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Author(s)	Ruth Wong
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EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE:
PRACTICES, PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

by

Prof. Ruth Wong

Institute of Education

Singapore

Historical Context

Historically speaking, early childhood teacher education in Singapore was not especially conceived as such. For a long time, it did not include the teachers of children between the ages of two and five. Also up till 1928, teachers of children, aged six to eight (lower primary) were trained in exactly the same way as teachers for those aged nine to twelve (upper primary). Even after 1929, the separate provision for the training of teachers of lower and upper primary school children merely implied variations in general methodology and in the level of classes to which teachers in training were assigned for teaching practice. Theory always lagged behind practice. The objectives and clients at each level of education were not really understood nor particularly studied. , Hence, during periods of unprecedented demand for education in the Fifties and Sixties, frequent lapses into the more traditional form of so called general purpose teacher education occurred.

The late introduction of training for teachers of pre-school children (1965) was due both to the preoccupation of successive governments with the improvement of educational opportunities at other levels and to the slow growth in the general demand for kindergarten education. This last had remained very much a private enterprise, and the fees charged were such as to place it only within the reach of children from homes which were relatively well-off.

Demand for pre-school education began to pick up in the late Sixties and by the early Seventies made a dramatic spurt. Surveys made by the Ministry of Education have shown that, in recent years, more than half of all children entering school each year have received some form of kindergarten experience. The statistics are as follows:

Table 1: Pre-school Experience of Children Admitted to Primary School

<u>Year of Admission</u>	<u>Percent with kindergarten education</u>
1973	68.88
1974	78.1
1975	84.2

Several factors have combined to create this phenomenon.

First, the Social Factor

With improved standards of living and mass communication, many parents have come to regard the kindergarten experience as an enrichment process which they would not like to withhold from their children, if they can afford it. The kindergarten has become known as a place where children enjoy themselves, are given opportunities to learn the proper social skills, are initiated into the appropriate preparation for primary school and are generally very well taken care of for a few hours of each day.

Secondly, the Educational Factor

Teachers in primary schools, who work with large classroom groups and within a highly selective and examination-dominated educational system, have tended to develop rather unrealistic expectations with regard to the linguistic and other skills which children should possess on admission to primary school.

Research has shown that there are at least 18 different linguistic environments from which the Singapore school pupils are drawn. Hence it often happens that the medium of instruction used in the school at which a child is enrolled may not be the language of the home environment. Children, who have not had exposure to the language of school instruction (this may be one of English/Malay/Hua-yii/Tamil) are subject to unequal treatment from teachers who are impatient with those who do not know what others know.

Rightly or wrongly, parents perceive this as a threat to the progress of their children in school and lock on the kindergarten as a place where their children can receive a gentle introduction to the language of the school.

A third factor which has helped to give impetus to the demand for pre-school education is economic in character. The rapid industrialisation of Singapore has meant an increasing absorption of women into one sort of employment or another. The twin-income phenomenon has become increasingly evident. With the availability of house help and the extended family lifestyle fast disappearing, mothers find it convenient to leave their offspring in the charge of well-managed day-care institutions while they work.

There seem never to be enough places to cater to demand at the Government-sponsored crèches where children are left in the mornings as early as 7 a.m. and fetched home again in the late afternoons at 5 p.m.

The crèches take on children in the early age-range. All children have to be under six years of age. They are accepted, irrespective of citizenship status and family income. A child whose parents are Singapore citizens with a combined income of \$300/- to \$500/- per month is charged a fee of 10¢ to 30¢ a day. Those in particularly needy circumstances do not pay any fee at all. These children constitute the regular clients of the crèches. They are fed, bathed and given kindergarten or nursery education at these centres.

Occasional day-care is also provided on demand, although the charges for this service are higher.

Charges For a full day's attendance S\$1.50 per day

" " morning session only..... S\$1.00 (with the provision of lunch)

" an afternoon session only.....S\$0.50 (with tea)

Meals with good nutritional value are provided.

The development of crèches gained momentum only after the last World War. There were only two in 1949. By 1959, there were six. To-day there are thirteen¹. They are all administered by the Social Welfare

¹Attendance at crèches is given at Appendix I.

Department of the Social Affairs Ministry and the teachers in the crèches are also provided by this Department.

There was also a fourth factor in creating demand. This was a socio-political one. In view of the awakening public consciousness of a need for early childhood education, private kindergartens of dubious character began to sprout all over the island. The conditions in these were not the most conducive to the healthy development of body, mind or spirit. As it was not yet within the capacity of Government to provide public pre-school education on any scale sufficient to promote appropriate benefits for all, it was decided to help at least the less advantaged children by encouraging and supporting the People's Association, a quasi-government body, in their efforts to set up kindergartens at their various community centres. The development of P.A. kindergartens took a big leap forward about 1964/65.

To make this education available to children in the lower socio-economic groups, the fees charged were only S\$1 per month as against a range of S\$12 to S\$75 charged at that time by private kindergartens. To-day, fees charged by private kindergartens range higher than fees payable by University students.

The factors discussed above generated such a momentum in the pace of popular demand that, within a few years of 1964, when the first P.A. classes were set up, it was reported² that some 20,000 children were attending classes in unregistered kindergarten which were run by political parties, churches, private organisations or individuals. Another 12,000 were in the P.A.'s 137 Community Centres and 5,000 were in other registered "baby schools".³

TEACHER TRAINING PRACTICES

Consequent on the rapid proliferation of day-care centres, nurseries, kindergartens, etc. the need for proper and formal training of teachers could no longer be ignored. The demand for primary school teachers had eased

²Reply of the Minister for Education to a parliamentary question re Kindergarten Education, March 20, 1970.

³Similar to nursery schools, with emphasis on day care.

considerably by 1966 and reached some stability in 1968. It seemed appropriate to make preparation for the training of pre-school teachers as soon as the easier tread appeared in the demand for primary education.

The basic preparation for this move began in 1964 when two persons were selected by the P.A. and sent to Australia on Colombo Plan Training Scholarships to pursue studies in the field of early childhood education with the objective that, on their return, they should spearhead the training of P.A. kindergarten teachers.

Previous to this, the Ministry had established within the Inspectorate a post for kindergarten education. The brief given to the kindergarten inspector was to look after, supervise and give professional advice to private kindergartens. Between 1962 and 1966, the Inspector conducted mainly short informal courses for inexperienced teachers. Advice on how to teach was given on an individual basis.

In 1965 a workshop cum conference on pre-school education was held and, in 1966, an exhibition on Kindergarten education was organised by the Ministry of Education to disseminate new ideas and approaches.

The first formal training was offered by the specialist inspector on kindergarten education in 1968. This took the form of courses of 3-month duration which stressed aspects of child development, language skills, number concepts, the teaching of art and crafts and music, the methods for inculcating proper health habits and some understanding of safety measures in the classroom. The 3-month course became known as the basic course. Its nature was very much a "crash programme" and its emphasis was on practical skills in teaching. In view of the great demand for teachers, this was continued to the present as a first-level course for kindergarten teachers.

In 1969, an advanced course was introduced jointly by the Ministry and the Adult Education Board. Known as the Intermediate Kindergarten Teachers' Certificate Course, it was to be fully a one-year course, open only to teachers who had already had training in the basic course. The candidates were selected from among applicants who, at the time, had to be working in one of the institutions recognised by the Government- a P.A. Kindergarten, a creche or an approved private school for pre-schoolers.

Each participant had also to possess an acceptable School Certificate.

The course for the IKTC was conducted by a team of lecturers, comprising the specialist inspector, returned Colombo Plan teachers and guest lecturers (doctors and science specialists). Its objective was to give an in-depth approach to the areas previously studied in the basic course and to supply a theoretical base to the understanding of the behaviour of the child. The study of the subject, "Nature and Science" was introduced for the first time together with social studies. The importance of nutrition and safety principles was stressed.

The group of teachers with the IKTC (46 out of 52 enrolled were successful) was intended to be pioneers of change in the Government's effort to promote sound kindergarten practice. Unfortunately, the group was not augmented by subsequent groups, because of the heavy demand for basic training. For in August 1970, the Minister for Education ruled that all unregistered kindergartens should be registered by Jan. 1, 1972 and should have, as staff members, persons who had at least undergone the basic training course.

The most recent development in pre-school teacher education is the decision of the Institute of Education to offer a one-year, advanced Kindergarten teacher education course. The first such course will commence in July, 1975.

The team approach to the organisation of this course, as in the case of the IKTC Course, will be adopted. The curriculum, however, will be a departure from the purely school-subject based content of the traditional course with its emphasis on methodology. Theories of learning and child development will be very much integrated with practice. The observation of child behaviour will be made both in the laboratory situation and in the classroom. The philosophical as well as other objectives of pre-school education, to which Singapore subscribes, will be studied. Small groups of pupils will be assigned to each student-in-training for special responsibilities so that the latter may learn how to empathise with the former in terms of their needs and demands. Examinations will be deemphasised and much of the course evaluation will be based on the quality of assigned projects for which the teachers in training will be required to engage in data gathering and critical analysis. The role of communication (particularly the human aspects) in teaching will be emphasised, since the non-verbal aspects of teacher behaviour tend to influence much of child behaviour in the classroom. Finally, the usual block practice will yield to daily practice (on a shortened-day basis) to

enable students to get to know their pupils more intimately and to gather reliable data for their projects.

This course is patterned very much after the course for primary school teachers, which was radically revised when the Institute was established in April 1973. The main aims are

1) to inform practice through theory, something which has been rather neglected in primary school education.⁴

2) to correct theory through practice. The appropriate questions teachers should ask would be of the type,

"Does this really work in our context?" Hence, the need for project assignments.

In the present pattern of training, all teachers, whether for lower primary, upper primary or lower secondary school, have to undergo a two year course with the following as case subjects:

1. An integrated education course which draws together important principles of learning and teaching which have implications for practice. These are culled from the psycho-socio and philosophical disciplines, General methodology is discussed in the light of these principles.

2. Health and population education.

3. Music, Physical Education, Librarianship and Education for Living as co-curricular, non-examinable subjects.

4. First and second Languages.

Alongside these courses are the elective courses which require students to pursue through their projects, in-depth studies of children at their respective levels of teaching; to specialise in methodology appropriate to the level of teaching; to study, up to intermediate university

⁴some would argue with me that this is not true. But a few so-called theory lectures without relevance to practice in the classroom defeats the purpose.

level, two academic subjects, for which the candidate has to show proof of adequate proficiency in the GCE, "A" Level Examination. The query has often been raised as to why primary Teachers should be required to read academic subjects in depth. Our teacher who has no interest, master or acquaintance with a subject at a sufficiently high level is conceptually limited and is less adequate in responding to the questions of the more gifted children in class.

Methodology in the various subjects is integrated with content so that, at the Institute, there are no separate subject lectures and methods lecturers. Curriculum development forms part of the methodology course. "Teaching practice" is now termed "school practice" to give it a broader meaning. It does not include merely classroom situations, but activities outside of the classroom as well - extra-curricular involvement, home visits, etc. It is arranged on a daily shortened-day basis, not as block teaching.

The Institute prepares teachers for all four language media - English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil. Generally, the lecturing staff are bilingual in English and one of the other languages. However, there are certain fields of studies in which bilingual staff are difficult to find.

Admission requirements for primary school teacher training comprise the following:

1. A good Higher School Cambridge Certificate or a GCE "A" Level Certificate with a G.P. grade not lower than 4.⁵
2. An acceptable pass in an entrance examination comprising both a written and an oral examination in the first language.
3. A pass at an interview.

PROBLEMS

1. The pedagogical problem

The term, "training of teachers", aptly describes the process, and means, in practice, precisely what it implies. Prescriptions, more than rationale

⁵Because Singapore's School system is integrated, all students irrespective of language stream, undergo the same school/public examinations.

characterise the courses which teachers have taken in the past. Generally speaking, these teachers have been trained, but not really educated in an enlightened practice, which is well-informed, and whose hallmark is an ability to take the initiative in searching out and trying new or different approaches in order to evoke the best from the children who are taught. Teachers, trained on a diet of prescriptive methodology are not secure enough to avoid prescriptive teaching themselves. They tend to encourage rote learning, brush aside creative behaviour and are uncomfortable and lacking in confidence when dealing with curious and inquiring minds.

If it is desirable that the capacity for independent learning should be developed and individual initiative and an inquiring attitude should be fostered from the earliest childhood years, then it is necessary to ensure that teachers, whose task it is to nurture young minds, are truly effective in carrying it out. But it has turned out that economic expedience dictates the policy of assigning the least academically qualified to the teaching of children in the most crucial years of their development.

Given, this situation, are these alternatives to the practice of gradual upgrading exercises, which often take such a long time to complete that the gap between teachers' skills and children's needs is never bridged?

2. The teacher-educator problem

This relates to the first problem. If courses have been limited in substance, they have been so, either because there has been a shortage of teacher educators and resources have had to be spread very thin, or because those available are themselves inadequate.

In the case of pre-school teacher education, the first situation obtains, while in that of lower primary school teacher education the latter is true. In the Singapore system, traditional training practices have produced graduates to teach only in secondary schools. Teacher educators drawn from their ranks do not have first-hand knowledge of primary school practice. They may theorise well, but are unable to exemplify their theory in practice. On the other hand, non-graduate teacher educators, by virtue of the training they themselves have received, can practice well with some help from intuition, but are without the important insights which may help them explain their practice to those whom they train.

3. The linguistic problem

By reason of the fact that the Singapore Government believes in parity of treatment through the offer of education in the four major languages, teacher education has had to be offered also in four languages.

This has imposed a strain on the teacher education institution, because of the need to replicate each course four times.

Added to this is the more recent determination to make each child effectively bilingual. Can mono-lingual teacher educators produce bilingual teachers? If teachers are not bilingual, their children be encouraged to bilingualism? How much time, therefore, should be devoted to making teachers effectively bilingual in order to cope successfully with their instructional objectives and responsibilities? Significant changes have to be made and need to continue to be made in respect of the organisation of the curriculum and in the conduct of teaching practice.

4 Curricular innovations and attitudes

The best curriculum will not take, unless teachers are prepared both mentally and attitudinally to implement the changes. It often happens that changes in curriculum occur much faster than teachers can cope with them. Recent innovations, such as the interdisciplinary integration of subjects in the curriculum, or the policy of allowing children to progress at their own pace, or the replacement of the public examination by continuous evaluation are concepts difficult to grasp in operational terms. At the grass roots level, practitioners have, for years, been trained in a prescriptive methodology. Suddenly, they are free to exercise their initiative within a flexible curriculum. They are extremely insecure because the new approach to teaching that recent innovations require is foreign to the classroom life-style to which teachers have been conditional by training and habit for many years. This problem implies the need for a massive re-training programme.

In other words, the Institute of Education has become central to educational change, being the only teacher education institution in Singapore. The task is formidable. It has itself to develop an adaptability and "capability" for teacher re-training. It has to demonstrate what is required in practice, if it is to continue to preserve its own credibility.

If the teacher education institution has no answers to change, can change really take place? It is a moot question whether the general public pays

much attention to this question. Remuneration to staff of teaching institutions rate lowest for teacher educators. Certainly, there does not seem to be much awareness of the need for sound teacher education, since the day when "crash programmes" made a heady invasion which no other profession, apart from the teaching profession, will admit.

5. The problem of quantitative demand

This has already been implied in the course of discussion. Under pressure, the educational solution most often used is in the nature of a crash programme. There is both a positive and a negative aspect to this. On the positive side, crash programmes have helped the educational system to tide over its difficulties and needs; on the negative side, many an educational venture, upon evaluation, has failed precisely because of this.

The "work in haste and repeat at leisure" maxim holds in this respect. There is need to consider the measurement of "crash-worthiness", and, concomitantly, plan for a programme to absorb the shock when the system has stabilised.

PROSPECTS

The Institute of Education, established in April 1973, is just about two years old. It took over the education functions from the University's graduate school of education and the former Teacher Training College. The research responsibilities of the former Research Unit of the Ministry of Education were also transferred to the Institute.

These important developments at the Institute will have direct impact on early childhood teacher education.

First, the adoption in January 1974 of 17 primary schools as the Institute's experimental schools will help the lecturing staff to gain fresh insights about how children learn. Lecturers can also experiment with new approaches to classroom teaching. The information gathered through their experiences and experiments and the teaching materials which they produce, with the help of the school staff and pupils, will be made available to interested-teachers in Singapore, through the setting up of resource centres at the various experimental schools. Week-end workshops are conducted on a non-formal basis at these resource centres. In this way, knowledge and practice can be simply upgraded. Also this may provide one of the solutions to the problem of quantitative demand. The objective, therefore, is to show the way to relating theory to practice and demonstrate that this is possible.

The resource centres also provide a good "nursery" for pre-service teachers in training. They visit and work at the schools on special assignment over and above the normal teaching practice requirements. The usual teaching practice is not conducted in the experimental schools.

Recently, a plan was finalised, whereby the Institute's staff, with the assistance of the Kindergarten staff of the People's Association, would study the relationship between kindergarten education and lower primary education in terms of the objectives, the curriculum, the process, and the needs of the children. In connection with this study it is intended to conduct an experiment in simultaneous child and parent education. It is hoped that this study will yield information which will improve the content and process of early childhood teacher education and supply a model for the participation of parents in the teaching process - a process which need not be entirely formal.

Finally an attempt is being made to re-examine the objectives of teacher education at pre-school level, in the same way that the Institute is examining such objectives for other levels. The aim is to establish a priority listing of what constitutes teacher education at each level. Instead of predetermining the period of training at one, two or three years, it may and well be feasible/possible to arrange for a sequence of courses of varying lengths to be offered in the context of the continuing education of teachers, within the life-span of the individual's service. To this end, the Institute has established as one of its divisional schools, the School of Continuing Studies.

We are extremely short of answers about early childhood teacher education at this moment. The pressure for more and more training and retraining courses mounts as parental choice adumbrates the situation where, by 1978, one hundred per cent of children admitted into primary schools will have had pre-school training of at least one year, and 70 per cent with at least two years. In this year, the demand for universal kindergarten education will coincide with the offer of universal secondary education, already an announced policy made known early this year by the Minister for Education. Thus, by 1978, there will be provision for universal primary and secondary education together with a strong demand for universal kindergarten education. Already Singapore parents are talking about pre-kindergarten nursery education for children, aged 2 and 3. These developments inevitably follow in the wake of national progress.

The Institute is in a privileged position in having all teacher education progress under its roof. On this account it is able to view teacher education for the various levels, from kindergarten to adult education as one integrated whole. The years ahead will contain many challenges, but, since necessity is the mother of invention, the continuing demand should afford stimulus for a more creative approach which will include among its solutions the participation of parents and community in the teaching process and the search for qualitatively acceptable and creative alternatives to the formal approaches which now obtain.