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Steering Debate and Initiating Dialogue: a review of the Singapore preschool curriculum

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ABSTRACT This article presents a discussion of the new kindergarten framework in Singapore. The recent launch of the framework indicates a step forward in the field of early years, with a clear recognition of the importance of the early childhood experience. However, it also raises pertinent issues about the social, cultural, and political maxims that surround the curriculum. Looking closely at the preschool context in Singapore, this article considers the conflicting paradigms that underpin the curriculum: the idealised aspirations of policy makers and early years professionals in creating a child-centred, interactional curriculum; the ideology of a Chinese, Confucian culture which extols scholastic achievements and the pursuit of academic, moral and cultural attainments; parental expectations; and the demands of a meritocratic, economically driven society which perceives education as a commodity to be obtained for financial success and social mobility. In seeking to initiate dialogue and steer debate, this article therefore forces readers to consider some of the tensions and conflicts that underpin the new kindergarten curriculum, and questions the ways in which the curriculum can be conceptualised by practitioners amidst these competing maxims.

Background: the Singapore context

Singapore is an island nation state in South-east Asia, situated at the southernmost end of the Straits of Malacca. It is a small island with a population of approximately 4 million, and is a largely migrant nation. The earliest immigrants came predominantly from China and the surrounding Straits Settlements, and their arrival dates back to the early fourteenth century. A distinctive feature of Singapore is its lack of natural resources, and the country's survival has always been dependent on its strategic geographic location as a commercial and financial trading hub. In 1819, Singapore was founded by the British under the auspices of the then British East India Company, and the experience of British colonisation (1819-1963) saw the beginnings of rapid economic and commercial growth within the country. In 1963, Singapore gained independence from British rule and to date the nation maintains its status as a major business and financial centre, and is considered a developed economy with an established political and financial base.

Culturally, Singapore is made up of three main ethnic groups: Chinese, Malay and Indian, with Chinese as the dominant race, making up more than 80% of the population. Amidst this cultural diversity, the government realises the need to strive for unity in order for the country to progress and prosper. It fosters a common sense of belonging and has actively called for a collective national identity, to which every Singaporean can adhere. Hence, the country's national pledge, for instance, explicitly upholds: 'We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality'. It is this sense of a national 'Singaporean identity' that has served throughout the years to bring the different cultures and ethnic groups together.

In recent years, Singapore has become increasingly cosmopolitan, with its ethnic composition shaped by cultural hybridity and a plurality of cultures. With growing influences from the West and an inherited legacy of various cultural heritages, it is a place where East meets West, with a diversity of cultures and people. Globalism has had a profound effect on the nation state and with

the increase in migration, Singapore has become home to a myriad of diasporas from South-east Asia, Europe and the rest of the Western world.

Singapore in the twenty-first century is therefore a multiethnic and multicultural nation, with a stable government, and a competitive economic and financial infrastructure. The government has been known to make international comparisons and, in the early 1990s, compared the island's economy to the 'Swiss standard of living' (Gopinathan, 2001, p. 5). Without any natural resources, the government understands the importance of keeping a competitive edge in the new millennium. As such, education and a skilled workforce are seen as key factors in sustaining the country's growth and development. In the new world of globalisation and information technology, the government makes every effort to ensure that Singaporeans are well trained, skilled and educated to meet the challenges of the international world. Even more so now than ever, education has become an important public policy and the government has, in the last decade, initiated schemes such as 'Towards Excellence in Schools' in 1987 and the 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' framework (Gopinathan, 2001) in a bid to motivate and educate the generations. This drive towards excellence in education has implications for the way preschool education in Singapore is shaped, and the way children and their education, care and overall development are perceived.

Early Years Provision in Singapore

Against the backdrop of a multicultural and cosmopolitan nation, the provision for early years in Singapore is considerably diverse. In Singapore, care of children has been largely a private concern for the family, where strong family ties and values mean that children are often looked after at home by their grandparents or members of the extended family. It is also not unusual for middle- and upper-income families to employ foreign women as maids to help care for children and maintain the family home. However, in recent years, the country, like many others, has been subject to demographic and social changes, and more mothers are choosing to work in order to supplement the family income and pursue a career. In the last decade, for instance, more than 50% of women contributed to the country's labour force, and the figure is predicted to rise in the years to come (Kwan, 2000). With more women actively encouraged to join the workforce, the demand for preschool provision has become strong, and this is reflected in the increase in demand for out-of-home care and provision for children in the early years.

In Singapore, the term 'preschool' generally refers to child care centres and kindergartens, and these are available in both the private and public sector. These include a range of settings: religious-based child care centres and kindergartens (for instance, a kindergarten managed by a Methodist church or a child care centre attached to a mosque), workplace child care centres, private kindergartens (for instance, a Montessori kindergarten), government-subsidised kindergartens, and child care centres run either privately by commercial organisations or by the government. The compulsory school age for children in Singapore is seven years, and preschools in Singapore generally cater for children from two to six years. To date, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), a subsidiary of the Ministry of Education, regulates the nation's preschool provision and is responsible for the regulation of all child care centres and kindergartens. This includes monitoring the quality of provision, the training and accreditation of staff and their qualifications, and general supervision of the management and physical facilities of the settings.

Yet, despite a centralised management of preschool settings, the provision for early years in Singapore remains extremely varied, catering for different social strata and cultural groups, and meeting the demands of different family and parental needs. Amidst such diverse provision, it is not surprising, then, that preschools in Singapore vary considerably in terms of their programme content, and overall teaching and learning approaches (Retas & Kwan, 2000; Fan-Eng & Sharpe, 2000). Kindergartens, for instance, have the autonomy to stipulate their own goals and philosophies, and are free to shape their individual curriculum. The rating of the 'quality' and effectiveness of each centre or kindergarten is also often measured arbitrarily by the number of children enrolled, parental expectations, and the alleged reputation of each setting. These

perceptions of quality and what entails a 'quality' curriculum are mixed, depending largely on parental expectations and the particular setting's curricular emphasis, educational philosophy, and general pedagogic beliefs of what the early years should entail.

The New Preschool Curriculum Framework

In light of the diverse nature of early years provision in Singapore, the introduction of a standardised, national kindergarten framework was therefore a much needed development in the field of child care and education in the country. On 29 January 2003, the Senior Minister for Trade, Industry and Education in Singapore, Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, launched the new preschool curriculum framework. Entitled *A Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum in Singapore* (Ministry of Education, 2003), the publication of such a document marked a significant milestone, for it reflects the beginning of a nationally endorsed curriculum for children in preschools. It was an official statement of what 'quality provision' means in a preschool environment, and a national endorsement of what a preschool curriculum should look like. For the first time in Singapore, the focus and emphasis on the early years is clear, and the curriculum indicates the importance of this phase of schooling. Indeed, that there was sufficient rationale for the Singapore government to justify the introduction of an early years curriculum indicates a legitimate concern for the provision and quality of care and education in the sector. More importantly, what the launch of the curriculum signifies is an instituted recognition and interest in the early years, not just from the point of view of practitioners and educational bodies, but policy makers and governmental agencies alike.

The conceptualisation of the Singapore kindergarten framework began in 1999 (Joint Press Release by Ministry of Education and National Arts Council, 2003), following the Ministry of Education's initiative to improve the quality and provision of preschool education in Singapore. Such a conceptualisation was in keeping with a nationwide drive to regulate the provision of early years child care within the sector. The late 1980s and 1990s, the period leading up to the conceptualisation, saw a series of significant developments in the field. In 1988, new legislation regulating the provision of child care was introduced in the form of the Child Care Centres Act and the Child Care Centres Regulations Act, which set out explicit policies and procedures for child care providers. Also, in a bid to centralise the regulation of preschool provision, the MCYS was given exclusive power to monitor and license all child care centres. The revised 2003 edition of *Assessment of Licensing Standards in Child Care Standards* (MCYS, 2003) provides clear guidelines for quality practices and essential tools for assessing provision. Various early years projects were also initiated in an effort to enhance the profile of the early childhood experience. In 1986, for instance, Project Kindergarten was established and in 1991, Project Pre-school. Spearheaded by the People's Action Party Community Foundation Pre-School Development Unit (PCF), an auxiliary of the government, Project Pre-school (PAP Community Foundation Pre-School Development Unit, 1994) brought about a concerted effort to improve the provision of preschools in general. Endorsed by the Prime Minister and key government officials, its aim was to support and enhance the conditions of child care in the community, through, for instance, the building of new educational centres, the upgrading of existing ones, and the provision of training and development for practitioners. Essentially, the task of both Project Kindergarten and Project Pre-school was to raise awareness of the benefits of a quality early years experience and to call for an institutional structure that would ensure this quality.

Not surprisingly, widespread interest in the early stages of learning contributed to a heightened awareness of the need for a more coherent child care system and provision. A consequence of this was the introduction of the Desired Outcomes in March 2000 (Joint Press Release by Ministry of Education and National Arts Council, 2003), which stipulated for the first time the common aims of preschool education, whereby children at the end of their kindergarten education are expected to:

- know what is right and what is wrong;
- be willing to share and take turns with others;

- be able to relate to others;
- be curious and able to explore;
- be able to listen and speak with understanding;
- be comfortable and happy with themselves;
- have developed physical co-ordination and healthy habits;
- love their families, friends, teachers and school;

(Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 12)

Significantly, the focus of the Desired Outcomes for preschool education is the social, emotional and moral aspects of development. Moral education and citizenship seem to take precedence, as children are expected by the end of their early years to know right from wrong, 'be willing to share and take turns with others', to 'love their families, friends, teachers and school' (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 12) and, by implication, the wider community. At a macro-level, the cultural discourse of the Singapore education system is predominantly Chinese, and this emphasis on moral nurture and moral development has clear links to the traditional teachings of Confucianism. By encouraging children to uphold morality and foster harmonious relationships with their friends, families and teachers, children are expected to define their relationship with the external community. In contrast to the autonomous 'Western self', the Confucian perception of the 'self' is therefore defined largely by the individual's place in society, and by his or her familial and social relationships in the community (Elvin, 1994). This Confucian emphasis on possessing a sense of morality and on the responsibility of the individual towards valuing others is further reinforced by the government's conviction that 'no education programme is complete without a strong emphasis on values' (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 12). With a predominantly Chinese migrant population, it is apparent that ideas and ideologies from China have been transplanted into Singapore's preschool curriculum, and there is a concerted recognition of the role of education in cultivating sound moral values (Gopinathan, 2001).

With such stress on the affective development of the child, it could be argued that the introduction of the Desired Outcomes indicates a step forward in the approach to preschool education in Singapore, in the way that it seeks to move away from what Blenkin & Kelly describe as a 'traditional view' (2002, p. 1) of education; an approach that is subject specific and purely academic. Instead, the approach to education which the Desired Outcomes espouses is one that encourages a divergence from a knowledge-based curriculum, and this may well suggest a conscious attempt on the part of the writers and policy makers to shift the paradigm of early years education towards a less academic and more child-centred curriculum.

Following the introduction of the Desired Outcomes, the impetus behind the new kindergarten framework is based upon a similar premise, where the rhetoric of 'child centredness' provides a focus for its underpinning philosophy. Prior to its introduction, preschools in Singapore did not adhere to a common curriculum, and provision for children in the early years was very much dependent on the individual child care provider. Building on the Desired Outcomes, the framework thus provided a much needed coherency and consistency that were vital for the effective implementation and planning of an early years curriculum. The framework reinforces the educational philosophies that the Desired Outcomes had earlier espoused, and advocates the emotional, social and moral development of the individual, except this time with an added emphasis on learning. A brief summary of the main tenets of the framework is outlined below, the details of which can be found in the Singapore Ministry of Education document (Ministry of Education, 2003) and website (http://www.moe.gov.sg/preschooleducation/curriculum_framework.htm). Firstly, a set of six principles underpins the aims and goals of the kindergarten curriculum:

Principle 1: Holistic development and learning

Principle 2: Integrated learning

Principle 3: Active learning

Principle 4: Supporting learning

Principle 5: Learning through interactions

Principle 6: Learning through play.

Secondly, the principles are accompanied by a set of six practices, which provide a guide for practitioners to implement and work towards the principles and goals:

Practice 1: Starting from the child

Practice 2: Fostering a positive learning climate

Practice 3: Preparing the learning environment

Practice 4: Planning and structuring learning activities

Practice 5: Setting up resources

Practice 6: Observing children.

The six principles and practices of the framework demonstrate clearly the underpinning philosophy of early years education in Singapore. They do not aim to be prescriptive, and are universal and applicable to every setting. There is a clear emphasis on learning, and the framework reflects an attempt to focus on the context and process of learning, with suggestions for appropriate forms of provision. As opposed to delineating a specifically subject-based curriculum, it places emphasis on the value and importance of play and calls for a consideration for the 'holistic development' of the child. There is also a concerted recognition that the child is an 'active' learner, where learning is best supported through opportunities for play and interaction. The stress, therefore, is on a more informal experience of learning in the early stages of development, and a broad-based type of curriculum that takes into consideration a child-centred approach, with a clear focus on the individual. As Pamela Sharpe has noted, recent attempts to provide a more 'integrated curriculum' (2000, p. 125) have entailed a movement away from an academic-type curriculum, which typically stresses a subject-centred and achievement-orientated environment. Indeed, such an approach to the early years can only be welcomed, and the aspirations of policy makers and professionals commended, in their efforts at advocating a child-centred curriculum. Furthermore, the role of the practitioner is also enhanced through the curriculum. The principles are accompanied by a set of six teaching practices, which seek to empower and guide the early years practitioner. The practices provide clear guidelines for the implementation of the curriculum and for the provision of age-appropriate learning activities, encouraging 'a positive learning climate' (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 3) and thus enabling practitioners to reflect upon their practice and to monitor progress and innovation.

Yet, ironically, while the new kindergarten framework advocates the cultivation of a child-centred, active-learning environment, there does not seem to be any acknowledgement of the social and cultural issues that are unique to this environment. There is no mention of the multicultural composition that pervades the Singapore context, and there is no discussion of the impact of this multiculturalism on the delivery of the curriculum. Equally, there is also no mention of citizenship and the implications of building a national identity in a culturally diverse society such as Singapore, and no hints at how these issues can be related or woven into a preschool curriculum. The implementation of the curriculum is therefore very much left to the experience and interpretation of preschool practitioners.

Nevertheless, despite this inadequacy, essential to the main tenets of the new kindergarten framework is the notion of education as developmental, and consideration of the importance of planning, implementing and supporting education in its early formative stages. At the same time, however, despite this impetus to promote a child-centred, interactional curriculum, several crucial concerns emerge with regard to the underpinning maxims of the framework. There are complex contradictions and tensions that surround the curriculum in that even as it purports to present what Sharpe perceives as an 'integrated curriculum' (2000, p. 125), it would appear that the implementation and interpretation of the curriculum is in danger of lending itself to the contrary.

The framework encapsulates the tensions between an approach to education that is developmental and one that can be described as traditional, where current social and economic pressures are forcing the curriculum into other models. While it would appear that the impetus of the framework is to advocate a less formal experience of learning, educators and researchers such as Gopinathan and Heng have argued that social and economic demands from the wider community

are for education in terms of its content, assessment and achievement, even in the early years (Gopinathan, 2001; Heng, 2001), and for its planning and implementation in terms of intended outcomes (Gopinathan, 2001). Parental expectation is a major factor that has contributed to this tension (Sharpe, 2000).

Parental expectations play a crucial part in determining the type of preschool programme a child receives. This is especially so in Singapore, where education is very much dependent on a market-led economy, and parents' educational aspirations have a major influence on the type of preschool programme their children receive (Sharpe, 2000; Sharpe & Gan, 2000; Fan-Eng & Sharpe, 2000). In Singapore, it is not unusual for parents to prepare their children for the academic rigours of the primary school system, and provide them with some form of early education to give them a head start (Sharpe, 2000; Ebbeck & Gokhale, 2004). Tan-Niam, for instance, argues that in Singapore, 'parents favour preschools with an emphasis on academic skills', as reflected in the highly structured curriculum (Tan-Niam, 2000, p. 140), and this is mainly because parents perceive it to be essential to prepare their children for entry into the school system. The expectations that parents have for their kindergarten children are therefore clear, and this includes a curriculum 'of high academic focus' (Tan-Niam, 2000, p. 140), which places emphasis on the development of literacy, linguistic and overall academic skills. Not surprisingly, this is in part precipitated by the education policy of bilingualism, where English and another ethnic language, such as Malay, Tamil or Mandarin, are taught simultaneously at all levels of education, from preschool to secondary school (Sharpe, 2000; Gopinathan, 2001).

Since the country's independence from British colonialism, the Singapore government has recognised the value of the English language for commerce and trade, and has retained its status as an official language and as the primary medium of instruction in schools. Simultaneously, in an attempt to safeguard its cultural history, the government has stressed the importance of ancestral languages, and has insisted that all students learn a second language. Hence the introduction of the bilingual policy, and the impetus behind it to counterbalance the country's modernisation with some degree of cultural maintenance, where English and a second language (perceived as the individual's mother tongue: Mandarin, Malay or Tamil) are compulsory components of the school curriculum at all levels of education. This emphasis on bilingualism is further reinforced by the employment of streaming procedures in the primary curriculum, particularly at primary 4, where students' ability and competence in their two languages are used as measurements for streaming, with the stronger or weaker students channelled into either more or less academically demanding educational programmes respectively.

Simultaneously, the nature of the primary curriculum in Singapore is also such that it entails the use of public examinations for streaming. This has led to a demand for education in terms of academic content and outcomes. The selection mechanism in the form of a mandatory national examination at primary 6, with the aim of separating the less able students from those more competent, places pervasive emphasis on performance and grades, which continue to be perceived as indispensable indicators of a child's achievement at school, from preschool through to tertiary education. The very structure of the educational system in Singapore thus makes stringent demands on its students and children, and its competitive requirements manifest themselves in tensions that underlie the curriculum.

Given the demands of the primary school system, parents therefore expect to provide a head start for their children, through a more formalised, academic-type curriculum. In research conducted by Ebbeck & Gokhale (2004), the majority of children in a sample size of 40 parents received private tuition in preparation for their formal schooling. Parents of even younger children expressed concern for their children's readiness for the rigours of primary school, and they were convinced that an informal, interactive format of learning would be inappropriate for preparing their children for an effective transition to primary school (Ebbeck & Gokhale, 2004). The pressures of the Singapore educational system are such that parents want and expect a formal, teacher-directed education, and they deem it necessary and desirable for their children's learning (Tan-Niam, 2000; Ebbeck & Gokhale, 2004). Such parental perceptions of education have been influenced by the prevalent Confucian ideology, which suggests that teaching, discipline, and

governing children are paramount to their overall development, and elder members of society such as teachers and parents have the primary responsibility for maintaining these ideals (Yeo-chi Kong, 1994). Thus, the notion of a teacher-centred approach to learning is often adopted as opposed to a more child-centred one, and to this end, the impetus and aspirations behind the new kindergarten framework are in danger of being contentious.

In the spirit of steering debate, the critical issue with the introduction of a national kindergarten framework is therefore the need to negotiate an approach to education that takes into consideration the well-being of the individual as well as that of society. Indeed, this issue appears all the more stark in a society such as Singapore, where economic progress in recent years has generated changes in class structure and levels of affluence, which have in turn influenced new lifestyles, cultural patterns, economic expectations and the educational outlook of its people (Rodan, 1996; Gopinathan, 20001). According to Rodan's research on class transformations in the country's development, a large percentage of expenditure by Singaporeans today is devoted to education:

[e]xpenditure on education not only includes secondary and tertiary fees but outlays on private tuition. According to one survey, approximately one-third of all students from kindergarten to university make use of private tutors. This alone involves a total monthly expenditure of S\$21 million. (Rodan, 1996, p. 24)

Rodan's point demonstrates the fact that education in Singapore carries with it considerable economic value, especially when one considers the monthly expenditure on education in the country. The emphasis is clearly on the pursuit and attainment of educational qualifications. Employment of private tutors, even during the early years, as seen from Ebbeck & Gokhale's (2004) study, reflects both a significant capacity to pay for, and the importance attached to, education. As Rodan claims, '[t]here is probably no other place in the world where formal qualifications represent as much economic or social capital' (1996, p. 24). His views on the status of education in Singapore thus raise important questions, not only about how we live in a modern, global society in the twenty-first century, but also how we conceptualise modernity; its conditions and existence.

At the same time, the socio-economic orientation of the country is also reflective of the correlation between the value of education and the level of affluence of the people. In Singapore, where a substantial proportion of the population is predominantly middle class (Rodan, 1996), a high economic value is placed on education. As Rodan asserts, three out of every four adult Singaporeans 'could be labeled middle class by their own commonly accepted criteria of income, housing, education and lifestyle' (1996, p. 29). The emergence of a middle-class society represents a social strata and living standard that includes high levels of consumption and a great emphasis on attainment, and with it, 'a greater concern for education as a central mechanism for securing position and wealth' (Rodan, 1996, p. 11). The socio-economic milieu of a country that frames the curriculum has therefore a powerful bearing on the way education as a whole is perceived. Without a doubt, the rapid economic development of Singapore has led to the significant purchasing power of its people and expresses itself in new lifestyles and aspirations, not only in the sphere of education but society at large (Rodan, 1996).

The monetary value attached to education, and the notion of education as a vehicle for economic, vocational and utilitarian aims, is further reinforced by the government's educational policy. The mission statement from the Ministry of Education (1996) indicates:

The wealth of a nation lies in its people – their commitment to country and community, their willingness to strive and persevere, their ability to think, achieve and excel ... Every child must be encouraged to progress through the education system as far as his [sic] ability allows. Advancement must always depend on performance and merit to ensure equal opportunity for all ... Education equips us with the skills and knowledge, as well as the right values and attitudes to ensure the livelihood of the individual and the country's survival and success (Ministry of Education, <http://www.moe.gov.sg/press/1996/st00296.htm#mission>, p. 1)

This statement presupposes the need to enable individuals to take up their full place and responsibility in society, to strive for a collective commitment to their country, and to succeed in

the modern competitive economy. It argues for the role of people in the country's prosperity and the benefits of a quality education for the nation. It sets out the purpose of education as essentially for employment, and for the progress of the nation, and it is clear from this statement that the educational maxim of Singapore is as much for the survival and maintenance of society as it is for the well-being and development of the child. The policy stresses the importance of education both for the future of the individual's livelihood and economic sustenance, and for the nation's 'survival and success'. As such, the development and advancement of children is dependent as much on the skills and knowledge that they acquire from participating in the educational system as it is on the values and attitudes that they possess. Hence, the main function and purpose of education as perceived by the state is largely as an institution for the support of the country's growth and development. What the mission statement ultimately advocates is a crucial need for the state to provide a conducive environment in which capital may thrive, primarily through the performance and attainment of the individual via the educational system.

There are therefore important issues to consider here in the focus and emphasis of the new kindergarten curriculum, and it would be too simplistic to suggest that the curriculum is concerned with either one or the other: with either the economic sustenance of the individual or that of society. Rather, the question is one of negotiation and balance, especially in a sociocultural climate like Singapore, where the stress on education has deep roots in the traditional, inherited ideology, based very much on a Confucian-type philosophy which generates exceptional demand for skills that are pertinent primarily for the functioning of the wider community and society, and not just for the enhancement and development of the individual. In Singapore, current policies of the primary school curriculum have a pervasive insistence on subject-based divisions and the formalisation of early learning and appear to assume a contrary thrust to the new kindergarten framework. National initiatives such as streaming, as discussed earlier, and a market-led, partial privatisation of preschool provision to enable the more affluent to exercise greater consumer choice, all contribute to the pressure of adhering to a formal, subject-based curriculum model with a predominantly pre-academic emphasis. As Sharpe has written, 'preschool provision for children ... is a social priority' (2000, p. 124). In a nation that advocates the importance of meritocracy and the utilitarian value of education, achievement and attainment in education are highly rated aims. The significance of such an emphasis on education, as discussed in this article, is that of the expectations of practitioners and parents, who aspire for children to grow and develop in a meritocratic climate, and for a preschool environment that allows for such a provision. The challenge for the new kindergarten framework, then, is to withstand the pressure of enveloping socio-economic, cultural, and political directives, and to resist the pressure of being consigned to other approaches and models of education, apart from what was intended in the beginning.

It is therefore important for practitioners and policy makers alike to be alert to the wider social, economic, and cultural forces which govern the discourse of the new kindergarten framework. It is this very complexity that pervades its discourse and which reflects a fundamental tension in the approach to early years education in Singapore, and for that matter in society today. As Blenkin & Kelly argue, 'curriculum has too often been viewed as concerned with subjects, with knowledge' (2002, p. xiv). In a society like Singapore, where educational attainment is commonly perceived and measured in terms of the individual's achievement of grades and goals, the discourse of the framework is framed and embedded in the competing tensions that underpin the curriculum and the complexities of supporting education and learning in the early years.

If the aim of the new kindergarten framework is to promote an approach to education that is child centred and appropriate for the child, then it needs to be supported and sustained by an equally clear and coherent statement from the state and policy makers, in order to ensure that the early years phase of schooling is given the adequate prominence that it deserves, and takes full account of any professional and open debate about the provision of care and education in the sector.

As this article has set out to explicate, the notion of an early years curriculum that is appropriate for and centred on the child is far more complex than it seems. The launch of a national curriculum that protects and values the care and education of children is only the

beginning. In an era where assessment and outcomes are increasingly perceived as measurements of an individual's achievement, professional judgements need to be made in relation to the implementation and planning of the curriculum, especially if a sound and appropriate curriculum for children is to be sustained. As Blenkin & Kelly assert, the distinctive concept of education 'starts from a view of what education is rather than of what it is for' (2002, p. 3). Indeed, for practitioners and all who are involved in working with children in the early years, it is also a question of not just *what* we teach children but *how* and *why* we should teach them. In the race to maximise the potential of young children, it is important for adults and practitioners not to be overwhelmed by the desire to place children within a structure of learning that is driven wholly by socio-economic demands and necessity.

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