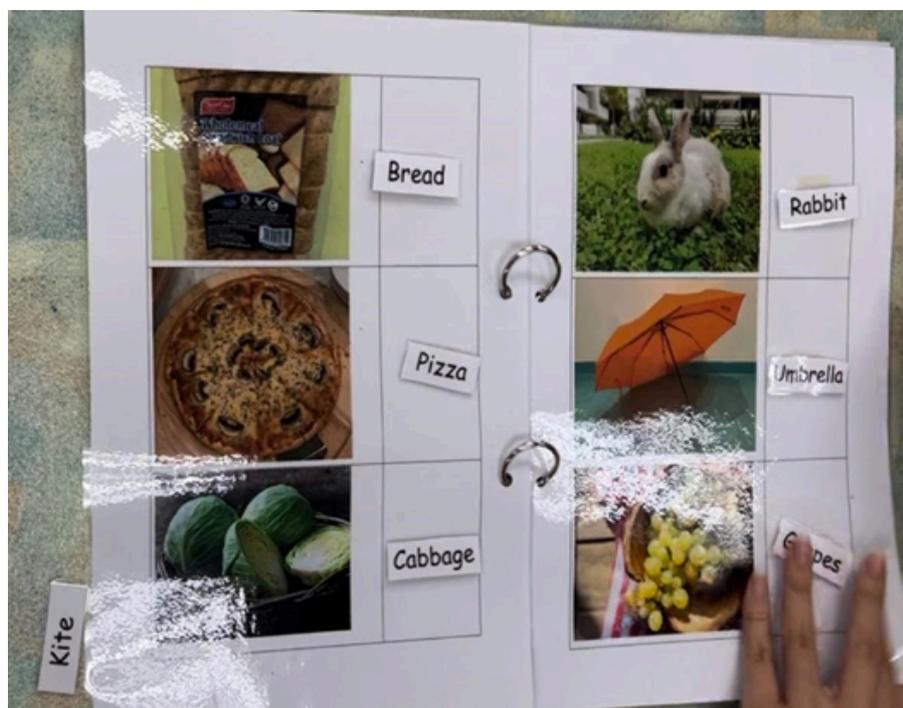
Sample of words and matched pictures.

Using Developmental Bibliotherapy to Promote Children's Sense of Belonging and Acceptance in an Inclusive Classroom

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Introduction

This was observed in the Nursery 2 class that I was attached to during my project:

> Matthew is a four-year-old Singaporean child. He travelled overseas during the June holidays, and he struggled to speak English to his teachers and peers when he returned. When I started this project in September, he was still in the process of developing his language skills and social skills like initiating play with his peers and learning to share. As he often tried to snatch toys from his peers, they got worried whenever he came close to them. On one occasion when he tried to play with a group of peers, George firmly said "No!" while keeping his Lego blocks close. When Matthew tried reaching for some Lego blocks near another child Mark, Mark exclaimed: "You can't play with us."

While we cannot expect children to always have positive peer relationships without tension or conflict, I was concerned because research has shown that peer rejection reduces children's ability to succeed academically and social-emotionally in school (Perolli-Shehu, 2019; Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Junoven et al., 2019). On the contrary, children with a greater degree of peer acceptance would have more positive peer relationships and be included in various group activities (Johnson et al., 2000; Lindsey, 2002). Therefore, I saw the need for children to learn to empathise with children who are excluded from play. I also wanted to encourage them to be more welcoming and accepting in their peer interactions.

Developmental Bibliotherapy

While researching strategies to facilitate more inclusive and accepting peer relationships among children, I chanced upon an interesting intervention known as Developmental Bibliotherapy (DB). DB is a process of using books as a proactive method of promoting positive behaviours or finding solutions to problems in the classroom (Akgun & Benli, 2019; Cook et al., 2006). It is important to emphasise that DB is not mere storytelling, it involves 4 stages: a) Pre-reading discussion, b) Reading, c) Processing and d) Follow-up activities (Cook et al., 2006). Through these four stages which involve discussions, role plays, games or drawing activities, DB enables constant revisiting of the message of the story.

With well-structured questions and carefully planned follow-up activities, DB enables children to make meaningful connections with the story and the daily situations in their peer relationships (Maich & Kean, 2004; Heath et al., 2005; Cook et al., 2006). When the selected story for DB is similar to situations that children have encountered in their peer relationships, they can better relate and empathise with the characters and situations (Cook et al., 2006). Thus, the selected story provides an opportunity for children to reflect on their peer relationships and aids discussions on how to improve or deepen peer relationships in the classroom (Cook et al., 2006; Forgan 2002).

Implementing DB in the classroom

During my 6-week project with twenty 4-year-old children, I intentionally selected 2 books to reflect the scenarios that children encounter within their peer relationships. The books 'Can I Play Too?' (Willems, 2010) and 'Along Came A Different' (McLaughlin, 2018) illustrated scenarios where children were excluded in play situations.

'Can I Play Too?'(Willems, 2010) inspires children to learn from how the main characters, Elephant and Piggie empathise with their peer, Snake who is left out of a game. It also shows how they were proactive in thinking how to include Snake into the game.

The storyline of 'Along Came A Different' (McLaughlin, 2018) hinges on diversity, which is a topic I previously introduced in another book 'We're Different, We're The Same' (Kates, 1992). It also highlights the importance of accepting and appreciating differences among our peers.

Pre-reading discussion

During the pre-reading discussion, I utilised questions like "What food or games do you like?" I used children's answers to highlight ways they were similar and different from their peers. Before reading 'Can I Play Too?' (Willems, 2010), I utilised two role plays to illustrate what exclusion might look like in their daily interactions with peers. The first role play involved a child who was excluded from play (drawn from the book) and the second role play involved a child refusing to hold hands with his partner (drawn from observations of children in the class). The role plays elicited discussions among the children, and they suggested ways to resolve the situations.

Reading

While reading the books, I asked related questions such as "How do you think Snake is going to play catch with them?". The questions were structured to enable children to draw connections between the text and illustrations, allowing them to better understand the storyline.

Processing and follow-up activities

I combined the processing stage with follow-up activities because the processing stage also involved using activities like drawings or games to allow children to understand the concepts of the selected book (Cook et al., 2006). The games included a modified version of Blow Wind Blow, allowing children to state the differences or similarities among their peers (for example, 'blow away those who have long hair').

For drawings, the children drew a self-portrait and things they liked on a paper shaped like a puzzle piece. The completed drawings (refer to Appendix 1) were displayed as a completed puzzle to show them that they make up a piece of the classroom community even though their puzzle pieces might be different. They were also asked to draw what they learnt from the DB sessions with questions like "Which book did you like the most?" or "If you were Elephant or Piggie, how would you let Snake play with you?" The questions were meant to help them remember what we did throughout the sessions and guide them towards drawing relevant pictures in relation to acceptance and inclusion (refer to Appendix 2).

Observations after implementations

Of the two books that I used in the DB sessions, I witnessed that the book 'Can I Play Too?' (Willems, 2010) resonated more with the children. This was possibly because it best resembled the peer interactions they faced daily. Besides reading the book, I realised that teacher facilitation through modelling and guiding was important in enabling the children to apply what they had learnt from the story in their daily peer interactions. In subsequent playtimes after I read 'Can I Play Too?' (Willems, 2010), I intentionally used the story to facilitate and model peer interactions.

Example:

Mark refused to let Gideon play with him as Mark wanted the Lego blocks to be cars, while Gideon wanted them to be trucks. I told Mark, "Gideon looks sad just like Snake when he could not play with his peers." Then, I reminded him how Elephant and Piggie tried many ways to let Snake play catch with them even though they knew Snake was different from them physically. I hoped that by bringing up the story, it could help Mark to accept Gideon's differing viewpoint and find a solution to bridge the differences between them. After awhile, Mark called Gideon over to build a carpark for the cars and trucks.

By aligning Mark and Gideon's situation with the storyline of 'Can I Play Too?' (Willems, 2010), I helped to facilitate Mark's empathy towards Gideon. This aligned with the impact of DB because when Mark connected the story with the situation he was in, he was able to empathise with how Gideon felt (Cook et al., 2006). It also prompted Mark to model what the other two characters did by coming up with the solution of creating a carpark.

Additionally, I noticed that the children started using the phrase "Can I play with you?" when they wanted to join in the play with their peers. Matthew, the child from the example at the beginning of this paper, was one of those who used it. This was a promising step he took in using his words instead of actions to enter into play situations, Matthew was also observed to be more empathetic towards his peers. When another child was upset about being excluded from play, he comforted his peer and also offered the toy car he was playing with to that child.

Coie's (1990) theory of peer rejection highlights that a child using inappropriate ways to initiate play contributes to him being disliked by peers (Perolli-Shehu, 2019). I knew it was necessary to facilitate Matthew's social skills because as Matthew continuously tried to initiate play with his peers without understanding that his methods were inappropriate, his peers became more frustrated with him (Perolli-Shehu, 2019; Buhs & Ladd, 2001). Nonetheless, I felt that it was also equally important for Matthew's classmates to understand that he was still learning English and social skills. Therefore, when I observed similar situations, I used them as teaching moments to encourage the children to be empathetic when interacting with Matthew. When conflicts arose, I explained to the children that Matthew was trying his best to remember to ask for more toys instead of snatching. I even encouraged the children to remind Matthew to use his words to solve conflicts when Matthew takes away their toys. Subsequently, I observed how his peers became more accepting of Matthew.

> Example:
> When Matthew cut in the line to wash his hands, Marcus commented: "Matthew is still learning English." Mark added: "He is still learning (how to line up)." Later, when Tara noticed that Matthew put too much soap, Marcus reminded Tara: "He is still learning."

By explaining that Matthew was still learning, I had intentionally created a culture of inclusion and acceptance where children became more accommodating to Matthew's behaviour. This emphasises the importance of teachers in facilitating social skills while guiding children to understand the social difficulties that their peers face (Kemple & Hartle, 1997).

Conclusion

Noting that children who are rejected tend to stay in the cycle of being rejected by peers throughout their school life, I believe that facilitating positive peer relationships from early childhood is important in changing this trajectory (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Johnson et al., 2000).

One of the main difficulties I faced during this project was grappling with my own idea of inclusion. Inclusion itself is a broad topic and most research is focused on including children with disabilities in the classroom. Fortunately, I came across UNESCO (2015)'s definition of inclusion which states that inclusion does not only refer to including children with disabilities in regular classrooms - it also encompasses embracing and accepting diversity in the classrooms such as the multiple intelligences of children, their strengths, differences and even their varied experiences. Using this as my guide, I worked on breaking down this concept of inclusion and acceptance so that the children could easily understand it.

Finding the right books that fit that concept of inclusion and acceptance also took a lot of effort, but it was worth it to see the children connecting the storylines to their own peer interactions. It was so heartening to see how much they grew in their interactions with each other. It showed how they were learning to be both proactive in fostering peer relationships and also in accepting peers with whom they would not normally play. Throughout the project, the children and I were learning, relearning, and unlearning what it means to be inclusive and accepting of others.

Through this project, I am now more confident of using DB as a strategy to facilitate children's peer relationships. In turn, this will help me create a classroom community where children feel they belong and are accepted despite their differences.

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Appendix 1 – Completed puzzle artwork


Completed puzzle – Children were given a puzzle piece and asked to draw a self-portrait and things they liked on it. I had informal discussions with the children about how different each child's drawing was. But I always drew them back to the conclusion that even though our puzzle pieces look different, we still make up a part of the classroom community.

Appendix 2 – Children's perspectives on inclusion and acceptance
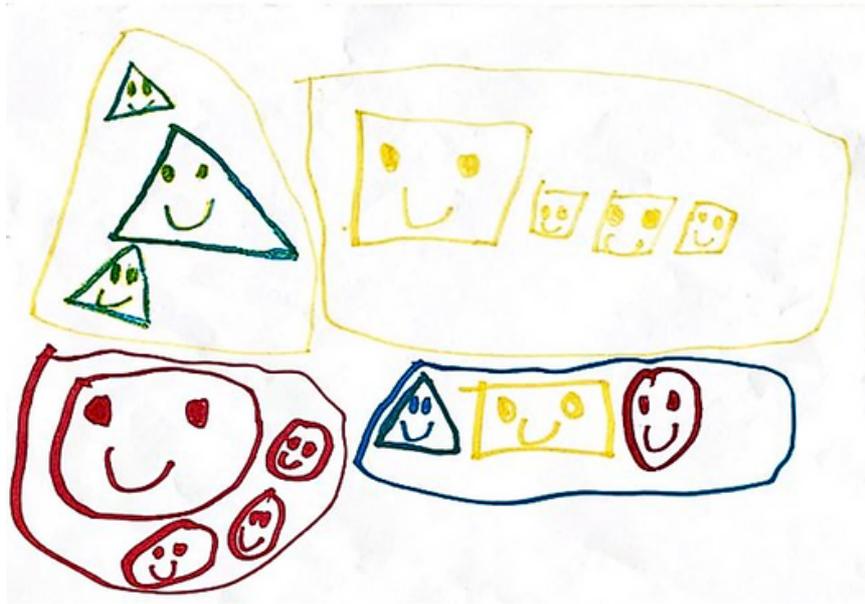
Drawing 1 – This drawing is in reference to the illustrations in the book 'Along Came A Different' (McLaughlin, 2018). Referring to how the three shapes used to stay with their own group of peers, Ella initially drew the square, triangle and circle shapes in their own boundaries. Later, she drew the three shapes together. "I'm going to make them friends again…I draw a circle then I look again. Friends!"
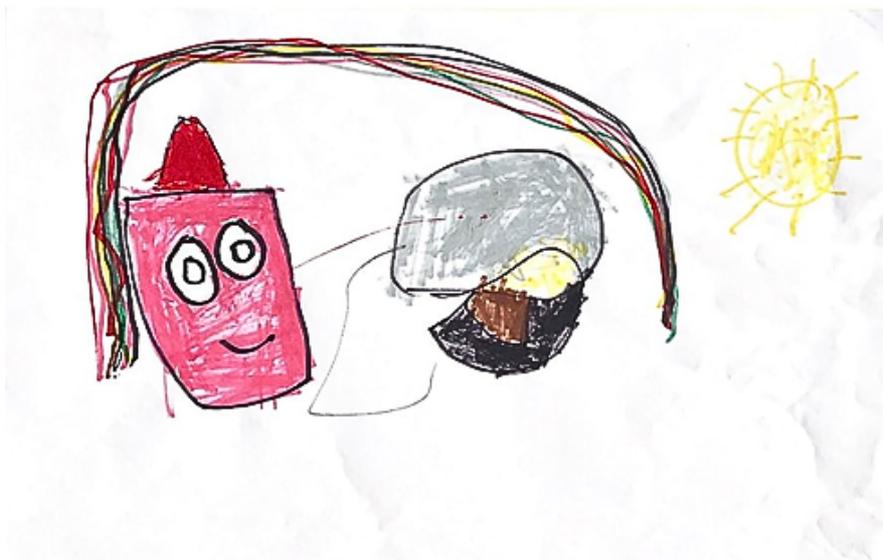
Drawing 2 –Lina said she drew the square character from 'Along Came A Different' (McLaughlin, 2018) playing together with a new mushroom character she created.

Drawing 3 – As an extension of the book 'Can I Play Too' (Wilems, 2010), Ombre decided to draw a tail for Snake to flick the ball upwards so that Snake could play with Piggie and Elephant.

S.O.S – Sustainable Options for Serenity
A case study of a new EC educator

Wendy Goh, Ph.D.

When the COVID pandemic happened, much of what we were used to changed. The lockdown period gave me the luxury of time to ponder and I made the decision to pivot into early childhood education. I believe that the greatest positive impact for children is during the early years.

As a new teacher, I began my full-time position with anticipation and excitement. The one thing I did not prepare consciously for was my mental well-being. I was pre-occupied with getting the classroom organised for the children, learning their names and holding in mind the nitty-gritty details of school practices. Looking back, I think I had too much optimism and naïveté. Reality quickly set in and I now share what I did as I told myself, "you can't go over it, you can't go under it, you got to go through it!" My goal was to go through it with less anxiety and more serenity.

According to the Oxford dictionary, serenity is the state of being calm, peaceful and untroubled. My NIEC lecturer reminded me of the serenity prayer which goes

> "God, grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change,
> courage to change the things I can,
> and wisdom to know the difference."

My initial experience at this preschool centre led me to question my beliefs about the early childhood sector. The initial months of my experience felt rather dismal as I was struggling. I needed help. I sent out an S.O.S. to anyone who would listen. Over time, with the help of more experienced and very kind educators, I adapted and learnt new skills of coping.

Traditionally, an S.O.S is the distress signal sent out if a person is lost at sea or stranded somewhere remote. For me a more positive and constructive perspective was to reframe S.O.S. as "Sustainable Options for Serenity." Why did I aim for serenity? Serenity within ourselves allows us to observe the children with clarity. Mindfulness comes when we are untroubled and calm about the task at hand.

With serenity as my goal, here I share what helped me in my on-going quest. The first "S" stands for Self-support. The "O" stands for Outside-of-your immediate environment support and the second "S" stands for Secret angel support.

S – Self-support

Self-support is the most crucial form of support because you need to be aware of your emotions and your reactions to situations that come fast and furious. Being the first form of support, it is also about ownership of the fact that only you can change your perspective. You are the main character in your life's journey. Assigning blame to the next thing or person is unhelpful and ultimately self-destructive. We have to take responsibility for our reactions. We cannot control other people, we can only control our own reactions to things that happen to us.

During my studies, I remember feeling overwhelmed by the deadlines. I knew it would not be sustainable. It was by chance that I found an app called Finch. It is a cute little penguin that reminded me to stop and take mindful breaths. If I made an effort to improve my thinking or perspective, I would gain points that allowed me to change the little penguin's outfit. It is an entertaining app that helped me take stock of what I was feeling and to take deep breaths for a break. What I enjoyed most about this was that it also provided useful quotes to see things with a lens of gratitude. As others have written, gratitude is the attitude.

Having been given a chance to work with children and influence their lives is something that I am grateful for. I am also grateful for the chance to have overcome challenges as they presented themselves and lived to tell the tale. The fulfillment of getting through the tough times is something to cheer about. The Finch app was a useful mobile app for my mental wellness and I am sure there are other versions out there that would suit you.

My trusty notebook was another form of self-support. I chose a small notebook that I carried everywhere in my over-shoulder sling bag. The notebook allowed me to note things down. I wrote notes about which child needed diapers to be replenished and which child forgot to bring back a form. Additionally, I wrote reminders to myself to "take a deep breath" or noted down small accomplishments such as "You finished prepping the resources for the learning centre one day ahead of time! Way to go!" We have to be our first and foremost cheerleader. On days when everyone is too busy to notice, you look back and give yourself a "shout out".

O – Outside support

Next in S.O.S. comes "O" which stands for Outside-of-your immediate environment support. I reached out to find moral support from the wider community of early childhood educators – the Association of Early Childhood Educators, Singapore (AECES) and the National Institute of Early Childhood Development (NIEC).

Joining AECES was an important step for me. Being part of AECES opened up ways to contribute beyond my classroom. The monthly "Community of Practice" sessions allowed me to make new friends. From their sharing, I learnt from other people's experiences and realised that I was not going through this alone.

REFLECTIONS

Since these friends were not my colleagues, they possessed objectivity and encouraged me to stay the course. Without knowing the other teachers in the equation, they focused on helping me cope with the reality of the job rather than overthinking the situation with me. I remember speaking with a principal of another school and she addressed the concerns I had. She took a neutral position and her outside perspective helped me to continue with my learning journey.

Being part of the alumni network of NIEC meant that I would receive the online publication entitled "Thrive." I enjoyed reading the tips and tricks suggested by the writers. One of the tips was to reach out to the alumni network which included my lecturers. By keeping in touch with my ex-lecturers, I tapped on their years of expertise while learning on the job.

Mdm R was my English language lecturer and she listened patiently to me when I needed a friend. She encouraged me to not give up as she too had wanted to give up many years ago. She shared her personal story of resilience which led her to be at NIEC currently. If she had given up, I would not have been speaking to her at all.

My Practicum supervisor, Mdm P, shared about a colleague who told her she would not last beyond a month! Clearly this ex-colleague had misjudged Mdm P who is currently a Principal who also supervises trainee teachers. Mdm P told me not to quit as that would be the best testament of my grit. She further offered this insightful perspective: those with unkind words had simply forgotten how they felt at the start of their journey. I realised that Mdm. P was also advocating for more compassion – for others and for myself.

S - Secret Angel support
Finally, the last letter S stands for "Secret angel support". A secret angel is someone who supported you though you did not see it at the start.

One of the most cheerful people I met in the preschool centre was Aunty T. She would come to clean the classroom after the children had left for the day. It was during her casual chats with me that she made me smile. Aunty T knew I was new to the centre, she reminded me often that once you get used to it, all will be better. I was reminded by Aunty T to not over-think but rather to enjoy the children and to see the positives in every situation.

If Aunty T could give her best, then how could I not do the same? Hers was a different role from mine but she spoke with a wisdom that came with years. I hope that you may find someone within the school whom you did not think would be of help, like I found Aunty T. You may find your best support in the place you least expect and everybody loves a good surprise.

Conclusion

Serenity is my personal goal as an early childhood educator. Serenity is a quality of being that empowers me to be at my most mindful self around the children. I wish to be present to each child who is speaking to me and to notice and recognise the learning that is taking place. If I can recognise where each child is at, then I will be able to respond in a way that is both responsive and respectful. An early childhood educator who prioritizes self-care will be more emotionally-ready to tend to the hearts and minds of children in their care.

Asia-Pacific ECCE Teacher Training for Social and Emotional Learning (2023)

Linda Yan

AECES had the privilege of conducting a workshop in collaboration with the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC), Childhood Workforce Initiative (ECWI), and UNESCO Bangkok. It was held in Singapore from 21-24 November 2023. The target participants included organisations and institutions from 7 countries responsible for overseeing ECCE and the implementation of SEL programmes in their countries. These participants include government representatives, academia/universities, foundations, teacher training institutions, international NGOs and CSOs. We had participants from:

- Philippines (Partnership between ECCD Council of the Philippines, Philippines Normal University and DepEd)
- Malaysia (ECCE Council of Malaysia)
- Bangladesh (BRAC-IED)
- India
- Singapore (ECDA)
- Cambodia
- Vanuatu

REFLECTIONS

The expected outcome of this training was to empower stakeholders at the national level with the knowledge and tools necessary to enhance and help build up policies and programmes in the realm of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) for ECCE teachers. The workshop sessions were designed to equip participants with a thorough understanding of SEL and its practical applications for early childhood education throughout the region.

The AECES team of trainers at the November session was made up of four trainers - Dr. Christine Chen, Mabel Wee, Lee Siew Choo and myself.

The 4-day training encompassed four themes:
- Nurturing calm, clear and compassionate educators, as well as dealing with the emotional awareness and self-regulation of practising teachers.
- Exploring 3 essential qualities for educators – mindfulness, empathy and compassion.
- Building and nurturing pro-social and responsive classrooms which emphasise on children's SEL.
- The importance of diversity, inclusion, cultural responsiveness and equity, including measurement and assessment techniques.

Personal reflections

As the trainer of one of the sessions (Building pro-social and responsive classrooms and children's SEL), I came into the session well-prepared. I had crafted training materials/resources, stories to share and personal anecdotes. Like a soldier prepared for "battle", I armed myself with research and readings, analysed the field content and rehearsed my slide presentation countless of times. In my mind I was confident to face the participants and expound on the merits and strategies of SEL. I wanted to be an agent of change and make a beneficial contribution to current thinking and mindsets about SEL.

However, I met with Humility face to face. The trainer became the trainee and learner. My "specialised" knowledge was overshadowed by what I heard and learnt from the real life knowledge the participants experienced for themselves. The person who thought she could inspire others became inspired in turn.

I listened to impassioned voices of some resilient educators who persevered in helping a diverse group of children who come from various backgrounds of refugee status, poverty, trauma and conflict. I found myself emphatically drawn in by their candid and personal sharing of their massive challenges and struggling journeys in reaching out to these children with various needs and challenges. My training began with the realisation and understanding of what some educators faced in their own countries.

Navigating educational policies, politics, lack of resources and societal expectations are just some of the issues that they grapple with. Yet they stood in the gap for the children doing what they can, holding on to hope that things will change for the better. I felt their firm belief that SEL was the way to create safer, more caring, and joyful pro-social classrooms and that character development was a pressing need for the current and future generations to come.

I also learned that before plunging into the training content (the how and the what to do), I needed to listen with empathy to understand their diverse situations. I had become small and tunneled in my perspective, which was brought about by many years of training teachers locally and viewing the world by the standards of the efficiency of our little red dot. I had learned such a precious lesson – to make space and time for people to share their stories and experiences because they can be a source of strength and inspiration for everyone present.

Bonding and connecting with some participants during the tea breaks and lunches also led to informative eye-opening conversations about the challenging work that they were doing for the benefit of the children in their respective countries.

I left the 4-day session with an overwhelming admiration for the work that many of the participants were involved in. It widened my view that this gathering of educators from 9 nations was a platform to establish ties and friendships, with a common hope and purpose of transforming lives of children across borders, religion, ethnicity and culture.

This community of educators grasped the urgency and far-reaching benefits of SEL and want to incorporate it into their regional curriculum. I left the session knowing they carried with them the tenacity of vision, purpose and a strong will to build and promote an SEL future for children in their respective countries. I wish them well in new beginnings.
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ASIA-PACIFIC ECCE TEACHER TRAINING FOR SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING (APETT-SEL)

Workshop

REFLECTIONS

There is Magic at the Bird Paradise

Dr Yvonne Chan Yoke Yin
Senior Lecturer, National Institute of Early Childhood Development

The annual Preschool Seminar took place at the Bird Paradise on 26 April 2024. The seminar entitled: The Power of Nature: A seminar on social-emotional learning through wildlife @ Bird Paradise offered fresh perspectives on outdoor education and ideas on facilitating social and emotional learning in young children.

The day began with a warm welcome from Miss May Lok, Director (Education) at Mandai Wildlife Group. Miss Lok and her lively team members provided participants with several thoughtful ideas to take away throughout the day.

Dr Siti Shaireen and Mrs June Tham were the keynote speakers at the seminar. We were reminded from their sharing on the importance of providing a conducive environment for children to learn. In addition, the way the educators communicate with their children will also make a difference to their self-concept and social-emotional development. The intentional educator could then design relevant activities seizing teachable moments in the day for the development of social-emotional learning in the children. Mrs June Tham also reminded participants about the importance of adopting a strength-based approach rather than a deficit mentality when working with children with diverse needs.

REFLECTIONS

Keynote speaker – Dr Siti Shaireen
Dean, Faculty and Leadership (NIEC HQ)

Keynote Speaker – Mrs June Tham
Former Executive Director of APSN and Rainbow Centre

The concurrent sessions were supported by co-facilitators from the Education team at Mandai Wildlife Group. This thoughtful arrangement provided a platform for participants to learn more about the animals and the role of the wetlands in the ecosystem.

Workshop Facilitators – Ambre Lee, Yvonne Chan, Dian Idaly and Kavitha Subash

Besides having the privilege of working with my colleague Kavitha on one of the concurrent workshops for the participants, we were also rewarded with the opportunity to visit and learn more about the Bird Paradise before the event. The tour conducted by Haniman and Dian from the Education team provided us with rich insights into the many learning possibilities available for visitors at the park.

I will be sharing some of my personal insights below, drawing a parallel between experiences gathered from Bird Paradise and developing social-emotional learning in the children in our classroom.

REFLECTIONS

EARLY EDUCATORS | JUNE 2024

**1) We need to understand who they are and what they need**

A tour of the birds at Crimson Wetlands offered an inspiring insight into how a sound understanding of the characteristics of our feathered friends and their needs can result in a walk-through aviary with different habitats and several bird species co-existing and thriving together. Some of the birds included the Scarlet and Red-and-green Macaws, Scarlet Ibises, Roseate Spoonbills and American Flamingos. The birds seemed well-settled alongside each other and with hosting visitors in their enclosures. This is only possible with the trust gained between them and their keepers and the understanding that their needs will be met.

Macaws feeding at Crimson Wetland

In the classroom likewise, each child is a unique individual with different strengths. Establishing a respectful and trusting relationship, will help attachment to develop. By building secure relationships with the children, it will also build a strong sense of identity. That will help them learn better and develop.

2) Every individual can learn – significance of Universal Design Learning
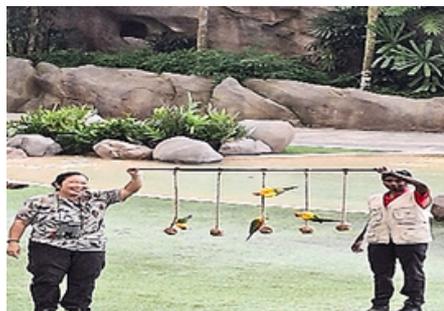
Wings of the World presentation at Sky Amphitheatre

Another highlight visiting the park was getting to watch the Wings of The World at the Sky Amphitheatre. It was an interesting performance of different birds showcasing their natural talents, which included a yellow-naped Amazon Parrot that can sing in three languages. The grand finale included flocks of birds swooping onto the centre stage in an orderly manner.

As different birds showcased their unique natural talents. It reminded me that it is significant for us to believe that every child can learn. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework offers insights into how to improve and optimise teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn. The 3 ways included stimulating and motivating the learners (trigger interest), providing a variety of ways for learners to gather information, and using different ways for students to express what they know.

I think the greatest encouragement for any educator is to see the children under their care being able to learn after using suitable strategies to motivate the children, as well as watching them grow in self-confidence and their understanding of their abilities.

3) Unity is strength and so is collaboration with others

Flamingoes at Crimson Wetland

It was noted during the trip that birds like the flamingoes like to gather in groups. They find safety in numbers, which helps to protect individual birds from predators while their heads are in the mud.

I was reminded that working with children sometimes requires more than the effort of just one educator in the class. Children's learning and development depend on the quality of the environments that they play, learn and grow in. Warm and positive relationships with their family, friends, teachers and people at home, in school and in their community also provide a safe environment for children to explore and learn.

A whole-centre approach is therefore necessary to ensure that children learn in an environment that is anchored on positive relationships (Ministry of Education, 2023). Educators need to regularly collaborate with families and the wider community. Providing opportunities for children to interact with people outside of their familiar settings also helps them to be aware of the different backgrounds, needs and strengths of other people in the community. This sets the foundation for children to be more sensitive to and respectful of the diverse community around them (Ministry of Education, 2023).

This wonderful opportunity to work on the workshop together with other content experts and the Education team at the Bird Paradise has offered many rich insights into the different perspectives of outdoor education and ideas on how to facilitate social emotional learning in young children. There is indeed magic at the Bird Paradise.

Reference
Ministry of Education (2023). Educators' Guide for Values, Social and Emotional
    Competencies and Learning Dispositions. Ministry of Education.

Appendix
Videos that capture the heart-beat of the keepers and staff at the Bird Paradise, highlighting their caring relationships with their feathered friends:

a) A New Home For Asia's Largest Bird Park
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmkZRqvM1Mk&list=PLkMf14VQEvTYyU-LtgcmswzUoZapgw8nA&index=1

b) How To Move 3,500 Birds Into Asia's Largest Bird Park. The Great Migration: New Eden.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-Z9wg1RmSo&list=PLkMf14VQEvTYyU-LtgcmswzUoZapgw8nA&index=2

Play.Discover.Create, an Emergent Approach to Reflecting the Voices of Children

Ta Sze Hwee, Cheryl
Centre Leader
Pre-School By-The Park

Preschool By-The-Park was honoured to be invited to The Voices of Children International Project. It is a multi-year initiative by Bright Start Foundation, where the primary objective of its action research is to honour and celebrate children's thinking, opinions and voices. The action research led by University College London (UCL) aims to introduce an innovative pedagogy - "NEW Voices of Children" - to educators working with children between 3 – 6 years old. By-The-Park was invited in recognition of our play-based emergent approach, Play.Discover.Create (PDC), where our educators develop learning experiences and curriculum based on the interests and experiences of children. There is a strong alignment between By-The-Park's PDC approach and Voices of Children, and we were keen to participate in the project by being a lab school to pilot pedagogical practices.

The journey for our 5 educators started with two professional development workshops conducted by Bright Start Foundation. The first focused on creative expression in Early Years Education and the second on active listening to children's voices in daily routines.

In the first workshop, Mr. Pete Moorehouse highlighted the importance of building creativity and allowing children to contemplate big ideas of the world. In doing so, children find a sense of identity and gain a voice to share with others their thoughts, wishes and dreams. Mr. Moorehouse also mentioned slow pedagogy, which is having flexible schedules and giving time to children to be in the state of flow. These concepts highlighted the importance of allowing children time and space for thinking, processing and exploring, a practice that is prevalent at By-The-Park.

The second workshop speaker, Ms. Lily-Ann Krigler provided insights on active listening and amplifying children's interests and perspectives. Her concepts prompted reconsideration of routines and technology. Ms. Krigler suggested that routines in early childhood settings should encompass all aspects of an educator's efforts to ensure the smooth operation of the program. This includes creating conducive environments, multi-party engagement and designing meaningful experiences.

REFLECTIONS

During the workshop, Ms. Krigler also stressed the importance of children having control of materials and elements in the environment as well as having techniques to develop independence and confidence in voicing their thoughts. This strongly resonated with and affirmed By-The-Park's practices, as our PDC approach supports the shift from education as content delivery to a learning mindset of skills development.

With the affirmation from the workshops, our educators set out to put the theories into practice in our annual World Water Awareness month. They started with allowing ample time and space for children to deepen their explorations, and giving them the autonomy to make decisions. Although it was already a part of their practices, the educators focused on enabling children to vote, plan and explore as part of their routines.

Our educators encouraged the children involved in the action research to express their thoughts and opinions during group art collaborations. By introducing the concept of voting, this enabled the children to express and exercise their right to be heard. Seeing the children gain a sense of ownership and confidence was uplifting.

Through this, the children also developed skills and techniques in problem-solving, communication, and socialising. The focus to honor children and their voices shifted the interactions between the teacher and children from one that was instructional and top-down, to one that was more relationship oriented. By listening to their thoughts and discussions, educators gave children attention and respect which also built up their self-esteem.

As the children explored and exercised creativity, they began to contemplate topics that were important to them. From exploring the topic of water being the earth's resource, it extended to threads on sustainability, uses of water and the importance of sharing resources. Our educators saw the children's growth in expression and confidence, as their voices were being heard and they were given time to explore a range of things on a deeper level.

At the start of their explorations, the children used familiar mediums such as colour pencils and pencils. From their dialogues at circle time, our educators noticed that many responses by the children were similar. This was because the children communicated actively while sharing material resources at the creative arts space. Their conversations opened shared experiences and helped form consensus and common understanding. This observation prompted the educators to re-examine how resources and space design can enliven children's learning.

REFLECTIONS

Picture 1: Saving Water, a mural created by a group of 5-year-old children.
The children talked about the sources of water coming from pipes and how we should use less water when cleaning the house.

Further extending on this, our educators added other art supplies like markers, crayons and water cakes, and facilitated small group collaboration. Children were given ample time to create murals, resulting in tangible outputs of their collaboration. As one thing led to another, the topic of water conservation emerged. By introducing new creative tools and reconfiguring spaces to connect, the dynamics of learning changed for the children.

Picture 2: A watercolour painting by a child, titled - "I want to save the water so the fishes can swim and sleep."

Acknowledging that community and families are key in building children's identity and sense of agency, By-The-Park organised a costume parade with parental involvement to raise awareness on World Water Day. Parents were encouraged to co-create water-themed costumes with their children. Through this project, families and children discussed about their commitment to responsible water usage and preservation, creating opportunities for them to share this awareness with their relatives and friends. Children also created postcards for our neighbors to spread the message. They were delighted when neighbors returned with cards and messages supporting their movement.

By respecting the children's opinions and thinking and deepening By-The-Park's approach to learning, our educator shifted from teaching and imparting knowledge into a facilitation orientation for fuller experiences. Letting the children make decisions helped them gain a sense of agency, build self-awareness, and enhance their social and language skills.

With the focus shift from content delivery to skills development, educators are laying strong foundations for lifelong learning and success beyond their school years, as children develop positive aptitudes and dispositions to learning. As the world evolves, education too, must keep up with change and prepare the next generation to be future-ready.

Flora and the Flamingo

By Molly Idle

Isla Wong Yoke Cheng
Research Executive
Singapore University of Social Sciences
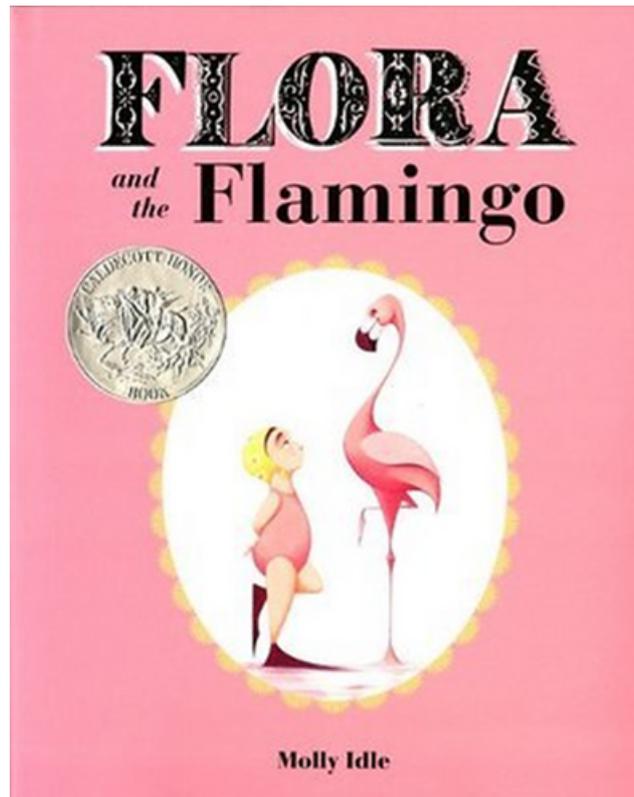
BOOK REVIEW

Story-reading sessions are opportunities for us to create a space where young children feel supported in expressing their thoughts and ideas about story plot and character intentions. Going one step further, this article encourages you to "co-author" books with young children, through the wonderful means of wordless picture books.

As adults, we make meaning of the story through words and pictures. When there are no words, we depend on pictorial cues to tell us what the writer is trying to convey. Children do this naturally as they flip through illustrations, which supports them in learning to decode pictorial cues, make predictions about character intentions, and make connections in the story plot. These skills contribute to the building of foundational literacy skills.

Molly Idle's "Flora and the Flamingo", a Caldecott Medal winner, is an example of a delightful wordless picture book that not only has educational opportunities, but is also a pleasure to read. With clear and simple illustrations, it presents a sweet and endearing story of a young girl, Flora, initially imitating the flamingo's poses. Subsequently, they begin to compete to execute certain dance moves. After a couple of adorable trips and tumbles, the two eventually realise that they move and look better when dancing together. The book ends with the both of them performing a synchronised dance joyfully and exuberantly together. The book also features flaps that are smartly placed and integrated into the book. The flaps are not just another interactive element to the book; they contribute to and enhances the overall storyline.

I thoroughly enjoyed the way Idle has captured dance movements in this book. The lines and curves, the way the characters are shown moving on their own and together, are elegant crafted. The flaps also heightens the sense of motion on the page even though the characters are in 2D. The characters have expressive facial and body language, making it easy to follow their emotions and intentions. Idle was once an artist for DreamWorks—this explains the whimsical and charming nature of her illustrations.

Empowering children's voices with wordless picture books
When reading "Flora and the Flamingo" with 2- to 3-year-olds, I recommend crafting your own storyline. At the same time, be intentional in creating time and space for the children to ponder on the character's expressions and inner thoughts. The use of open-ended questions will be crucial in supporting young children to develop the vocabulary and pictorial decoding skills to make sense of the story. Some examples of such questions include:

- **I wonder what Flora is trying to do when she raises her arms.**
- **Flora's facial expression has changed. How is she feeling now? How do you know that she's feeling…? What happened that caused her to feel…?**
- **What could Flora be saying to the flamingo?**

For 4- to 6-year-olds, I encourage you to use the children's words to invent a storyline and create dialogue. If this is your first time introducing wordless picture book to them, you can start by flipping through the book with them, then asking what is different about this book compared to the others you have read in class. It would not be long before they ask you, "Why aren't you saying anything? Where are the words?"!

Give the children ample time to view the illustrations cover to cover, and after they feel like they have gotten a general idea of the story, you can begin to create a mind map, taking down what they are saying about the characters and storyline.

Eventually, these ideas will turn into the words for the story. Here are some questions that could further prompt their storytelling skills:

- **How would you like to start the story? Those are called introductions.**
- **The books that you have read in school and at home, how do they start?**
- **Characters are people in stories. What do you think the character could be saying at this point?**
- **How can we turn what you just explained into a sentence in the story?**
- **How do you think this character would sound?**
- **What sounds do you think this scene is making now? How do you think we can sound it out to write it down?**

Remember that the questions you craft should help the children make sense of the illustrations. Using the clues from the pictures in a book to tell a story requires high levels of thinking. You will be encouraging the children to use inferential comprehension to read between the lines and make inferences about things not directly stated in the story.

If this experience is done as a group, the children will need to collaborate with one another to complete the flow of the story. This adds another level of challenge as they will now need to take their classmate's perspectives and ideas into account. Be sure to tailor your questions to encourage them to think beyond the visual cues in the pictures, going into character intentions, emotions and thoughts.

Most importantly, as the facilitator to the children's storytelling process, it is vital that you document their words, recognising, accepting and cultivating the expression of their emotions, thoughts and ideas. I always find myself impressed, amused and charmed by the children's originality and creativity – and I am sure you will be, too!