Exploring the perceptions of stakeholders in a Singapore Kindergarten during a period of curriculum reform.

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Abstract:
For 40 years, the Singapore education system has adopted a ‘standard’ curriculum, however the Minister of Education, Mr. Shanmugaratnam (2006) has stated that the ‘one size fits all’ approach is not feasible in a ‘globalized world'. There is a call for a shift from academic rote learning to more experiential engaged learning, lifelong learning and learning that is considered character building. The Singapore MOE and policy makers have realized the importance of early childhood. In 2003, the Ministry of Education (MOE) launched a Pre-school Curriculum Framework based on a two-year pilot research study. The resultant new curriculum focused on developing the child holistically, on learning through play and experimentation, and on interacting with the teacher. To help raise the professional standard of pre-school educators, the MOE mandated that by 2008, all preschool teachers and principals should attain the minimum qualification of a pre-school teaching diploma and leadership diploma respectively.

A qualitative research methodology was used to study the challenges, problems and emerging transition issues faced by the stakeholders involved in the Singapore curriculum reforms. The research methodology entails a case study of one kindergarten. Data collection methods consisted of interviews, observation and
document analysis. Analysis provides insights of indirect and direct influences on stakeholders in a kindergarten while attempting change as required by the MOE. Findings include an exploration of how change is viewed, experienced and handled by all those involved in the kindergarten during this time.

Introduction

“National level curriculum and pedagogical change cannot be achieved by working on the curriculum and teaching methodologies alone. School organisation, teacher education, terms and conditions of service, school-workplace relations and school community values impact upon the curriculum and ways of teaching and learning. They all are part of an exceedingly complex picture whose elements are interrelated.”

(Skilbeck, 1990: 32)

The objective of this research was to examine significant changes in a Singapore kindergarten during a period of curriculum reform. Emerging issues and the experiences of the stakeholders of the kindergarten have been investigated. Stakeholders include teachers, the principal, parents, children and a government body, the Ministry of Education (MOE). In this paper, the perception of change will be discussed from the views expressed by the principal and teachers during interviews. The paper describes the Singapore early childhood context, the roles, beliefs and practices of the principal and the teachers and the challenges they encountered.

Background

Singapore has limited natural resources and it recognizes that its major resource is its human capital. Therefore, learning and transformation in Singapore’s organizations and individuals is important if the country is to meet environmental challenges. In a knowledge based economy an effective learning organization is the key economic
factor for success and sustainability, which will help to achieve competitive advantage, innovation and enterprise (Tan, Gopinathan & Ho, 2001).

For over 40 years, the Singapore education system adopted a curriculum defined by continuous assessments and common examinations for streaming children at ‘key’ ages, regardless of family background. In a globalised world, when skills are more prominently emphasized, the ‘one size fits all’ approach is not feasible for an educational system (Shanmugaratnam, 2006). The MOE recognises the importance of nurturing children from a young age. A shift from ‘academic rote learning’ to learning from experiential discovery, engaged learning and developing life-long skills that develop character building is a major change (Shanmugaratnam, 2006)

In the recent years, there has been a growing concern about the quality of Singapore early childhood education. Traditionally, most teaching in Singapore classrooms has been didactic and teacher directed emphasizing seating, grouping, content, materials, use of space, scheduling and learning activities.

“In our schools, students have learned much and teachers have taught a lot. However, there are some areas of incompleteness in our learning at school.”

(Ng, 2004: 4)

A common scenario in Singapore classrooms is one where the teachers out-talk the entire class of students and students answer the teacher’s question. Written assignments from a workbook or worksheets, with frequent correction and grading, are common in kindergartens. Most teaching methods for high school students are often imposed on the kindergarten children.

“In school, students adhere faithfully to their textbooks and seldom venture beyond the examinable syllabus. They may know the methodology of solving a problem but they may not know why they are doing what they are doing. They do not question what they have learned in school, but they do practise really
hard (at least some of them do). In this culture, how do we develop students to think out of the box?” (Ng, 2004: 5).

Changes in Singapore pre-schools have already taken place. There are currently a total of 488 registered Kindergartens and 721 registered child care centres providing preschool education in Singapore. They are all entirely run by the private sector which includes religious bodies, community foundations, business organizations and social organizations (Tan, 2007). Based on a pilot research, on play curriculum, conducted in 2000 by the MOE, the resultant study shows that children benefit and learn through play (MOE, 2003). The kindergarten curriculum reform took place in 2003, where a curriculum framework, based on play and learning outcomes was developed and introduced into the early childhood sector. In order to include play as a medium for teaching in children’s learning and also to raise the professional standards of teachers and principals, nationwide training for all early childhood practitioners from kindergartens and child care centres was initiated. The modules and requirements for the training programmes were documented, regulated and accredited by the MOE. This was to ensure consistency, continuity and appropriate knowledge would be imparted to kindergarten teachers and principals. These funded training programme structures were offered by different private training institutions.

This research discusses the reform of the early childhood curriculum in Singapore by researching the experiences of stakeholders in one kindergarten. For this paper, data collected from interviews with the principal and the teachers are described.

The Context

In 2003, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore launched a Pre-school Curriculum Framework based on a two-year pilot research study. The resultant new curriculum focuses on developing the child holistically, on learning through play and experimentation, and on interacting with the teacher. All kindergarten principals were required to obtain the Diploma in Pre-School Education (Leadership) by 2006. By
2008, one in four teachers was required to obtain the Diploma in Pre-School Education (Teaching), and all other teachers were to have Certificates in Pre-school Teaching. This mandated policy was to raise the teaching standard and to produce staff to be cognisant with the value of play curriculum.

According to the Kindergarten Curriculum Guide (2008: 36),

“Play is children’s natural way of learning about themselves and the world around them. Through play, children develop and refine motor and social skills, experience the joy of discovery and mastery and build foundational concepts and skills for life-long learning. Although many activities in pre-schools are referred to as ‘play’, not all of the play experiences can be considered as purposeful play where children are actively engaged in constructing knowledge and discovering new relationships.”

The curriculum guide designed by the MOE differentiated between ‘Child-directed play’ and ‘Teacher-directed play’ in the kindergarten, (MOE, 2008:36). The characteristics of child-directed play are one that is creative, child initiated and exploration takes place based on children’s choice of activities and learning (MOE, 2008:36)

In contrast, the characteristics of teacher-directed play are that this type of play is teacher initiated with a specific goal and learning outcomes. Teacher’s guidance is needed to help children to be more focused on the activity over a sustained period. Teacher acts as a role model and interacts with the children in a large or small group activity.

These two approaches to play curriculum suggest the MOE is providing guidelines for staff while offering definitions of play. There is also an emphasis on quality.

In the MOE Curriculum Guide (2008), there are six principles for quality kindergarten curriculum. These are listed as ‘ITEACH’ (MOE,2008:3):

- I for Integrated learning
• T for Teachers as supporters of learning,
• E for engaging children in learning through play
• A for ample opportunities for interaction
• C for children as active learners,
• H for holistic development

According to the ITEACH, Children learn through experiences that are integrated and interdisciplinary. Teachers facilitate and support children’s learning. Exploring and interacting through play, knowledge is constructed and children’s learning stimulates their cognitive thinking skills. Given ample opportunities to play, children are able to interact meaningfully with materials, their peers and teachers. Children as active learners explore, discover and construct knowledge through meaningful tasks. In order to promote a holistic development in the curriculum, the teacher facilitates and supports children’s learning in areas such as aesthetics, creativity, environmental awareness, language, literacy, motor skills development, self and social awareness. These are the concepts and ideas that have been offered to the teachers and principal in this study through their training. As parents have not been educated for the new curriculum and their own educational experiences were very different there is a mismatch between stakeholders in terms of commitment and understanding of play curriculum. Some of these issues are explored in this research.

**The Research**

This research is a qualitative research project using a case study approach and data has included interviews, discussions and direct observations of the stakeholders of a Singapore Kindergarten. Mertens (2005) describes qualitative research as an inquiry which involves collection, analysis and interpretation of data in order to understand, predict and control an educational or psychological phenomenon. The research requires the researcher to get close and ‘in-depth’ into a particular situation. In this case, the researcher spent time at the kindergarten, becoming familiar with the
educational experiences parents, staff and children provided. Having established a relationship with stakeholders, observations and in-depth interviews were recorded to explore perceptions of the changes in curriculum and pedagogy that was required by the MOE. Bromley (1986) states that case study methods help us make direct observations and collect data in natural settings. “Case study is used to gain in-depth understanding replete with meaning for the subject, focusing on process rather than outcome, on discovery rather than confirmation” (Burns, 2000: 460).

The Literature


The Setting

A Registered Kindergarten with a minimum of five years in operation was selected. Five qualified teachers with a minimum two years preschool teaching experience with three of them holding preschool teaching diplomas were interviewed. The principal had two years experience in a leadership role and holds a leadership diploma. Observations have been conducted on four full time session K1- K2 level groups of children. Four parents from K1 and K2 levels were selected for interview sessions.

The participants and data collection

The research aimed to ‘unlock the mysteries of living organization’ (Fullan, 2001: 46). The stakeholders for this research include the principal, teachers, parents and children. Data collection methods included open ended informal interviews and these were used to gather the participant’s perspectives on the change process. Classroom observations, document analysis such as photographs, children’s work, kindergarten information pamphlets for parents, teachers’ evaluation and assessment forms, child assessment records were used to provide an in-depth study. Interview material from the principal and teachers is discussed in this paper only.

The Findings

The Principal

During the implementation of MOE’s recommended play curriculum in her kindergarten, the principal’s role was challenged. She felt that transition of change should be carefully handled and not abrupt though she believed that play helped children learn. The principal stated that though some of the trained teachers were
eager to put their beliefs of play into practice they felt the weight of the additional time needed to design play activities, on top of the requirement of worksheets, was onerous. Worksheets were not replaced or decreased by the implementation of play curriculum. The principal thought that the transition to a full play curriculum would not be effective or easy until parents were educated on the play curriculum and accompanying benefits. She further stated that another important area of change the MOE should study was the primary one curriculum and make changes in order to ensure a smooth transition from kindergarten to formal schooling. Knowledge of primary one requirements and information on curriculum should be easily accessible to the kindergarten parents. She reported that it was difficult to achieve a 100% play curriculum in her kindergarten due to parents’ expectations and demands. Traditionally, children’s learning was done mostly on worksheets. She hoped to achieve at least 30% play and 70% learning by academic worksheets in the future. As a private kindergarten, they have to account for enrolment numbers, so parents’ demands and expectations have to be met. Issues of parents’ expectations and the need to see their child’s work were apparent. The school opened forty years ago and had pursued a formal approach all those years. In formulating educational objectives and the implementation of the recommended play curriculum the centre adopted activity corners for all areas of the classrooms. This was according to the ‘child-centred’ approach, the need for integrated learning corners recommended in the MOE’s curriculum guidelines (MOE, 2008).

Parents’ expectations were consistent with their own experiences, observation of past practice and knowledge of school. The principal stated that to rigidly adhere to a complete play curriculum requirement, based on the guidelines would be an onerous task. If parents were not educated on the benefits of play curriculum, if primary one’s academic emphasis has not changed and parents’ knowledge of primary’s curriculum guidelines not improved, this situation would continue. The demands from parents to see worksheets as child’s work and learning and the strong emphasis for academic learning in the kindergarten will not go away. As a school leader, she mentioned that she championed autonomy in her teaching staff and welcomed collaborative sharing of knowledge. Teachers engage in consensus planning with other teaching staff on the
monthly theme and then individualise their teaching of the curriculum. As stated, her biggest challenge in the change process was to create awareness of the new play programme in parents. Getting parents to accept new knowledge of the play curriculum, to understand that the change would provide for the developmental needs of their child was a difficult task. As a newly appointed leader in the school, she expressed the need to maintain the ‘equilibrium’ and cohesiveness of the school culture during this change process. She would also like to strengthen the teacher’s capacity to apply new knowledge of play into the classroom curriculum. She pointed out that the multiplicity of external and internal forces must not be overlooked during this change of curriculum as decades of traditional practices of teacher directed activities and worksheets were still there. She envisaged some conflicts from parents and teachers in implementing a full play curriculum which would lead to children and teachers leaving the kindergarten if change was too fast.

The principal felt that once a week outdoor play and a yearly school outing was not sufficient for young children. Her other objective was to get more parent involvement in the school activities, so as to strengthen the families’ informal social connections. She had implemented compulsory record keeping of children’s progress and incorporated new forms for children’s assessment.

Analysis

The principal agreed that children’s learning is enhanced from play and the implementation of the new play curriculum will benefit the children. However, a year had passed since last mandated completion of teachers’ and principal’s skill development and the traditional practice of worksheets and teacher’s instructional teaching methods are still the main practice of the kindergarten.

According to the principal, her role in the kindergarten is to be a transformational leader who champions teacher’s autonomy. Though teachers were given autonomy in the curriculum practice, the principal accepts responsibilities for quality in the teaching
through the empowerment given to the teachers. She answers to the directors of the kindergarten and also practices within the requirements of MOE. The principal identified the main reason to change to a full play curriculum was difficult because of parents’ expectations. Dolan (1994) stated that it is important to have parental involvement in as many activities as possible to build rapport and work together on any uncomfortable issues that change presents. An effective school with its collaborative connections will strengthen the relationships within the community. Parents are integral part of the school and should be viewed as the solution more than part of the problem (Fullan, 2000). The principal recognized the value of educating parents on the benefits of the play curriculum but felt that the MOE should do it. The principal thought that educating parents through parental workshops, seminars and providing information on play would help change parents’ perceptions and preconceived ideas of play in children’s learning (Lee, Lo & Walker, 2004).

Fullan (2001) asserted that change should be fragmented slowly as recognized by the principal the need to maintain ‘equilibrium’ and minimize change in her new principal leadership role. By not implementing change quickly, the principal hoped to retain the enrolment numbers and also prevent teachers from leaving the kindergarten. Hoy and Miskel (2005: 384) have noted that changing leaders create challenging situations where ‘instabilities’ may occur such as ‘the replacement of principals or superintendents is disruptive because it changes the lines of communication, realigns relationships of power, affects decision making, and generally disturbs the equilibrium of normal activities”. Thus, teachers using traditional practices of teaching were still supported by the principal who did not feel overly confident as she had only been in a leadership position for two years.

The processes of change experienced by the principal and teachers in kindergarten are analysed using Fullan’s (2000) three stories of change in reform. The ‘inside story’ relates to how schools change their internal structures and dynamics to be effective, the second is the ‘inside-out’ story relating to how schools deal with external forces that affect and impinge on them during change. Third, is the ‘outside-in’ story on how
those external school agencies engage in large scale change and the infrastructure developed and used to accomplish the change.

Fullan’s inside story is illustrated by findings from Newmann and Wehlage (1995). These researchers show that successful schools have a learning community among teachers and administrators; who record student’s progress and assessed continuously to adjust in the pedagogy to achieve their goals and learning outcomes. Linking Fullan’s (2000) first inside story to the analysis of the findings of this research, it would seem the principal tried to maintain a collaborative culture among the teaching staff in the kindergarten. She had implemented new forms to record children’s progress and championed autonomy in her teachers where teachers were given freedom to adjust, or change their practices, during this change. However, the principal supported the teachers’ practices of using traditional teaching methods of worksheets and not making much adjustment or changes in the implementation of the play curriculum. No action plan had been developed by the principal to adjust for change in the current class curriculum for ‘reaping’ the benefits from the teachers’ knowledge gained from their recent training. Fullan’s first story of accountability, the inside story of internal change had not been effected.

The second story, the inside-out story, dealt with outside forces in effecting the change. It showed that the principal in the kindergarten relied on her own perceptions to delay change. Her perceptions of outside forces, such as parents’ expectations, shaped the curriculum and practices of the teachers. Hence the change to the recommended play curriculum by MOE had not taken place. Other forces include government policy of the recommended play curriculum and the different interpretations of play by the teachers trained. Trying to meet parents’ expectations, making parents happy so that they would not take their children out of the kindergarten meant the parents’ partnership was a reason resisting change. It seemed external forces were showing change but some of these forces were also stakeholders in the school reform. The parents were not partners of the education process, they were seen as consumers and therefore the inside story-out story is complex and layered.
The principal in the kindergarten gave the need to maintain cultural connectedness and cultural trust as reasons for not changing too quickly. Fullan (2000:5) states that, “the critical importance of the inside-outside story, schools need the outside to get the job done. These external forces however do not come in helpful packages; they are an amalgam of complex and uncoordinated phenomena. The work of the school is to figure out how to make its relationship productive one”. The principal commented that the MOE should conduct nationwide workshops to educate parents on the value of play in what Fullan (2000) describes as the third story of ‘the outside-in’ in the reform. The ‘external reform infrastructure’ within an accountability system needs to be built in for change to be effected. In this case, for years parents had experienced play as ‘fun’ and not learning and the principal had supported formal academic programmes for preschoolers. Fullan’s (2000) three stories of reform provide a framework which helps explain the difficulties for the stakeholders in instituting change.

As Hughes (1999:27) comments that ‘to learn to know, to learn to do, to learn to live together, to learn to be’ further supports the idea in any change, there is a need for main players to reflect on the purposes of their actions as all elements of change among stakeholders are interconnected. Their connections in the implementation of play curriculum have direct implications for the change process. From the interviews, the principal identified that the healthy school culture should not be disrupted she allowed teachers to continue with the traditional practices. Levin (2004) reported that change is not what most schools look for when challenged with reform. Fullan’s (2000) three stories illustrate the need for collaboration and working towards partnerships are important forces of change.

**Teachers’ perceptions on play curriculum from the interviews conducted**

The five teachers interviewed in this research were Teachers J, R, N, D and CT. Their ages range from thirty to fifty years. J had nineteen years and other teachers had three to five years teaching experiences. They were all qualified and trained kindergarten teachers. CT was the Chinese language teacher.
Teachers at the kindergarten had similar articulated understandings of ‘what is play?’
All the teachers mentioned in their interviews that play is good for the children. They
expressed the belief that children learn through play and it happens when children are
given opportunities to play based on their interests and they construct their learning
through play. Teachers stated that they needed to provide learning materials on
shelves to allow children freedom to choose their activities; they should also choose
friends to play with. The teachers had created different learning corners in the
classrooms. These learning centres were a main strategy presented during
professional development on play and the environment, as part of professional
development to support the reform. However, teacher had mixed views on how their
professional development had impacted on their practices.

In the interviews, teachers J, R, N and D expressed one common response towards
the new play curriculum. Though they have all agreed that play is good for the
children, they all encountered difficulties in breaking with the tradition of using
worksheets and also said the parents expected academic learning. The Chinese
language teacher, CT, however stated that participative learning with music and hands
on activities helps children to learn faster. She used participative activities during her
sessions and incorporated worksheets for writing or drawing towards the end of her
class.

Teachers J, R and CT agreed that the training funded by MOE for teaching diploma
courses, to help introduce more play-based practices, made them more confident as
teachers. They stated that the training also helped them to design learning corners
with appropriate teaching resources for the children. Teacher CT, the Chinese
language teacher, mentioned that she was making her own teaching resources to
integrate play into the different themes in her teaching and the training helped her to
design more relevant and appropriate activities. Only teacher D disagreed, she said
the training was only applicable if parents could see play as the child’s work. She felt
that the programme in the kindergarten had not changed much as teachers were still
using workbooks as the main bulk of their teaching activities and there was not much
Three of the teachers expressed the belief that children need to be happy, actively participating and looking forward to starting school. They said they believed that children need time to play and also to pursue academic learning. Two teachers thought that learning through play is good and but it is not easy to apply a play curriculum in this kindergarten as preparation and completion of worksheets by children remain the dominant practice. They reported that the parents demand worksheets or workbook exercises as an indication of children’s learning.

From the interviews with teachers, there was a general consensus among the teachers that play in the early childhood setting required extra effort, time to plan, organize and implement. Though they stated that they knew play is good for the children, they were reluctant to implement many play activities as the current practice of worksheets continued. Teachers stated it was time consuming to rearrange, design and resurface learning areas for a play curriculum. Four teachers stated that in the past they did not keep records or conduct assessment on the child’s progress but now new forms were implemented for record keeping and assessment for the children as parents want to see their child’s progress record.

Teachers interviewed stated that they have a diversity of children, such as Indians, Chinese, Malay and Filipinos. The majority of children enrolled in the kindergarten programme are those living on estates near the school. Teachers said that some of the children joined them at K1 or K2 level and these children were often disadvantaged, even more so if their parents did not understand English. The teachers understood that the importance of eliminating inequalities in teaching children from diverse backgrounds. They understood from their training in early childhood development that every child is unique and their pace of learning is different. This presented challenges when expected to implement a play curriculum. Teachers commented that the current ratio of one teacher to 18 children in K1 and one teacher to 20 children in K2 classes presented a hindrance for them and makes it difficult to meet the MOE’s play...
curriculum guidelines (MOE, 2008). Teachers said that worksheets were not eliminated and together with a high child to teacher ratio, individualized teaching and educating children with diverse language backgrounds presented problems in the implementation of the play curriculum.

**Analysis**

From the teachers' interviews, it is would appear that teachers' practices and stated beliefs are contradictory. Practices in the kindergarten curriculum are not strongly in line with the MOE curriculum guidelines (MOE, 2008). Problems causing resistance to change from teachers seem to be deep-rooted and include meeting parents' expectations, child to teacher ratios, workload, educating children from diverse linguistically backgrounds, children's different pace of learning and classroom management. The principal's support of current practices in meeting parents' expectations to sighting worksheets further allowed the teachers to fall back comfortably to the traditional practice of working and teaching through worksheets and avoiding the guidelines of the play curriculum set by MOE (MOE, 2008). Efforts to overcome these issues were not supported by the principal or initiated by the teachers.

The teachers interviewed stated that they were aware of the different cognitive levels of children from diverse backgrounds and some required individualised teaching approaches to meet the different pace of these children's learning. Though the teachers interviewed said that they understood the benefits of play in children's life, they did not implement the play curriculum. Whitebread & Coltman (2008) affirm that effective teaching must include fun, excitement and play is an important part of it. The teachers lamented that their roles were challenged and needed to negotiate change.

Ng (2004) on the role of teachers:

“Teachers are not powerless people. Teachers affect a whole generation of children in a way that no other profession can.” (2004: 7)
Teachers said they understood the importance of their roles in shaping children’s learning and knew that change would be good for the children. When they reflected on their practices of worksheets drilling and academic learning, it would appear change has not taken place in the last one over year. Teachers’ practices were not in line with their stated beliefs of a play curriculum (Lee, Lo & Walker, 2004). Change has not been demanded by the principal who supports the teachers’ autonomy and allows them to fall back on the traditional worksheets learning. Partnership with parents in time of change might help negotiating parents’ expectations. Strategies will be needed to overcome teachers’ capacity to introduce play activities. Strategies such as readjustment or restructuring the rigid class timetable, teachers’ work time, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations designed for teachers, skill development for teachers in appropriate workshops and also proper monitoring and follow up plans need to be developed. As training is already in place, perhaps the content and pedagogy of these initiatives also need exploring.

**Conclusion**

The pressure to perform in academic achievement is exerted on tertiary level but has continued down to secondary schools and then work its way down to the kindergartens. The whole system aimed to produce learners who would be more superior and competent at the next level of their education (Michalovitz, 1990). The principal and teachers of the study stated that academic push for young children in the kindergarten were augmented by anxious parents who viewed academic achievement as the criteria for children’s success and a condition to help them to attain social status for parents (Michalovitz, 1990: 91). The change to the recommended play curriculum is an identified need by MOE if Singapore is to retain its competitive advantage as a knowledge economy.

There is a significant body of research on play, much rhetoric about play from many books and most education departments in most countries are convinced of the merits
and value of play. However in the educational context, play activities are very difficult to define as what is the ‘optimum’ value of play. Peacocke (1987:3) stated that: “It is unfortunate that the word ‘play’ has so many definitions, parents are suspicious of it.” Play activities in parents’ mind are those that provide enjoyment, fun and pleasure. Many adults perceive teacher’s responsibility is to teach and limit play as they view play as unproductive (Shepard & Smith, 1988). A similar trend of ‘earlier is better’ is a conviction of parents (Elkind, 1990). From the interviews, teachers emphasized and justified the construction of play activities needed to include ‘academic rigour’ in order to meet parents’ demands for academic learning. At the same time, the principal and teachers trying to meet parents’ expectation as ‘justification’ for their own conviction of not allowing change to take place and not adding ‘value’ for the play curriculum to be effected. Other prevalent reasons for teachers not wanting to change the curriculum are the difficulty in educating into diversity, play is time consuming and the need for classroom management.

From the interviews, the principal’s and teachers’ attitudes towards change were contradictory. They viewed meeting parents’ expectations and overcoming the pressures to place academic learning and completing worksheets as major influences on why change was not occurring. It seemed that teachers and the principal were reluctant to modify their current curriculum as current habits, routine and practices would be disrupted. Modifying the curriculum could be overwhelming for both, though the principal and teachers said they understood clearly the benefits of the play curriculum. The principal stressed the importance for stability in the functions and daily operations of the kindergarten. As Hoy and Miskel (2005:27) state “there is a dynamic relationship between bureaucratic role demands and individual work needs as people are brought together in the workplace.” From these interactions, we can see a certain culture such as ways of doing things, norms, and thinking are developed. The current norms, beliefs and thinking of the principal and teachers in the kindergarten had an impact on their behaviours and response towards change (Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman, 1992). The principal was more concerned with the degree of uncertainties such as structure of the kindergarten, internal and external forces of the environment and perceptions of the stakeholders in response to change. These were salient
reasons for the principal not wanting to change (Hoy and Miskel, 2005) and teachers followed the principal’s move in not embracing change.

To summarise, teachers gave their reasons on why change was not happening. Reasons such as meeting parents’ expectations of sighting worksheets, the diverse backgrounds of children and classroom management of the high child to teacher ratios and play activities are time consuming. More profoundly, a strong culture in the kindergarten that promotes commitment among the principal and teachers based on certain beliefs and values is not present (Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman, 1992; Daft 1994). As further affirmed by Hoy and Miskel (2005:27); school with a strong culture ‘provides members with a commitment to beliefs and values beyond themselves; individuals belong to a group that is larger than themselves.” In the interviews, it seemed there were unwritten resistance and uneasy feelings in the implementation of the play curriculum that emerged among the principal and teachers. Teachers did not attempt to break their negative behaviours when challenged during these change processes as they did not feel the presence of rewards from the kindergarten or be motivated from the group norms in putting additional efforts. Culture with its norms, “emergent values and shared orientations of the workgroup” will influence and guide that behaviour when rewards are given from the group (Hoy and Miskel, 2005).

The implementation of the play curriculum in Singapore is similar to what Tamburrini, (1982) has described as the ‘dichotomy’ of the teacher’s role in providing a curriculum; one is child initiated and the other is teacher directed. The MOE guideline (MOE, 2008:35) had advocated that play can be child initiated or teacher directed activities. However, these words were clearly identified and certainly did not imply that tasks based on worksheets, as in present practice was appropriate.

Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt and Camerer (1998) state that ‘cultural of trust’ needs to be established within the school organization for goals to be achieved. The principal’s recent appointed leadership role isolated the ‘leadership situation’ that shaped her leadership behaviour and performance (Campbell et al., 1970). The principal strives to gain the ‘culture of trust’ from her teachers and prefers to slow change. She does not
perceive her role to be educating parents about the change. A plan for the establishment of the play curriculum, providing support strategies in collaborative sharing and learning, training of teachers, standard assessment and procedures in monitoring the change processes need to be present (Hoy & Miskel, 2005:358). Partnerships of stakeholders in the pursuance of the goal in successive implementation of new play curriculum such as promotion of shared understandings, collective team actions and continuously need to be maintained (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). Without this, the three stories of change inside, inside-out and outside-in will not be interconnected and each will inhibit the other ideas and efforts.

“Sustained change is not possible in the absence of a strong connection across the three stories. Internal school development is a core requirement. But this cannot occur unless the school is proactively connecting to the outside. Schools that do develop internally, and do link to the outside, are still not self-sufficient. It is possible for these schools to develop for a while on their own, but in order for this development to be sustained, they must be challenged and nurtured by an external infrastructure.” (Fullan, 2000:7)
References


