Exploring learning experiences during an early childhood curriculum change in Singapore

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Abstract
This paper is part of a major research project on early childhood curriculum reforms in Singapore. Singapore launched the Pre-school Curriculum Framework in 2003. The resultant new curriculum focuses on developing the child holistically, on learning through play and experimentation, and on interacting with the teacher. The role played by teachers as change agents in the implementation of the new play curriculum must not be overlooked. As part of the reform the Ministry of Education (MOE) mandated that all preschool teachers had to have an accredited teaching diploma by year 2008. The aim of this reform in teacher education is to promote a shift in practice, knowledge and beliefs in pre-school teachers. A general recognition of teachers’ professionalism was emphasized with a new education and training regime for teachers to promote quality teaching in a new era of a play curriculum. However, little attention has been given to Singapore’s cultural and competitive environment which leads to teachers trying to make sense when negotiating the challenges and demands of this new professionalism. The new curriculum is challenging as theories of early childhood pedagogy and play may be interpreted differently, in practice, by teachers with differing teaching experiences, training and life histories. Teacher’s knowledge of ‘play’ is based on their personal understanding and experience, from which they contextualize the development for children’s learning.

A qualitative research methodology was used to study the lived experiences of children and teachers during the curriculum reform. The research entails a case study of one kindergarten. Data collection methods consisted of interviews, observation and document analysis. Discussions on the children’s learning based on observations and analysis of this study will provide information on how the kindergarten teachers have approached the reforms.

Exploring learning experiences during an early childhood curriculum change in Singapore

In a way, Singapore’s economic and national governance system is unique. Its core is a very efficient, noncorrupt, and business-oriented government bureaucracy, whose key priority is to make a tiny city-state highly competitive in the global economic arena.

Tselichtchev & Debroux (2009, p 190)

Introduction and Background
The Singapore government’s key priority is to create a ‘knowledge-based economy’ (Gopinathan, 2001). The Singapore approach to developing the potential of its citizens is that everyone is given equal opportunities in accessing education and the practice of academic streaming is based on the principle of meritocracy (Bastion, 2004; Moore 2000; Young, 1958). In view of the meritocratic system, a competitive school environment is prominent whereby streaming is based on continuous testing and examinations (Bastion, 2004, Gopinathan, 2001; Lim 2007). In the pursuit of wealth
and status, parents believe that by enrolling their children in a prestigious school that ranked highly in the Singapore school system, they are fulfilling one of the criteria for their child’s success (Tan, 2008). A parent interviewed by the researcher stated, “Everyone wants their child to be somebody; an architect, lawyer or doctor...” Further pressure was felt by Singapore children due to the compulsory bilingual competency requirement in English and their mother tongue language (Gopinathan, 2001, Khong, 2004; Lim 2007).

‘Kiasuism’ (noun) and “kiasu” (adjective) are words known in the Singapore culture that were derived from the Hokkien dialect and simply mean ‘the fear to lose’. It is a phenomenon commonly found in the behaviours and images of Singaporeans due to its highly competitive and meritocratic system (Ho, Ang, Loh & Ng, 1998; Ng, 2005). Parents have adopted a ‘kiasu’ (scared to lose) attitude as they believe that their children will do well in gaining knowledge from additional classes before any streaming examinations (Khong, 2004). The role of parents in managing their children’s education has become more complex in an increasingly competitive school environment where “education is such a high stakes issue in Singapore” (Khong, 2004, p7).

The Singapore Ministry of Education’s (MOE) mission is “molding the future of our nation, by molding the people who will determine the future of the nation” (Ministry of Education, Singapore). The mission demonstrates the imperatives of education and training of the younger generation for the nation’s future. In recent years, the Singapore government has recognized the importance of nurturing and teaching children from a young age.

*We must nurture them in their early years to be innovative, to be flexible, and to have a passion for learning that takes them through life. All of us here today have a role to play. Let us work together to allow our children to create a future we can all take pride in.*

(Tharman, 2003, p 6)

The shift from academic rote learning to more experimental differentiated learning that focuses on life-long skills and character building is aimed at encouraging children to think widely, be more engaged and explore ideas thoughtfully. Tharman (2003, p4) states that in spontaneous play, it allows children to “discover, take a few risks, and make mistakes. It allows them to care for each other, and express their feelings”

Given this requirement for transitional change, from a meritocratic to a child-centred preschool educational curriculum, the complexity and all interrelated components of change needs to be investigated. This study aims to explore how the stakeholders engage with change and how their lived experiences during the implementation of the recommended play curriculum support the reforms. The design of the research is a qualitative case study to help the researcher gain insight into the stakeholders’ perceptions of the changes. The stakeholders include teachers, principal, parents, children of a Singapore kindergarten and the MOE. This paper will explore and discuss the lived experiences of children and teachers in a Singapore kindergarten during the process of change. The paper describes the Singapore preschool educational context and observations suggest the teachers have not moved from teacher directed activities and traditional academic methods of pedagogical instruction to a more child centred learning. Findings will discuss why the proposed changes are not evident.

**The Singapore Context of Preschool Curriculum Change**

The term ‘preschool’ has been used commonly in Singapore to denote kindergartens and childcare centres. All preschool education policies initiated by the Singapore MOE, such as mandated policies of nationwide training for teachers and principals and the recommended play curriculum, were applicable to kindergarten and childcare centres (MOE, 2003a, 2008, Lim, 2007). The term preschool in Singapore therefore refers to kindergartens, child care centres and some toddler playgroups (MOE, 2003a, 2003c, 2008). Kindergartens are regulated by the Singapore Ministry of Education, whereas,
childcare centres and playgroups are under the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS). During the reform of the preschool curriculum the MOE accredited training courses for teachers and principals were applicable to kindergartens and childcare centres. In this research the case study was of a kindergarten.

According to the Kindergarten Curriculum Guide (2008, p36), play is defined as:

*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 to play designed by the MOE differentiated two types of play; ‘Child-directed play’ and ‘Teacher-directed play’ (MOE, 2008, p36). Child-directed play is creative, child initiated and based on exploration. It takes place based on children’s choice of activities and learning (MOE, 2008, p36). Teacher-directed play is teacher initiated with specific goals and achievable learning outcomes. In teacher directed play, teacher’s guidance is required to help children to be more focused on the activity over a sustained period. Teacher acts as a role model in the interaction of the activity with a large or small group of children.

The aim of the Kindergarten Curriculum Guide (MOE, 2003c; MOE, 2008) is to translate the ‘nurturing early learners’ of the MOE’s curriculum framework into quality teaching. Hence, it is organized into ‘ITEACH’ (MOE, 2008, p3); an acronym of six principles of learning and teaching as listed below:

- 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, teachers facilitate and support children’s learning and experiences across an integrated curriculum. Children learn through exploring, communicating and interacting in play. Knowledge is constructed when children’s thinking is stimulated with meaningful experiences. Children are recognized as active learners and ample opportunities are given for children to interact meaningfully with the materials, peers and teachers. Teachers support children’s learning in areas such as aesthetics, creativity, environmental awareness, language, literacy, motor skill development, self and social awareness. The six principles of the play curriculum are similar to those listed in the European, American and Australian descriptions of recommended practice (MOE, 2008; Lim, 2007). These six principles were a significant part of the compulsory training the teachers underwent.

As Lim (2007, p43) asserted:

*The recommendation for “child-centred” curriculum to be holistic and interactive and to allow children to play and explore as active learners echoes the Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) guidelines (Bredekemp & Copple, 1997) of the United States, although the document does not have any citations or references. There may be some desirability in this recommendation, especially in Singapore, where young children have been inundated with academically rigorous curricula.*

(Lim, 2007, p43)
Countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada and UK had preschool reforms that developed similar curriculum frameworks to emphasize the importance of teaching approaches and purposes in their established guidelines of learning in the early childhood programme (Tayler et al., 2008; Carr. 1999; Langford, 2010; Langford, 2010; Sylva et. al, 2010).

The Research

The Literature

Theories of Play

Theories of play from the early years literature involve many research studies conducted by educationists, psychologists and researchers such as Piaget (1950), Vygotsky (1967, 1978), Montessori (1967), Isaacs (1929), Smilansky (1990), Sylva, Bruner & Genevo (1976), Moyles (1989, 2005), and Almon (2003) who have all linked play directly to children’s development. Extensive research has recommended play as a basis of early childhood curriculum. Early childhood educators and theorists have advocated that children aged 3-6 are capable of taking control of their own activities and behaviour, solving problems, taking on challenges independently, and learning from one another. Children are keen observers of their environment and they communicate their ideas and thinking through a variety of means (Vygotsky, 1976, 1978; Klugman & Smilansky, 1990; Elkind, 1998; Sylva, Bruner & Genevo, 1976).

Almon (2003, p19) states that

The simple truth is that young children are born with a most wonderful urge to grow and learn. They continually develop new skills and capacities, and if they are allowed to set the pace with a bit of help from the adult world, they will work at this in a playful and tireless way. Rather than respecting this innate drive to learn, however, we treat children as if they can learn only what adults can teach them.

Importance of Play in Early Years Education

Decades of research in neuroscience have shown that neural connections are not dense at birth but new connections are made at rates much faster during infancy to 6 years old (Thompson & Nelson, 2001; Blakemore 2000 and Byrnes 2001). Children's brain mass by age six, may reach maximum density. Evidence relevant to the early childhood context has been reviewed and compiled by Blakemore (2000) and Byrnes (2001) and has supported the followings:

1. Experiential learning through play with meaningful contexts creates a number of linkages with the brain development and learning.
2. Connections are significantly formed with brain mass density increases from birth to 6 years of age.

Certain regions of the brain can be adapted through symbolic representations in young children and eventually form during the first few years. For optimum development stimulating early education and care environments that concentrate on the power of play as a medium for learning have been explored in the literature (Blakemore, 2000; Byrnes, 2001).

A growing body of research suggests that the cost of overemphasizing achievement (e.g. Kohn, 2000, p28) will undermine children's interest in learning, lead to feelings of failure and reduced quality of learning, children will avoid challenges and competition invites children to think how smart they are instead of how hard they tried.

In the past Singapore has emphasized competition and academic achievement as part of the meritocracy that exists. Such practices and beliefs are difficult to disengage with but the MOE has taken a leadership role in promoting change. Overemphasis on academic achievement can have profound negative impacts on children's development and learning (Sylva, 1984; Novak, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978; Freire, 1970; Church, 1993; Erikson, 1963; Piaget, 1950, 1962). When children play, they are
exploring, investigating, problem-solving and also absorbing new information which is meaningful to them. When they enjoy what they are playing, concentration, motivation and achievement will be present which will further enhance children’s sense of self worth and learning (Moyle, 1989; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Decades of empirical research has endorsed play in fostering a whole array of skills and life skills that are valuable for school success such as taking turns with peers, independence, problem solving skills and developing social and emotional successes (Yawkey & Pellegrini, 1984; Bruner, Jolly & Sylva, 1976; Singer, & Singer, 1990). Study conducted by Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez & McDermott (2000) has reported children who lacked the skills in play were distracted and lacked motivation. Mindful of this robust research base the Singapore MOE introduced the play curriculum in 2003 and this research explores the implementation of this reform. The paper, as stated above, examines daily experience within a kindergarten during this era of change and discusses findings in the context of children’s and teachers activities within the classroom.

**Methodology**

**A qualitative case study**

**The centre and the participants**

The research methodology of this research entailed an in-depth qualitative case study (Mertens, 2005; Yin, 2003). The sample school selected is a Registered Kindergarten with the Ministry of Education. Informal interviews were conducted with five teachers with preschool teaching diplomas or certificates (minimum three teachers must have diploma in pre-school teaching). Informal interviews were conducted with the qualified principal who holds a diploma in preschool leadership. Interviews were also conducted with four parents and MOE pre-school unit personnel. In this paper the aim is to explore and discuss how children, as one of the stakeholders in the curriculum reform, experienced change. Observations were conducted of children in a K1 classroom to study their learning experiences and this data will inform whether the kindergarten has moved from teacher directed activities, with an emphasis on formal academic activities, to more child-centred learning, as recommended in the MOE’s curriculum guidelines. Data and documents collected were carefully categorized and analysed. Pseudonyms are used in this paper for ethical reasons.

Cherry Kindergarten (pseudonym) is approximately forty years old, a registered non-profitable kindergarten catering for families with low to average economic status and children are recruited from the local neighbourhood. The total enrolment is around 150 children between the ages 3-6 years old. The kindergarten has thirteen staff, which comprise of one principal, seven main teachers, two odd job helpers (cook / cleaner), two full time Chinese language teachers and a part-time Tamil language teacher. The kindergarten is open from Monday to Friday and runs two sessions daily- 8.30-11.30am and second session is from 11.45am to 2.45pm. The kindergarten is closed on all school holidays as designated by the MOE and also public holidays. Findings are situated within the research literature on theories of play, analysis and implications were drawn from the data collected. Observations such as anecdotal records and photographic narratives were conducted. In this paper the relevant literature is explored, the kindergarten context described and observations of children’s experiences within the classroom presented and discussed.

**Observations of the Physical Environment of K1 Classroom**

From the interviews, teachers reported that their diploma training had given them knowledge in designing the physical environments which aimed to provide integrated learning for children and a major strategy was the use of learning corners. The classroom layout was orderly; a place for everything and children can easily put back the materials (Olds, 2001). Different learning corners (Dodge, Colker, Heroman & Bickart, 2002) with clearly labeled cardboard signs depicting subjects such as Language, Math, Science and Art were around the classroom. A big whiteboard was
prominently place in the centre of the classroom at adult height. A timetable sheet on the wall revealed a structured daily schedule for two sessions for Kindergarten One (K1). The majority of the sessions on the timetable focused on academic subjects, there were 35 minutes for a session of art and craft weekly, two times a week 15 minutes indoor play was scheduled and weekly, on a Friday, twenty minutes outdoor play was listed. Toileting, snacks, story times and rhymes were scheduled. Tables were joined together to form two long rows in the classroom with an aisle in the centre. There were 20 children in the class with one teacher. Children in K1 level are aged between four to five years old. A small corner of art materials containing crayons, colouring pencils, pieces of paper, pencils, erasers and a small tray of child’s size scissors was sighted. Expected preschool activities, like easel or blocks, (Olds, 2001; MOE, 2008, p89) were not observed, though this could be due to space restrictions. During interviews, one teacher commented that children were loud and noisy when playing with in a learning corner designated for blocks.

A big adult height display board was placed prominently on the wall with children’s art and craft work. The artwork of the children indicated a Chinese New Year theme of Chinese New Year red packets cut into shapes and pasted, as a flower, on a small drawing paper. Another display consisted of animal masks made by children from paper plates and coloured paper. The neatly cut and correctly positioning of eyes, nose and ears of the animals’ masks demonstrated a high level of teacher direction with little scope for creative self expression (Anning & Ring, 2004; Duffy, 1999). From the displays, achieving the end product rather than the process of doing seemed to be a main focus. Claxton (1984, p228) states that “To be creative you have to dare to be different”, it requires time, imagination, “a sense of nonsense” and all “within the realms of childhood” (Moyles, 1989, p80). These comments are relevant in the light of the new curriculum which has been designed to encourage children’s problem solving skills as well as dispositions for creative and critical thinking and adapting to uncertain situations (Moyles, 1989; Wood & Attfield, 2005; Duffy, 1999). In the following section, the researcher presents three observations from the K1 classroom with accompanying comments.

Observations of Children’s learning experiences in the K1 classroom

Observation 1: Learning primary colours in K1 classroom

Children sat on the floor learning primary colours as teacher stood in front of the whiteboard. Children repeated each colour as the teacher flashed a coloured card. A red colour card was placed on the white board. The teacher wrote “R, E, D”. The children were instructed to read the letters and the word. The children repeated three times, “R, E, D, red” The same process was repeated for the colours blue, green and yellow. The children returned to their designated seat at the table to complete a colour activity worksheet. Two children were making sword fighting gestures with their colour pencils, some were waiting for the teacher to help them, three children were colouring on the worksheet and others were talking. Some children exclaimed ‘How to do?’ and some asked “What to do?”. The teacher walked around helping the children. The teacher’s instructions could be heard – “quickly finish up your work and be quiet please!” One child asked teacher, “If we mix colour we get funny colour. What colour we mix give me red?” The teacher told her to get a red pencil and work quickly. After half an hour, some children had finished the worksheet and some had not. Those who had finished said loudly to the teacher ‘I finished already.” They waited for the teacher to come by to check their work.

Comment on observation 1:

This observation of a lesson on primary colours demonstrated a teacher directed activity. Rote learning was encouraged through constant repetition of reading the word and spelling each colour aloud. Such practice would be seen as problematic by many educationalists. When facts have to be “memorised deliberately” and learning does not
have meaningful contexts, children will face difficulties in remembering these facts (Wood & Attfield, 2005, p67).


*Simply asking a child...to pay attention, concentrate, study, learn or remember is unlikely to bear fruit. Unless we embody the material to be learned and remembered in a task that makes sense to the child, one that involves objectives he can realized and that draws attention ‘naturally’ to the elements we wish him to take in, our imperatives to concentrate, memorize or learn are almost bound to fail.*

A rich language environment is designed to cultivate a lifetime love for language and (Moyles, 1989; Dockett & Fleer 2002, Berk 2003; Almon, 2003). As observed, these children were repeating words and following instructions to learning colours. Almon (2003, p29) states that children have natural development “timetable” and if we add “fuel and speed them up” this could have damaging effects on the child’s physical, emotional, social and intellectual development. Children did not have a voice and Lim (2007) has said that the instructional and controlling voice of the adult seems to dominate children’s learning and life in Singapore. Wood (1998) and Meadows (1993) report that strategies to help in learning can be passed on to children as long they are situated in meaningful activities which allow the child to practice, use and transfer knowledge to different contexts. When the teacher ignored Child G’s question on the mixture of colours on what will give her red, Child G was not given the opportunity to bring her learning and thinking to a higher level (Vygotsky, 1978). The question asked by the child “If we mix colour we get funny colour. What colour we mix give me red?” demonstrated the child’s existing knowledge and natural curiosity. Taking advantage of the child’s natural curiosity will help to stimulate her learning and extend her thinking to the next level (MOE, 2008, p8).

**Observation 2 - Snack time:**

At 10.30am, children were ready for a snack. A pile of small enamel plates, a tray of children’s forks, a big bowl of fried noodles, with a scoop, were placed on the table by the teacher. Children queued for noodles each holding a plate while the teacher scooped the fried noodles into each plate. The children returned to their designated seats to eat. The teacher could be heard reminding children to eat “nicely and quietly”. The teacher said, “Raise up your hand if you want a second helping, I will bring the noodles to you.” The teacher went to those who raised their hands and gave them second helping. The teacher then walked around the classroom to pick up the noodles dropped on the floor. Children were instructed to empty the leftover noodles into the bin, place the plate and fork on the table. The teacher went around with a table cloth to wipe the tables. A child went up to the teacher and asked whether she could help. Teacher smiled and gave the child the table cloth and the child took over the task. The child wiped the table and the teacher said ‘Thank you’ to the child when the task was completed.

**Comment on Observation 2- Snack time**

From observation 2, it could be argued that if children were allowed to scoop their own noodles, they will gain ‘mastery’ and be in control of the task (Moyles, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978, Almon, 2003). If the K1 children were allowed to engage in experiential learning they would learn to be responsible for their own learning (Kane & Carpenter, 2003),
gain social skills in waiting, turn-taking and sharing and develop a sense of worth and respect for others (Berk, 2003; Claxton, 1984; Bruce, 2005; Moyles, 2005). In many programmes, snack time provides opportunities for children to enhance their learning about responsibility, hygiene, independence, functioning effectively in a group, learning to take turns and knowledge of nutrition (Almon, 2003). Choice and knowledge of own body such as how much the child preferred to eat were not encouraged and these are skills that once learned children will take with them into adulthood (Dockett & Fleer, 2002; Sylva et al, 2003; Almon, 2003; Moyles, 2005; Bruce, 2005).

**Observation 3: The K1 Class during play time**

The teacher announced that “Those who have finished their colour worksheet are allowed to play.” Based on this observation it would appear that play was a reward for those who finished their work. Some children were observed to be walking around the classroom aimlessly, four children were still working on their colour worksheets, several were trying to match a wooden floor puzzle and two children were in the maths corner playing. The researcher observed these two children (Child G and Child D).

A cardboard poster displayed ten kites with matching numbers according to the number of kites. Each number matched the spelling of the number at the bottom of the poster. Below the poster was a table with a set of ‘number’ cards from one to ten, a big sponge dice and a plate of ten small shells.

**Child G and Child D were playing the ‘counting and matching’ game.**

G picked the number 5 card from the set of number cards.

G (looked at Child D): This is ‘5’. D, look at the board and check where is ‘5’? Raise your hand first if you have any question.

The board spelled the words- one, two, three, four, five…to ten and with the respective number and had the correct corresponding number of kites above it.

D raised two hands and pointed at display kite on the wall.

D: Number ‘5’ there. F, i, v, e. (pointed at the word ‘five’)

G: Now D, find the word for ‘5’. Don’t make so much noise when you are looking for it.

D: Okay.

Child G walked over to the other side, picked up the spongy dice and started counting the dots on the dice.

Child G: (looking at the three dots on the dice) 1 , 2, 3. Teacher says we count the shells and match the number on the dice.

Child D: Okay, let’s count together the shells.

Child G moved over to the other side of the table to find the card with number ‘3’

Child G looked up at the displayed kite and then placed the number ‘3’ card prominently in front of her. She picked some shells and started counting them. She placed each shell on the ‘3’ card as she counted.

Child G: 1 shell, 2 shells, 3 shells

Her friend counted together with her and clapped each time they got it right. They continued playing with different numbers on the dice. Each time they miscounted, they will go back to the dice and count the dots again and match the correct numbers of shells shown on the card.

**Comment on Observation 3- Play time**

Child D and Child G initiated play in the math corner and G imitated the teacher as they played. Children will frequently have a strong desire to imitate their teacher and regard their teacher as a role model in their play.

The secret to helping young children thrive is to keep the spirit of creativity and playful learning alive and active. An important ingredient in this is our own work as adults, for children naturally imitate grown-ups. This inspires their play. Their learning is a combination of their own deep inner drive to grow and learn, coupled with their imitation of the adults in their environment. These two
elements interweave all through early childhood. They provide the underlying basis for play, yet their outer expression changes year by year as children develop (Almon, 2003, p21).

Child G and D recalled past experiences and changed the way they were playing, with the help of the self correcting kite display board, when they made mistakes. Using Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory, the following interpretations of the children’s learning can be surmised:

- Child G and Child D (4 +) responded to an adult’s model by scaffolding their own learning by imitating teacher’s role.
- Child G and D were able to communicate and problem-solve how to match, count and learn from each other.
- Child G was able to construct her own learning experience while working with the materials and her friend.
- Child G was able to verbally communicate what she was doing throughout the planning of what to play, execute the planned activity and reflect upon completion.

The interaction and communication of the play activity in which Child G and D were engaged indicated that knowledge was constructed when G was able to recall and explicate from past experience. Comprehension is achieved when Child G was able to state and explain the problem encountered. Application from knowledge constructed helped G and D to apply it when trying to resolve the problem in which they synthesize and evaluate the solution for the problem (Bloom, 1956).

Implications drawn from representative observations of children in the K1 classroom
The Singapore preschool educational system has gone through several continuous policy changes which has become increasingly challenging for teachers. Singapore preschool initiatives were launched based on a pilot research study conducted in 2000. If change in the new play curriculum was based on children’s interests, children’s experiences of change would be more meaningful (Wood & Attfield 2005). Wood and Attfield, (2005, p 192) suggest that practitioners should question, “Does it do justice to the children?” when dealing with curriculum design or change. In the observations there were differences when children were able to express themselves, like the child wiping the table and the two children in the maths corner who carried on a prolonged conversation of discovery. The daily schedule, the classroom layout and much of the teacher’s language suggested a controlled and instructional environment. Lim (2007, p 2) states,

…….children, despite their marginalized position in society as “immature” beings, live in the same complex world as adults and deserve to be recognized for their agencies as social actors and for their struggles with difficult issues that also trouble some adults (e.g materialism, illness, death, discrimination).

Children’s lived experiences are constantly contextualized and decided by parents at home, teachers and principals in school, community and even policy makers in government. From the observations there was an emphasis on academic learning and the teacher’s aims implied a belief in the importance of preparing children for the school environment (Lim, 2007, Almon, 2003). No element of play was introduced though children who finished their work sheets were directed to specific activities. Lack of play can have educational implications (Almon, 2003). Elkind (1998) warned of the phenomenon of the ‘hurried’ child or ‘earlier is better’ prophecy. A ‘hurried’ child is one who has been introduced to many areas of the adult world at a pace faster than the expected path of development and the learning experiences of these children suggest
this is still a probable situation in this kindergarten in Singapore even though the MOE has mandated education and training for teachers (MOE, 2003) on a play curriculum and introduced a recommended national curriculum framework (MOE, 2003, 2008) along the same lines.

The findings from the observations suggest this kindergarten continues with the traditional method of emphasizing academic rote learning. Play was not a central part of the practice observed in the physical, curricular or social arrangements observed although the MOE has committed to the value of children’s play in the context of young children and early learning (Almon, 2003; Kohn, 2000). From the observations, children who had finished their work were allowed to play with the materials or puzzles. Therefore, play was considered a reward for work (workbook) completed and a dilemma for children who were slow in their tasks and also disadvantaged children who would never have an opportunity to play. Piaget (1950, 1962) states that play provide the perfect setting for children to learn actively and construct their own understandings. In order for children to learn, a good learning environment helps children to learn effectively. From the observation 3 of play time, child G and D constructed knowledge as they interacted with the physical environment (Vygotsky, 1967; 1978).

Making paper animal masks and New Year flower art and craft were activities that had been completed through teacher instruction. Such activity is not conducive to play and when an activity is ‘made educational’ with a teacher’s direction, from a child’s view, the child will not consider it as play (King, 1992).

Discussion on Teacher’s challenges

From the observations presented here there were a high level of teacher directed activities where teacher took centre stage in teaching, academic worksheets and rote learning were still present in the kindergarten and the children observed were not given ample time and opportunity to develop creative ideas. Vygotsky (1978, p102) states that play helps the children to learn and creates spaces in which ‘a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he was a head taller than himself’. Educational psychologist Jane Healy (2003) states that the role of play in hands on and experiential learning, arts and a healthy environment are important ingredients for brain development. Creative play helps in the development of children’s cognition and imaginative capacity (Kane & Carpenter, 2003).

According to Moyles (2005, p4),

**....play can be deemed to be a noun, verb, adverb, adjective- the play or a plaything, as in drama and toys; to play in relation to method or mode; to undertake something playfully; or to be described as a ‘playful child’. Even at this basic level, it is not easy to distinguish any one meaning which might be attached to ‘children’s play’: it makes more sense to consider play as a process which, in itself, will subsume a range of behaviours, motivations, opportunities, practices, skills and understandings.........**

However, Moyles and Adams (2001) reported that early practitioners frequently acknowledged that they ‘know’ or ‘feel’ that play is valuable for children’s learning and developmental growth but often play is not included in their curriculum activities, planning, their roles in teaching and learning as well in classroom management. As observed, a teacher was heard in the background asking children to finish up their work before play, the reward for work done is play, evidently it shows the lack of value and meanings in “the purpose and processes of play” (Moyles, 2005, p7). Some of
explanations for the K1 teacher not to be able to fulfill her beliefs of play in the practice are: Children need to learn, insufficient time for children to play, parents do not expect their child to be in school playing, there are opportunities to play outside school, curriculum needs to be delivered, children need to learn to get down to work, everything has to be documented and insufficient resources for active learning (Moyles, 2005, p7).

Singapore policy change has created ongoing challenges as the MOE strives towards achieving a quality preschool curriculum based on theories of play. However, the role and presence of play remains problematic (Wood & Attfield, 2005).

A speech by Prime Minister Lee of Singapore in 2004 serves as a way of reminding Singapore preschool educators of the need to rethink their pedagogy and practice during this policy change:

But there is one which we shouldn’t do and that is when we add more teachers, we better don’t add more homework or increase the syllabus because that just defeats the whole purpose. Then we are back to square one. In fact, I think we should cut down on some of this syllabus. It would mean less pressure on the kids, a bit less rote learning, more space for the teachers to think, to reflect, to find ways to bring out the best in their students and to deliver quality results. Lee (2004)

Observations conducted on the children’s learning experiences indicate that teachers in this kindergarten did not favour play pedagogies. In practice, the reasons for this are complex and may be myriad. They may relate to social relations among stakeholders, levels of understanding and commitment to change, so that partners in the enterprise, like parents, owners of services and directors may not be convinced. Training courses may have been insufficient to convince an experienced workforce that they needed to change the habits of decades and the method of introducing reform may have been ineffectual.

In essence, the components of the Singapore preschool initiatives drawn from an open social school system of “the collective wisdom of all concerned - policy makers and planners at MOE, working together with MCDS, principal and teachers, teacher educators at words NIE [National Institute of Education], researchers and consultants” (Tharman, 2003, p1) may require another component, one that addresses all barriers in the implementation of the play curriculum. The benefits of a ‘unifying umbrella’ concept of an open school system in this reform can only be reaped if strategies are developed to address the difficulties and challenges faced by teachers during this shift of paradigm from traditional academic rote learning to a play curriculum. Efforts to address the external and internal factors that interfere with teachers’ commitments in engaging the new curriculum must not be overlooked. Teachers trained in the educational principles and pedagogical approaches of the play curriculum model in this kindergarten have not changed their practices. Overcoming the barriers in the implementation faced by teachers is necessary and needs to be elevated to a level of importance so as to be commensurate with other initiatives for a successful implementation of a play curriculum.

REFERENCES


