

Preschool Curriculum and Policy Changes in Singapore

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Abstract

Educational reforms are happening around the world and policy changes are commonly initiated by governments for political or economic reasons. Singapore government recognizes the importance of building a knowledge-based economy and is reflected in the continuous rounds of education policy development and reforms. Since 2003, the Singapore Ministry of Education's policy change in relation to the preschool curriculum, have been geared towards more child-centred teaching with an emphasis on play. In promoting preschools to adopt the play curriculum the government has introduced nationwide training for all preschool teachers and principals. In the past, the approach to education has been a meritocratic system and this has strongly reflected and shaped Singapore culture and way of life. The dramatic educational change means a shift from years of rigorous academic rote learning to a play curriculum. This will not be unproblematic.

A qualitative case study research methodology was used to study the lived experiences of the stakeholders in a kindergarten. The implications of the policy change and the challenges faced by teachers will be explored.

Keywords: Singapore, policy, teachers, preschool, curriculum change

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Introduction

In an era of globalization, educational reforms are aimed at meeting challenges and improving quality of education (Fullan, 1998; Lieberman, 1998). For Singapore, the competition faced by globalization is becoming increasingly keener and one response has been demands for educational change in pedagogical practices. In 2003, the Singapore government aimed to improve the quality of preschool education and in order to achieve this goal, nationwide skill development for all preschool teachers was announced and mandated (Ministry of Education, 2003a).

The preschool initiatives taken by Singapore MOE in 2003 were:

MOE has reviewed how the Government can improve the quality of pre-school education in Singapore by focusing on areas where we can achieve high leverage, while keeping the provision of pre-school education in the hands of the private or community sector. We have identified five areas of high leverage, which are to:

- 1. delineate the Desired Outcomes of pre-school education;*
- 2. develop a curriculum framework;*
- 3. conduct pilot research to study the benefits of pre-school education and the new curriculum;*
- 4. raise the standards of teacher training; and*
- 5. enhance the regulatory framework for kindergartens*

Tharman (2003, p.1)

Driven by the trends of the highly globalised world, there is a need to cultivate creativity and thinking skills in children, the new preschool initiatives are different from the deeply rooted academic drives of Singapore education. This change requires preschool teachers to “reorient themselves to align their beliefs and practices with the global fashion of education” (Tzuo, 2010, p.80).

Impediments and Challenges of Preschool Curriculum Change

Teaching practices and methods are often compared and questioned across countries and then transformed over time in the process of change (Louis, 1990, Werner 1991, Darling-Hammond, 1992; Hargreaves, 1994; Werner 1991). Bascia and Hargreaves (2000, p.4) have stated that due to differing conceptions and ideologies of teaching from different countries, educational change is “always underpinned by particular theories or assumptions about what teaching is like and what principles or activities comprise it.” One of the most important factors of reform that many have failed to consider is to understand what teachers actually need and with that understanding will help to support them to change (Sarason, 1990; Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000). Without seeking answers to why teachers still continue in their old practices but to proceed in trying to change their practices through skill development may risk failure in the implementation of new policy (Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000).

The implementation of the recommended preschool play curriculum has not been easy or unproblematic, due to Singapore’s historical, cultural influences and the meritocratic system. How has the Ministry of Education (MOE) ensured that investment and efforts in this reform since 2000 will be of benefit to the community? In other words, will the trained teachers change their practices and move away from a traditional teaching method of instructional academic rote learning to more experiential learning through play? The focus of this paper is to examine the challenges faced by the Singapore government as a stakeholder in the initiation of policy change for Singapore preschools and to investigate the effect on teacher practices and professionalism in light of policy change.

Method

The Centre and the Participants

The research methodology of this research entailed an in-depth qualitative case

study using naturalistic data collection methods (Mertens, 2005; Yin, 2003), including observations and informal interviews conducted with all stakeholders in the kindergarten. The stakeholders are teachers, the principal, parents, children and the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE) preschool unit staff. The sample school selected is a Registered Kindergarten with the Ministry of Education. Informal interviews were conducted with the qualified principal who holds a diploma in preschool leadership and five teachers with preschool teaching diplomas or certificates (minimum three teachers must have a diploma in preschool teaching). Interviews were also conducted with four parents and MOE pre-school unit personnel. Observations were conducted of children in K1 (four to five years old) and K2 (five to six years old) classrooms to explore teacher's practices and children's learning experiences. 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. Findings were situated within the research literature on theories of play and change management, analysis and implications were drawn from the data collected. Observations such as anecdotal records and photographic narratives were conducted.

Pseudonyms are used in this paper for ethical reasons. Cherry Kindergarten 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. There are thirteen staff, which comprise one principal, seven main teachers, two odd job helpers (cook/cleaner), two full time second language teachers, 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 following section includes a brief overview of Singapore's historical events

that influenced and shaped Singaporeans' embedded culture. This discussion extends to describe the characteristics of the meritocratic educational system and its impact on the stakeholders of the preschool. An example of the challenges faced is presented by describing the teachers' experience during this change. In Singapore, the inter-relations and connectedness of history, politics, economics, culture and technologies help shape the values, beliefs and expectations of the adults (Appadurai, 2000; Lim, 2007). Therefore, a research study on how change takes place in preschool education has to consider Singapore's historical past, the systems and the culture. Many challenges will be faced by the government for the implementation of a recommended play curriculum to succeed. In this paper discussion will be focused on the following three key factors that will impact on the change process:

1. Singapore's historical and embedded cultural influences
2. The Singapore meritocratic educational system and
3. A focused example-Teacher's commitment and 'ownership'.

1. Singapore's Historical and Embedded Cultural Influences

Key historical events after Singapore was founded in 1819 were the Japanese Occupation during World War II (1942-1945), merger with Federation of Malaya to form Malaysia (1963) and Singapore gained independence from Malaysia in 1965 (Bastion, 2004; Chew & Lee, 1991; Lim, 2007). After the expulsion from Malaysia, Singapore became a sovereign and independent nation on August 1965 with the first Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew.

Singapore has a long history of British colonisation and experiences since 1819 have deepened Singapore's exposure to the British system. The value of the English language was recognized by Singapore under former British colonisation rule. Over the years, Singapore has adopted educational practices from other countries like the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia. Educational models

and practices were integrated into Singapore and modified throughout the years of the British Colonial rule. Other ideologies and materials were also imbued into Singapore's education due to the high influx of migrants from China and India (Tan, Gopinathan, & Ho, 2001). Many key historical events that had happened during and after British rule had shaped and influenced the culture and values of Singaporeans. Separation from Malaysia in 1965 marked the beginning of an independent city with economic growth (Tan, Gopinathan, & Ho, 2001; Tselichtchev & Debroux, 2009). Since 1965, Singapore has become a cosmopolitan country and improved its living standards. Today, Singapore is a highly developed and prosperous city in South East Asia and has a population of 5.06 million (Statistics Department of Singapore, 2010). Singapore government's key priority is to create a 'knowledge-based economy. Singapore has a very high literacy rate of 95.4% in year 2006 for residents aged 15 and over (Statistics Department of Singapore, Jun, 2007).

Singapore has made a significant impression and model in terms of economic growth and successful educational advancement in the eyes of the world (Tselichtchev & Debroux, 2009; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Tan, Leong, Leong, & Tan, 2009).

Singapore was economically off the map as recently as in the 1960s but is now a leading economic and educational knowledge economy. Singapore has impressively made remarkable economic growth and educational transformation.

Hargreaves & Shirley (2009, p.75)

With all the overwhelming economic developments, shifts in population and advances in technology, new lifestyles have begun to emerge and evolve to induce a change in the social structure of Singapore (Yip, 1997). Ho, Ang, Loh & Ang (1998, p.1) state that in a society like Singapore, the emphasis on 'elitism' and "success is perceived to be narrowly defined in terms of school performance." Yip (2004) states that parents view education as a key criteria for their children's success in the

future and attainment for material comfort. Due to these influences and the post urbanisation, a phenomenon of ‘kiasuism’ had been en-cultured in Singaporeans (Khong, 2004; Ho, Ang, Loh, & Ng, 1998). ‘Kiasuism’ means ‘the fear to lose’ which originated from a Hokkien dialect (Khong, 2004; Ho, Ang, Loh, & Ng, 1998). Singapore parents believe that enrolling their children in a prestigious school that ranked highly in the Singapore school system will help them fulfil one of the criteria for their child’s success (Tan, 2008). Parents will go to great lengths to secure their child a place in a prestigious school. Efforts include joining an affiliated church, makes large donations offered to schools or even falsifying their home addresses (Yeo, 1995).

The following discussion of meritocracy and ‘kiasuism’ is relevant for this research as the characteristics of meritocracy have shaped the attitudes and way of life of Singaporeans.

2. Singapore’s Meritocratic Education System

Pursuit for Excellence in Singapore Educational System

In 1979, the Ex Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, currently the Senior Mentor Minister stated the purpose of education was:

... to educate a child to bring out his greatest potential so that he will grow into a good man and a useful citizen.

Lee (1979)

This explicitly expressed objective has similarity to the desired outcomes listed for preschool education in 2003 by MOE. There is a strong focus on character building and instilling lifelong skills in teaching and learning for young children.

The Ex Minister of Education, Dr Tony Tan asserts that Singapore educational policies should be in line with the pace of the economy and society. A ‘bottom up’

approach with autonomy given to school principals and teachers in the design of learning activities and these should include elements of life-long learning, logical thinking and creativity (Tan, 1986).

In the pursuit for the excellence model in Singapore education and also to carve a 'niche' in the preparation for globalization, scholars, teachers and principals were sent on a study tour to the United States of America and the United Kingdom to study and develop innovative skills (Gopinathan, 2001). In the drive for an innovative education during the 80s, Singapore educational system had intensified change within a short span of time. Since 1965, with cumulative development and change, the Singapore educational system had become more adaptable to the change as demonstrated in the primary school's educational changes in 1991.

In brief, the Singapore school system and Singapore academic achievements are summed up on the following two sections (Ministry of Education of Singapore website):

1. Preschools - 3 years (private Kindergarten or childcare centres): Not compulsory.
2. Primary Schools (Primary 1-6) - formal schooling for primary at 7 years old): Compulsory
3. Secondary Schools : 4- 5 years- 4 years for Express and 5 years for normal stream or technical courses, typical age entering secondary one is 13 years old
4. Pre-university years - 2-3 years of education: age to enter pre-university is 17-19 years old or Technical Education/ polytechnics (17-20 years old)
5. University

From the McKinsey Report, the achievements by Singapore students in International education competitions and ranking as displayed on the Singapore MOE website, it shows the followings(MOE Brochure, 2010):

- Singapore ranked 1st in quality in education system (Global Competitiveness Report, 2007-2008)
- Singapore ranked one of the world's best - performing school systems (Mc Kinsey Report, published September, 2007)
- Singapore students ranked among the top in Mathematics and Science - Trends in international Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS, 2007)
- Singapore ranked 4th among 45 education systems - Progress in International Reading literacy Study (PIRLS, 2006).

Singapore's position in the world's educational achievements not only informed us the Singapore government's continuous pursuit for excellence in their educational system, it also shows the presence of a keen and competitive school environment among Singapore students.

In 1997, Senior Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong announced the introduction of 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' (TSLN) paradigm (MOE, 1997, 1999; Mok 2003). The theme in the education reform 'Thinking Schools' aimed to imbue independence and creative thinking in Singapore students and "Learning Nation" denotes Singapore government's drive for a knowledge economy among their citizens (Mok, 2003; MOE, 1997; Gopinathan, 2001). Widespread educational reforms in Singapore have enhanced Singaporeans' competitiveness, competency and position in the global market. The government's philosophy of Singapore has been aimed at providing a better life for Singaporeans by maximizing their potentials through education in order to achieve economic growth and political stability.

A typical Singapore primary school student is tested regularly with examinations at least twice a year from the age of seven. Pupils are streamed according to learning abilities at the end of Primary 4 (10 years old) to different classes. At the end of Primary 6 (12 years old) students sit for Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) for placement to Singapore Secondary schools based on their marks achieved

and aptitude (MOE website). In addition to the common examinations, students are tested on their compulsory mother tongue language based on the root mother tongue languages which can be Malay, Tamil and Mandarin in all Singapore schools. The Singapore education system has been known to be academic rote learning with direct instructional teaching and repetitive worksheets by the children.

Singapore Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong in his 2004 National Day Rally states,

We have got to teach less to our students, so that they will learn more.

Lee (2004)

As part of the TSLN, the Ex Minister for Education, Shanmugaratnam Tharman, called for a transformational change from quantity to quality learning through the Teach Less, Learn More (TLLM) paradigm. According to Tharman (2005), ‘quality’ comprises of two key factors – teachers need to review and reflect ‘why’, ‘what’ and ‘how’ of their teaching and practices, and engaged learning in children who are proactive and have an interest in their learning.

The teacher is at the heart of “Teach Less, Learn More”(TLLM). TLLM is not a call for “teacher to do less”. It is a call to educators to teach better, to engage our students and prepare them for life, rather than to teach for tests and examinations. This is why TLLM really goes to the core of quality in education. It is about a richer interaction between teacher and student- about touching hearts and engaging minds ...

Tharman (2005)

The new preschool policy called for more ‘free play’ in the curriculum, a shift in pedagogical approaches to learning through play aimed to develop problem solving skills, life-long learning and creativity in children (Tharman, 2005; Ng, 2008). In

2003, the preschool initiatives in the Singapore educational system were officially launched (Tharman, 2003). The following provides a brief overview of the preschool education system and the chronological records of preschool changes in Singapore.

Preschool Education System in Singapore

Childcare centres and kindergartens make up the preschools in Singapore. Kindergartens are regulated by Ministry of Education (MOE) to provide education for children aged three to six years old. Child Care centres are licensed by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) to provide education and care for children from two months to six years old of age. Majority of Singapore children attend preschools though it is not compulsory for them. All Kindergartens are regulated under the Education Act (1958) and Child Care Centres under the Child Care Centres Act (1988). There are currently a total of 488 registered Kindergartens and 721 registered child care centres. They are all entirely run by private sector such as religious bodies, community foundation, business organizations and social organizations (Pre-School Education, Ministry of Education, 2007).

Table 1. *Chronological Record of Singapore Preschool Changes since 1999.*

1999-2003	Pilot research on Play Curriculum conducted
	Preschool Education Steering Committee set up: Study improvement for quality preschool
	New framework for preschool teacher training & Accreditation
	Pre-school Curriculum Framework developed and launched
	Desired outcome of Preschool listed
	Preschool Qualifications Accreditation Committee (PQAC) in MOE set up - Set up criteria and contents for preschool certificates and diploma courses - Review requirements for quality training and trainers - Approve training institutions for the mandated courses.
2003-2008	Training for all preschool teachers and principals to achieve mandated requirements.
	Feedbacks from Kindergarten compiled and studied by the MOE on practices and curriculum.
	Reviewing regulatory framework
	Raising English language proficiency of preschool teachers.
2009	Outreach to children from lower income families not attending preschool
	Detailed reference guidebook on pedagogical practices of play curriculum-ITEACH developed and distributed to all kindergartens.
	Raising preschool teachers' minimum qualifications-New teachers must have 5 O level credits, including English (3) & Diploma in Preschool teaching must be obtained with four years of joining preschool. From 2013, Existing preschool teacher must obtain O level credit in English and preschool teaching diploma to teach K1 & K2 classes.
	Revision on curriculum and courses for teachers and principal's skill development
2010	Launches Kindergarten-link

Challenges of the Meritocratic Educational System

The Singaporean approach to developing the potential of its citizens through education is based in general terms on the principle of meritocracy and the practice of academic streaming, where rewards are linked to talent and achievement. The term meritocracy was first used by Young in a book of *“The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033”* (1958).

As Rappa (1998, p.15) explains:

Meritocracy refers to a system of promotion and reward based on individual ability rather than ethnic considerations. Meritocracy is theoretically blind to all other variables but ability.

Lim (2007) states, “education remains the one factor that could determine a child’s economic future in global Singapore.” There is no denial that “some Singaporeans are often critical of the system and decry the pressure it puts on our children” Yip (2004, p.385). Khong (2004, p.44) in the research on lived experiences of “the roles of parents in Singapore education” evidently showed that “family income is highly correlated with parental education in terms of years of schooling as well as first educational qualification.” This demonstrates the outcome of the meritocratic approach where “rewards are linked to ability and achievement based on educational qualifications rather than ascribed characteristics.” (Khong, 2004, p.44). Therefore, anxious parents placed high emphasis on the role of education for their children to succeed. It clearly denotes a phenomenon, “Kiasuism” that is present in a highly competitive and meritocratic Singapore society” (Khong, 2004).

Parents believe that by having a “headstart” at preschool’s level will help their children to achieve success in their later years as in Elkind’s (1998) “hurried child”. Therefore, the pressure in Singapore for children to perform well in academic achievement is exerted not only at tertiary level but has continued to secondary schools

and descended to kindergarten level. The whole system aimed to produce learners who would be more superior and competent at the next level of their education (Michalovitz, 1990). Key streaming based on examination results at different stages for all Singapore children is common. Regardless of social economic class, good academic results seem to be the hiring factor for employment. Anxious parents have adopted a ‘kiasu’ (scared to lose) attitude by sending the children for additional enrichment classes before any streaming examinations (Khong, 2004).

In postcolonial and urbanised Singapore, increasingly high costs and standards of living and changes in lifestyles are the context for change. The pursuit for material wealth and status was apparent when more women participated in working long hours to increase their buying power, accumulate their assets and material wealth (Lim, 2007). A common scenario in modern and affluent Singapore occurred when women joined the workforce, children were placed in full day childcare. Children under the care of foreign maids and grandparents are common practice in many Singapore households.

In consideration of these societal changes, it is important that a good quality preschool education which incorporates the learning of values in character building and life-long skills is provided. Hence, in 2003, the mandated change for all Singapore preschools were that by 2006, all kindergarten principals were required to obtain the Diploma in Pre-School Education (Leadership) and 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. A play curriculum was designed and recommended but not mandated.

The Play Curriculum

A guidebook of preschool curriculum development was distributed (MOE, 2008) to all kindergartens in Singapore during on December, 2008 to provide kindergarten operators in steering the direction that meets the physical, cognitive, social and

emotional development of children through play. It is not compulsory for all preschools to implement the play curriculum but was recommended by the MOE, therefore, there is no statistic to indicate the numbers of preschools in Singapore that have implemented the play curriculum (Lim, 2007). In the guide, 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, p.36). The characteristics of teacher-directed play are that this type of play is teacher initiated and facilitated play with a specific goal and learning outcomes. Teacher facilitates and supports children in a large or small group activity for their learning. Exploring and interacting through play, knowledge is constructed and children’s learning stimulates their cognitive thinking skills. Ample time and opportunities need to be given for children to play as children are active learners, able to interact meaningfully with materials, their peers and teachers. These are the concepts and ideas that have been offered to the teachers and principal in this study through their training.

The mandated policy of trained teachers was to raise the teaching standard and to produce staff to be cognisant with the value of play curriculum. Given this requirement for transitional change from a meritocratic to a child-centred preschool educational curriculum, one of the challenges faced by the government is the complexity of change in teachers’ practices due to past events, approaches and meritocracy. The pressures of a meritocratic system in a competitive society are not easily ignored.

3. Teachers’ Challenges in a Time of Educational Change

Educational reform has happened and continues to happen around the world. Extensive research on educational change is rooted in child-centred pedagogical approaches and conceptions in teaching that have informed us on best practice in teaching and learning (Hall et al., 1975). Other knowledge from the management of

educational change research has provided us with the answers as to why some educational reforms have failed and identified underlying impediments to change (Fullan & Stiegel-bauer, 1991; Sarason, 1990; Stoll & Fink, 1996; Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). The following question by Bascia and Hargreaves (2000, p.150) demonstrates the difficulties faced by many stakeholders in the implementation of educational change policy in many countries:

With such rich knowledge base on technical aspects of change management, as well as on the human, culture-building processes of successful school improvement, why do reform efforts repeated fail to engage teachers' commitments and expertise, or fade from the limelight after their early promise?

In general, many countries launched initiatives to improve teacher's education but many of these changes have not delivered the quality and performance of the teachers expected (Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000). Singapore policymakers aimed to raise the professional standard of preschool teachers through skill development and teacher education to shift traditional teacher's practice in efforts to improve the quality of preschool education (MOE, 2003a). As teachers are key players in education, a paradigm shift in education involves changing teachers' roles, such as improving their pedagogical approaches, expanded roles in curriculum planning and development, mentoring for new teachers, skill development, partnership with parents and communities (Boles & Troven, 1996; McGhan, 2002; Wheatley, 2002; Fullan 2007). In the preschool context of change, Singapore MOE listed the desired learning outcomes, curriculum framework, minimum teacher's qualification and experiences, training content, examinations or assessment and other mandated requirement or provisions under the Ministry regulations (IMIG, 2004; MOE, 2003a, 2003c). The shift is geared towards more experiential, exploratory and hands on activities for young children to learn lifelong skills and character building through play.

When policy change is announced from top down it may not be such a smooth process. Policy change may encounter hindrances in the implementation if changes enacted are too ambitious, insufficiently conceptualized, happen too quickly or are too slow, “commitment may not be sustained over time, parents may be opposed; and leaders may be too controlling or ineffectual” (Earl & Katz, 2000, p.97). Educational change due to policy announcement may create a situation that teachers have to spend more time doing more administrative work including more staff meetings to attend and spending less time on reflection (Liew, 2008). Due to the pressures faced and the lack of time, teachers will be faced with a persistent sense of more need to be done which therefore resulted in low quality work (Liew, 2008).

... educational change must connect teachers to the system and society in an activist way, where they can see themselves not just as effects of the context, but as part of the context, contributors to it, and as agents who can and must influence how others perceive, shape and support their work.

(Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000, p.20)

Policymakers in Singapore have aimed to improve teaching and learning and have made this a priority in their agenda for policy change (Macmillan, 2000). Singapore policy change by the government often comes with a detailed content that need to be learned, outcomes to be achieved and a compulsory examination to qualify the individuals (IMIG, 2004). However, the government as a stakeholder has been faced with many challenges whenever a policy change takes place. Bascia & Hargreaves (2000, p.4) state that in most educational change, reformers rarely recognize the complexity of change for the teachers as they “fail to grasp what teachers need to help them to change.”

Teacher's Commitment and 'Ownership'

The advantages of autonomy given to Singapore preschools in designing their own curriculum activities and courses of development were identified by the MOE. The government's efforts of decentralisation, teachers are able to exercise greater autonomy, flexibility in their pedagogical and curricular approaches to meet the diverse needs of children. Trained teachers are expected to plan, structure their lessons plan systematically with the application of best practices and educational theories (Schon, 1987).

Based on the researcher's observations and interviews with five different teachers' practices from K1 and K2 classrooms of a Singapore kindergarten, it was found that teachers had improved and changed the classroom physical environment to include different learning corners with an aim to integrate learning across different disciplines. Teachers noticeably had not changed the curriculum to a play curriculum. In the centre observed, timetables of K1 and K2 were rigid and structured with high emphasis on academic subjects. Outdoor play was scheduled once a week of thirty five minutes. Observing classroom activities, the majority of the lessons were conducted by the teacher taking centre stage in front of a whiteboard, activities were deskbound with children given workbooks to complete for all subjects.

Bound with the mandated nationwide skill development for preschool teachers in Singapore and the current shifts in pedagogical expectations on trained teachers to deliver a quality preschool teaching on the new curriculum, teachers' roles are challenged trying to meet parents, principal, and community. Liew (2008, p.109) reported in his research based on a teacher's remark on policy change and reform:

Yes, we can do 'differentiated instruction'. It's not that we can't or don't want to differentiate our lesson content, process and product. The question is, do we have the energy to do that all the time, for every lesson, throughout the year?

Seyfarth (2008) reports that for teachers' practices to have a "lasting effect" through professional development, efforts are needed to support teachers in changing their teaching approaches. Teachers will not change their practices "*unless they see a reason to change and believe they will gain something by changing*" Seyfarth (2008, p.124).

Conclusion

The reasons given for the repeated failure of educational change are varied, though they are all compelling. Another explanation for the failure of school change...is that the context and process of mandated change often marginalizes teachers.

Bailey (2000, p.112)

Teachers' perspectives on the contents and process of change are often ignored or disregarded (Silberman, 1970). There is a large range of literature of change that report teachers' perspectives to be a valuable factor in the implementation of innovation and change (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1998; Bailey, 2000; Silberman, 1970).

It is important to consider teachers' perspectives of change as they are the key actors that assess the past experiences and current realities that are fundamentally linked with children's needs and learning (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991; Huberman, 1993; Ball, 1987; Cooper, 1988; Bailey, 2000). Areas that need to be addressed before teaching practices gained from training will be espoused are clearly understood by Bailey's (2000, p.113) statement that "Mandated change directs teachers rather than engaging them". Bailey (2000) suggests that "much more could be done if researchers, policymakers and administrators worked with teachers rather than on them" (p.113). Grant (1996) states that changing pedagogical approaches is difficult when teachers' beliefs are being influenced by their years of experiences as a learner and these experiences are personal to them.

The challenges faced by policy makers determined to implement a play curriculum, ideas were not straight forward to change especially teachers are so used to their traditional habits and also due to the 'kiasuism' of Singapore deeply embedded cultural. In the presence of increasingly differences in individual talent, achievement and skill and the heightened social emphasis, the challenge of meritocracy seems to be the main motivator and interest in engaging children for varied pursuits (Kuhn, 2005). Children are active and curious learner, always ready to explore the world and the exploring activity does not need any incentive for children to act on it. However, this "natural curiosity appears to go underground in most children" in later years (Kuhn (2005, p.28). When in middle childhood, differences in how children invested their time in those activities that they are able to see or focused to be better performers than their friends when they reach a state of ego standing (Nicolls, 1989; Kuhn, 2005). Main strategy of the Singapore government for economic growth is to pursue 'excellence' in their workforce (Bastion, 2004; Moore, 2000). Singapore approach to educational system is also through the practice of meritocratic system where all things being equal. Moore (2000) argues that the meritocratic system may not be the ideal system that will produce results. Streaming and placement are through continuous testing and examinations give rise to a competitive school environment (Bastion, 2004, Gopinathan, 2001). As Nicholls (1989) reports that school system is responsible for this model of a meritocratic and competitive system in which individual's pursuits are clearly reflected in material reward and status achievement goals.

Kuhn (2005, p.29) asserts the challenges of schools as a result of meritocracy:

In this sense, schools are well suited for socializing children into such a society, serving as vehicles to focus children's attention in evaluating their activities not in terms of intrinsic value but in terms of their performance in their activities relative to the performance of others.

In a meritocratic approach to education, question such as “Where do I stand relative to others?” will be asked in a fiercely competitive school environment due to the intense pressure to be outstanding academically (Kuhn, 2005, p.30). In Singapore, though there is no specific assessment or requirement for children entering formal school in primary one at seven years old, children at preschool’s level are not spared from parents’ expectations to perform well in academic learning. Preschool children are constantly treated as sponges, absorbing as much knowledge and activities that are filled in by anxious and competitive parents that hold belief ‘earlier is better’(Elkind, 1990) or to have a head start will help children to succeed. If the change to a play curriculum does not take place, young active children entering preschool not only trying to make sense in their endeavours but also continuously exposed to teaching methods (worksheets) that are meant for older children. School is an open social system that should aim to support children in their pursuits for meaningful and sense making experiences. Therefore, a nurturing environment is important that allow the child to construct meanings and engage in valuable and intellectual experiences. Though Singapore preschool teachers are trained, change to the play curriculum needs to be implemented slowly (Fullan, 2001) as the reality of the deeply rooted culture of Singaporeans and the challenges faced during this change process need to be recognized. Strategies can then be developed to help in the achievement of the play curriculum implementation.

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