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Journal:	*Policy Futures in Education*
Manuscript ID	PFIE-20-0176
Manuscript Type:	Special Issue: Globalization and the Early Childhood Curriculum in Singapore - The Changing Policies and Current Praxis
Keywords:	early childhood curriculum, early childhood care and education, globalisation, glocalisation, Singapore
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Special Issue: Globalisation and the Early Childhood Curriculum in Singapore - The Changing Policies and Current Praxis

Editorial

Early Childhood Curriculum Policies and Practices in Singapore: The Case of Glocalisation

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Abstract

Globalisation has been transforming early childhood care and education worldwide since the turn of this millennium. The early childhood sector in Singapore is no exception. Its early childhood curriculum has inevitably been influenced by the Eastern and Western cultures and has developed into a unique hybrid over the years. This special issue collects six articles covering topics on inclusive education, curriculum frameworks, infant-toddler care, curriculum-based teacher research, social-emotional learning, and bilingual language and literacy. A book review about early childhood curriculum in Chinese societies is also included. All these articles have jointly presented a snapshot of the 'glocal' situation of early childhood curriculum in Singapore, with a focus on the challenges and suggestions for policy and practical improvements.

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Early Childhood Curriculum Policies and Practices in Singapore: The Case of Glocalisation

Globalisation has been widely observed in the field of early childhood care and education (ECCE) since the turn of this millennium. Many governments are increasingly concerned about the ranking and global competitiveness of their country's early education and development system. Singapore is no exception. The LIEN Foundation, a Singapore charity organisation, commissioned and released the first international ECCE ranking report in 2012 - *Starting Well: Benchmarking Early Education Across the World*. In this first world ranking, Singapore was regrettably ranked No. 29, far behind the other 28 OECD countries. This unexpected result has accelerated the Singapore government to take timely actions to augment the situation of ECCE. Accordingly, several significant measures have been launched by the government to improve the accessibility, affordability and quality of ECCE in the last decade.

First, the *Nurturing Early Learners Kindergarten Curriculum Framework* (NEL Framework) published in 2003 was further revised in 2012 to reflect the new developments of education for 4-6-year-olds in the country. Second, the *Early Years Development Framework* (EYDF) was launched in 2013 by the *Early Childhood Development Agency* (ECDA) to guide quality infant-toddler care for younger children from 2 months to 3 years of age. Third, the national framework for quality assurance has been developed and established: the *Singapore Preschool Quality Assurance Framework* (SPARK) and the *Quality Rating Scale* (QRS) for ECCE programmes (Tan, 2017). All these reform measures are vigorous, resolute, and immediate.

However, the implementation and impact of these policies have not been theoretically or empirically explored. Given the fact that ECCE in Singapore is a primarily privatised market (Sum et al., 2018), these new policies would have encountered some resistance from

the field. As such, the current praxis in Singapore's multicultural and globalised context, such as the early childhood curriculum, pedagogy and preschool provision and their associated challenges, deserves evidence-based research and academic debates.

This is especially true when we recognise that curriculum as a cultural practice reflects societal values and expectations that will determine the future of younger generations via its design and implementation (Yang, 2018; Ang, 2014). There is a trend that early childhood leaders and teachers leading and implementing curriculum are encouraged to consider local cultures and values in fostering culturally sensitive practices (Yang, 2019; Yang & Li, 2018). Due to the interactions with globalisation, Singapore's early childhood curriculum is hybrid in nature, reflecting traditional Asian cultures and values and absorbing ideas and good practices from other countries (regions) such as Australia, Hong Kong, China, UK, and USA (Bull et al., 2018).

Gladly, this special issue has obtained a quality collection of studies that have provided critical, cross-cultural, and cross-disciplinary perspectives and evidence on the evolving policies and praxis of Singapore's ECCE (early childhood curriculum in particular) against the background of globalisation and internationalisation.

Towards an Inclusive, Culture-Sensitive, and Quality Curriculum: Rethinking Policymaking

Ang et al.'s (2020) article, "Critical reflections of early childhood care and education in Singapore to build an inclusive society," opens this special issue with the *Vital Voices for Vital Years 2* (2019) study. In-depth interviews with 35 professional leaders in the ECCE sector confirmed the significant changes in the early childhood landscape with the widely recognised role of ECCE in Singapore society. However, the professional leaders were still concerned with the mis-alignment between policy and practice and workforce shortage in early childhood inclusive education. Moreover, there is a continuing challenge facing the

sector in meeting the diverse needs of children and their families, especially those in less advantaged situations. The interview results indicated that the quality of Early Intervention provision varied across the voluntary welfare organisations, with a lack of consistent, high-quality curricula for early childhood intervention services. The making of an inclusive ECCE sector requires diverse skillsets and abilities in the community of practitioners. Due to the shortage of qualified teachers and specialists in the sector (Yang & Lim, 2020), it is essential to ensure the diversity of the workforce and professional culture as the support for achieving inclusion and equity.

In the second article, " 'That's just impossible in my kindergarten.' Advocating for 'glocal' early childhood curriculum frameworks," Bautista et al. (2020) presented a critical review and comparison of the Euro-American curriculum notions and Asian curriculum policies by focusing on the early childhood curriculum frameworks. Their findings confirmed that early childhood curriculum frameworks in Asia (Singapore and Hong Kong as two examples) had been shaped by Western values, theories and pedagogies due to the influence of globalisation. In the particular case of Singapore, key notions promoted by the government in the *NEL Framework* are inconsistent with the more traditional, local cultures. Based on the postcolonial theory, Bautista and colleagues further urged policymakers to develop a hybrid curriculum framework for the ECCE sector. Such a hybrid curriculum framework is featured as *glocalisation*, i.e., a balance of globalisation and localisation, by considering the contextual and cultural appropriateness of curriculum intentions and practices. To replace the key notions embedded in the current frameworks (i.e., Child-Centeredness, Quality Interactions, Creativity and Self-Expression, and Play), the authors proposed an alternative set of glocal notions: Child-Appropriateness, Pedagogical Quality, Arts Engagement, and Child-Led Activities. The newly proposed glocal frameworks are urgently needed to support

teacher preparation and professional development in the ECCE sector, as well as more culturally sensitive curriculum practices.

In the third article, "Infant-toddler care in Singapore: Journey towards quality," Wu and Perisamy (2020) reviewed the historical evolution of the infant-toddler care policies and frameworks in Singapore. As informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory, they critically discussed the impacts of globalisation and Western cultural hegemony on the development of the local infant-toddler care sector. Their review indicated a policy-practice gap in terms of improving quality of ECCE provision, resulting in the challenging situation that children in their most critical years (2 to 18 months) are being cared and educated by the least qualified practitioners. Furthermore, implementation of the national policy, EYDF, which caters to the sector of infant-toddler care, has varied in its fidelity and quality across childcare centres. The authors further identified two areas for improvement. First, the government should upgrade the staff-child ratio regulation and re-consider the mixed-age grouping for infant-toddler care, so that infants can be better cared for by educarers. Second, the professional learning pathway for educarers should be made available to ensure the teacher quality for infant-toddler care. Both strategies would lead to the quality improvement of infant-toddler curriculum implementation and help to bridge the policy-practice gap in this sector.

Bridging the Policy-Practice Gaps Through Teacher Research, Instructional Training, and Technology Use

Moving from policy to practice, Yang et al.'s (2020) article, "Early childhood teacher research and social-emotional learning: Implications for the development of culturally sensitive curriculum in Singapore," presented a case of teacher research in early childhood curriculum innovation in Singapore. They argued that teacher research could be used as a context-relevant, culturally responsive approach to promoting early childhood curriculum

practices. In the case presented in the article, social-emotional learning as a crucial domain of

early childhood curriculum is used to illustrate how an early childhood practitioner embraced

teacher research as a tool for integrating a child-focused, social-emotional learning approach

into the existing curriculum. Data was also shown to explain how teacher research in the

social-emotional curriculum helped to improve the practitioner's instructional skills and the

children's social-emotional skills. Yang et al. (2020) argued that teacher research could be

one of the key solutions for promoting culturally sensitive curriculum reforms and practices

in early childhood. This seems highly relevant to the Singapore context, as policy-practice

gaps in the local ECCE sector have been documented and discussed in other studies (e.g.,

Bautista et al.'s article included in this special issue; Yin et al., 2020). In Singapore, early

childhood policy is highly influenced by Western ideologies, while practitioners are still

facing local, sociocultural realities such as the hierarchical management culture, a rigid

schedule, limited resources, teacher stress, and parents' high expectations. Early childhood

teacher research highlighted in this article could be an avenue for balancing imported

professional ideas and local needs in curriculum reforms and practices.

In the fifth and sixth articles, language and literacy as another important domain of

early childhood curriculum is focused on to investigate how bilingual children in Singapore

learn English and their Mother Tongue Languages. In the article entitled "Promoting

bilingualism and children's co-participation in Singapore language classrooms: Preschool

teacher strategies and children's responses in Show-and-Tell," Ng et al. (2020) revealed how

Singapore preschool language teachers (English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil) used Show-and-

Tell to support young children's oral language production. Drawn upon the nationwide

longitudinal study, Singapore Kindergarten Impact Project (SKIP), Ng and colleagues (2020)

used reliable coding scheme for analysing teachers' and children's utterances during Show-

and-Tell. Evidence indicated that the effectiveness of teachers' strategies used in Show-and-

Tell remained to be improved, and teachers should be equipped with a wider range of instructional strategies in facilitating children's oral language development. The authors also suggest that the NEL's language and literacy framework should highlight that the use of wait-time is a key strategy for facilitating children's Show-and-Tell and language development.

In contrast, the article by Mah et al. (2020) focused on digital technology use and how it is related to bilingual Singapore children's early reading abilities. In their article entitled "Digital technology use and early reading abilities among bilingual children in Singapore," the authors investigated the digital technology use among children with different family language environments through a questionnaire survey. The child participants were also asked to complete the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) reading comprehension tests. Results indicated that children's reading ability and digital technology use in Chinese varied across family language environments (Chinese only, English only, and Chinese-English bilingual). And children's use of digital technology in English and Chinese would contribute to their reading abilities respectively for children from English-only families. This study implies that recent technological advances have become part of children's early learning experiences, which would further lead to their learning and developmental outcomes. Therefore, technology integration should be a more explicit component in early childhood curriculum frameworks, especially in developed countries such as Singapore.

Last but not least, this special issue has included a book review contributed by Minyi Li from Beijing Normal University. In this insightful commentary, Li (2020) introduced the monograph authored by two co-editors of this special issue, "Early Childhood Curriculum in Chinese Societies: Policies, Practices, and Prospects" (Routledge). This book shares the same focus of this special issue - early childhood curriculum policy and practice, and also investigates the contemporary reforms and innovations happening in non-Western societies,

including Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. As stated by the book review author, it

is important to uplift early childhood curriculum policies and practices by valuing

"theoretically self-contained frameworks and originally evidence-based research" (Li, 2020,

p. 2) in local contexts.

What Can We Learn from the Past for the Future?

This special issue is valuable for understanding the dynamic and complex

relationships among glocalisation (Bautista et al., 2020), policymaking, and early childhood

curriculum practices in Singapore. The current collection of articles has reviewed the history

of early childhood curriculum reforms and practices in Singapore. The articles depict the

blueprint for the future and inform how the policy-practice gaps could be addressed. These

articles collectively present the evolution of Singapore's early childhood sector, as well as the

ecological influences leading to a hybrid curriculum system, which is culture- and history-

based. Both globalisation and the local heritage culture have an impact on Singapore's early

childhood curriculum policies and practices (Bautista et al., 2020); therefore, contextual and

cultural appropriateness must be fully considered, otherwise imported notions will not work.

This special issue significantly contributes to the field by presenting more nuanced

and concrete analyses and evidence for depicting the complicated and dynamic

transformation of the early childhood curriculum in Singapore as a case of non-Western

contexts. It calls for promoting ECCE reforms and practices with sociocultural specificities in

diverse contexts. This urgent need is consistent with the framework of "3CAPs," namely,

culturally, contextually, and child-individually appropriate practices for understanding and

implementing early childhood curriculum (Li & Chen, 2017; Yang & Li, 2018). With this

framework of 3CAPs, culturally sensitive practices are achievable to not only enhance our

understanding of educational distinctions across contexts despite their similar adoption of

globally dominated ideas and practices (Tan, 2015), but also clarifying the promising direction for the continual development of ECCE.

A possible way forwards for the early childhood sector in Singapore is to further develop a nationally recommended curriculum for early childhood intervention programmes (Ang et al., 2020), which would contribute to an inclusive and sustainable future of ECCE in the society. Meanwhile, it is necessary to appreciate and enhance the diversity and quality of the early childhood workforce through pre-service training and in-service professional learning (Wu & Perisamy, 2020). As suggested by Ng et al. (2020), early childhood teachers should be equipped with key strategies to promote instructional quality. Besides, teacher-initiated research can be used as a culturally responsive approach to early childhood curriculum innovation and quality improvement (Yang et al., 2020). Lastly, how digital technology can be used to promote early childhood learning and development should be on the future agenda of policy and practice improvements (Mah et al., 2020).

Singapore is located at the Straits of Malacca, one of the most important geographical intersections connecting the two worlds: the East versus the West. Singapore has guarded the safety of those cross-straits as well as cross-cultural communications between the two worlds. And Singapore itself has been inevitably influenced by the two worlds and their representative cultures. In the process, cultural collisions and fusions (Li & Chen, 2017) have taken place, gradually and unavoidably. This special issue, depicting the current situation of early childhood curriculum policies and practices in Singapore, has provided a showcase of how the East and West cultures have interacted, interchanged, and interweaved into a unique "Singapore culture," which deserves more empirical explorations in the future.

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