Singapore Preschool Teachers' Responses to the Introduction of *A Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum* in the Context of 3 Preschool Settings

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Abstract

This paper is based on a British Academy funded research project on teachers' responses to the introduction of the Singapore preschool curriculum titled *A Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2003). 15 teachers from 3 preschools were interviewed and their views analyzed to identify issues in the implementation of the new curriculum. The teachers in this pilot study welcomed the curriculum framework but had reservations about it. For them, the three main issues were limitations in funding and resources to implement the Framework, a need for training, and the expectations of parents for a more formal approach to the curriculum. The cultural and economic context in which the preschools are located seem to have some influence on the teachers' ability to implement the Framework and on how the curriculum is delivered to children.

Keywords: *curriculum, national policy, teachers' views, Singapore kindergarten*

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Introduction

This paper is based on a small exploratory study funded by the British Academy on teachers' responses to the Singapore kindergarten curriculum. Titled *A Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum in Singapore* (the *Framework*), the curriculum was launched by the Ministry of Education (MOE) on 29 January 2003 (Ministry of Education, 2003). The document provides for the first time in Singapore, an official statement of what a quality preschool curriculum for children aged three to six years should entail.

The late 1980s and 90s were a time of policy developments in the early childhood sector in Singapore. The introduction of the *Framework* was in part the culmination of a series of initiatives by the government to regulate the provision of Early Years education in the country. In 1988, new legislation 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 childcare providers. In March 2000, the government introduced the *Desired Outcomes* (Ministry of Education, 2000) in a preliminary bid to stipulate the aims of pre-school education, with a focus on the social, emotional and moral aspects of development. An inter-ministerial task force was formed in 2000, comprising representatives from MOE, the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Community, Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) and pre-school practitioners. The work of the team was to develop a common training route for the kindergarten and child care workforce. In 2001, a new 'Pre-school Education Teacher Training and Accreditation Framework' was introduced. The new framework stipulates that all preschool teachers need to achieve at least a Certificate in preschool teaching as a minimum level of professional qualification. In 2003, the *Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum* was introduced by the government and made available to all kindergartens and childcare centres.

The impetus for the proposal of the new curriculum was revealed in a press statement published by the Ministry in 2003. Firstly, the introduction of the new curriculum was to 'give kindergarten education providers a clear direction for developing an educational program that meets the needs of their children physically, emo-

tionally, socially and cognitively.' (Ministry of Education Press Release, 2003).
Secondly, the curriculum was to 'provide a guide to good practices in preschool
education' (Ministry of Education Press Release, 2003). The development of the new
curriculum and the context in which it was developed therefore raised critical issues
in the early childhood sector: it highlighted the issue of raising the standards of
teacher training and preschool practices. It also revealed the government's concern
with the overall quality of the curriculum and provision of early childhood services in
the country. This was especially the case for children from less advantaged back-
grounds, where the aim of the government was to raise the standards of preschool
education and thereby provide the greatest leverage for these children to access a
quality early years provision and develop a firm foundation in lifelong learning.

The launch of the preschool *Framework* was therefore in part precipitated by
these intentions and reforms on the part of the government. The new curriculum was
to provide a much needed coherency in introducing a common curriculum framework
that catered for all preschool children aged 3 to 6 years. However, since the publi-
cation of the document, little known research and evaluation have been carried out on
the responses of practitioners to the new curriculum. The aim of this British Academy
study is to therefore gather practitioners' feedback on the document, and to explore
issues that they may or may not have in implementing the curriculum.

The Singapore preschool context

The term 'preschool' in Singapore generally refers to childcare centres and
kindergartens. These include a range of settings, from private childcare centres,
religious-based kindergartens to government funded kindergartens. The compulsory
school age for children in Singapore is seven years, and preschools in Singapore
generally cater for children from three to six years, although most childcare centres
also provide infant care for children aged 2 months and above. Childcare centres and
kindergartens differ mainly in their function and hours of provision. Kindergartens
cater mainly for children aged 3 to 6 years and offer daily sessional educational
programs, ranging from a maximum of 2 to 4 hours per session. Kindergartens are

available in both the private and public sectors. Government funded kindergartens are commonly known as People's Action Party Community Foundation kindergartens or PCF kindergartens and account for more than 60% of the country's kindergartens (UNESCO Policy Brief, 2004).

Childcare centres provide full or partial day care generally from 7am to 7pm during the weekdays and 7am to 2pm on Saturdays. All childcare centres are private establishments. They are registered under the auspices of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), but are run commercially for profit by the private sector. Unlike kindergartens, there are no government funded childcare centres, although state-subsidies are available for parents and families who are in need of financial support for childcare costs. The main reasons for this are two fold. Firstly, the primary remit of the MCYS is to support families and the community, and childcare centres are seen as one such mechanism in their provision of "care" for working parents and families. Secondly, the running of childcare centres is seen as costly and for viability, the government has maintained a supporting and admini-strative role while out-sourcing the provision of care to the private sector. As the Director of the MCYS, Mr. Lee Kim Hua explains that it would be a more cost effec-tive option instead for the private sector, a non-public organization to 'be responsible for the management and operation of services, with the government providing finan-cial support' (UNESCO Policy Brief, 2007).

The government's role with regards to childcare centres is thus confined to that of regulating the private childcare market, and providing partial funding to parents and families where necessary. The centres are ultimately responsible for the opera-tion, funding and organization of their own provision, from the maintenance of resources to the training and professional development of staff. While the MCYS regulates and monitors the overall provision and general physical environment of settings, the centres are effectively owned and managed by private organizations and individuals. Kindergartens, on the other hand, are largely perceived as "educational establishments", offering a more education-based preschool service and therefore operate under the auspices of the Ministry of Education (MOE) in terms of their policies and regulations. However, despite these marked contrasts, in practice, the

differences between childcare centres and kindergartens are not entirely distinct.

It is common for most childcare centres, while registered as such under the auspices of the MCYS, to also provide educational programs for 4 to 6 year olds. Conversely, it could also be argued that kindergartens, like childcare centres, provide a similar provision of care for preschool children, albeit for a more specific age group and for shorter hours. The distinction between 'care' and 'education' is therefore arguably ambiguous and this is especially so in discourse, where the distinction between 'care' and 'education' is virtually inseparable.

The Singapore Preschool Curriculum: A Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum in Singapore

Given the preschool context described above, the provision of early child care and education services in Singapore is extremely diverse. Childcare centres and kindergartens often vary considerably in terms of their program content, and overall teaching and learning approaches (Retas & Kwan, 2000). Kindergartens for instance, have the autonomy to stipulate their own goals and philosophies, and are free to determine the curriculum offered to children. The effectiveness of each centre or kindergarten is often dependent on popular impressions, measured arbitrarily by the number of children enrolled, parental expectations, and the reputation of each setting. A study conducted by Fan-Eng and Sharpe, for instance, revealed that factors such as "the centre has a good reputation", "recommended by someone" and "other siblings are attending the centre" often influence parents' views of the setting. Perceptions of what entails a 'quality' curriculum are also mixed, depending largely on the setting's curricular emphasis, educational philosophy, and general pedagogic beliefs (Fan-Eng & Sharpe, 2000; Wong & Lim, 2002).

Given the diversity of provision in the early childhood sector, the conceptualization of the Singapore preschool curriculum became part of a national drive to regulate the provision of child care and education in the country, in order to provide some degree of standardization of a curriculum from which teachers were able to drawn upon and deliver. The introduction of a national preschool curriculum was also in keeping with a wider international movement by governments across the world to

enhance the quality of early childhood services in their countries. The New Zealand government for instance, decided in 1990 that a national early childhood curriculum was to be developed, which eventually led to the introduction of *Te Whariki* in 1996. In the United Kingdom, the *Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5* was introduced in Scotland in 2001, and the English *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* in 2000 for children 3 to 5. The international trend among governments to develop national pedagogical frameworks in the preschool sector has also been noted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in the report *Starting Strong−early childhood education and care* (OECD, 2001). The development of the Singapore preschool curriculum in 2003 was therefore aligned with international movements in the early childhood sector to raise the standards of preschool curriculum and provision in the settings.

The genesis of the Singapore curriculum began in 1999, when a steering committee was formed to work with the Ministry to improve the quality of preschool education (Ministry of Education Press Release, 2003). With representatives from the Ministry, the National Institute of Education, preschool and primary practitioners, the vision of the committee was to improve the quality of preschool education in general and to delineate outcomes for preschool education (Ministry of Education Press Release, 2003). From March 2001 to November 2002, a pilot research study was conducted to evaluate the impact of the new curriculum and its implications on teacher training (Ministry of Education Press Release, 2003). A total of thirty-two non-profit preschool centres across the country participated. A report on the findings of the pilot study indicated that the new curriculum benefited children from low socio-economic backgrounds by providing them with a more holistic foundation for formal schooling. It revealed that 'pupils from low SES [socio-economic status] and non-English speaking backgrounds benefited more from the new curriculum' (Ministry of Education Press Release, 2003). The title of the curriculum '*A Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum*' implies that the target users are kindergarten settings. An informal discussion with one of the committee members confirms this. The *Framework* was initiated by the committee first and foremost for government funded PCF kindergartens, in order to improve the provision of preschools where the Ministry have

more jurisdiction over. However, as a guidance document, the *Framework* provides a reference for preschool teachers to draw upon and plan their curriculum, and to this extent, is also applicable for preschool settings in general.

The *Framework* is structured around six areas of learning: aesthetics and creative expression, environmental awareness, motor skills development, numeracy, self and social awareness, and language and literacy. It is accompanied by a compilation of six booklets, with each booklet focusing on a specific area of learning, learning goals, and descriptions of practitioners' roles and responsibilities. Alongside these are two DVDs on Nurturing Early Learners and an additional booklet on Putting Principles into Practice, which offers guidance for teachers in planning the curriculum, developing the learning environment, and monitoring children's development. An overview of the main features of the curriculum is outlined in the table below:

Desired outcomes of preschool education
• 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
Principles
Principle 1: Holistic development Principle 2: Integrated learning Principle 3: Active Learning Principle 4: Supporting learning Principle 5: Learning through interactions Principle 6: Learning through play
Putting principles into practice
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

Areas of Learning					
Aesthetics & creative expression	Environmental awareness	Motor skills development	Numeracy	Self & Social awareness	Language & literacy

Firstly, a list of eight desired learning outcomes provides the overarching aims of preschool education. Secondly, a set of six principles underpins the goals and outcomes for children. These principles provide a guide to developing an educational program underpinned by a philosophy of play and active learning. Thirdly, a further set of six principles provides a framework for developing good practice in the settings. It is evident that the conceptualization of the curriculum has taken a very different approach to the traditional subject based framework of the primary school curriculum. Instead, the principles and areas of learning highlight the main areas of interest of preschool children: exploring and making sense of the environment; skills and understanding for communication through language and literature, active learning, and contributing to self and social awareness. The *Framework* as a whole advocates a holistic approach to children's development and learning.

The booklets on each area of learning consist of a detailed inventory of outcomes, learning goals, and descriptions of practitioners' roles and responsibilities. The *Framework* emphasizes the role of the practitioner in preparing the learning environment and creating "learning centres" around the classroom (Ministry of Education 2003, p.31), by offering a range of suggested activities such as water play, sand play, blocks, art and craft, and different forms of play media from which children can choose. In the section on language and literacy for example, practitioners are presented with a range of recommended resources, including a list of fiction and poetry books, and suggested activities for daily practice ('Language and Literacy Development'). It states explicitly the task of the educator in enhancing children's language development, and to cultivate in children a "positive disposition for language learning" ('Language and Literacy Development', 2003, p.4).

The learning goals for children range from the broad and generic such as

"display appropriate reading behavior" to more specific ones such as 'discriminate between different letter sounds'. Guided by these goals and principles, the *Framework* has therefore clear aspirations for children and educators. It is centred on a series of tasks, activities and goals in helping children develop their literacy skills, and the role of the educators to help children achieve these goals. The curriculum is prescriptive in stipulating the types and level of reading and writing skills that children need to develop, and is didactic in its approach to education, emphasizing that children "need to know...", and "children also need to..." ('Language and Literacy Development', 2003, p.34). Significantly, the *Framework* is also underpinned by the pedagogical philosophy of "play as a medium for learning" and emphasizes the value of play (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.14).

Situating the Framework in the Wider Educational Context of Singapore

Singapore is a small country of approximately 3.61 million people (Department of Statistics, 2007). Education in Singapore is a highly competitive and valued enterprise. For an island with no natural resources except for its people, the Singapore government recognizes that an educated workforce is the key to the country's survival. Much emphasis has therefore been placed on education and creating an education system which produces students who are not only academically driven but possessing a 'wide range of talents, abilities, aptitudes and skills' (Gopinathan, 2001). The ideal student, as the scholar Gopinathan asserts, would be "literate; numerate; IT-enabled; able to collate, synthesize, analyze and apply knowledge to solve problems" (Gopinathan, 2001). This stress on academic and scholastic achievements has brought about what Gopinathan describes as an "ability driven curriculum" which has influenced the way education across the levels is managed.

Such a competitive and driven education system has inevitably influenced parental expectations of their children's academic achievements, and indeed, parents' attitudes towards what it means to excel in the system. This is evident in their

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demands for a curriculum that emphasizes academic achievements, even at preschool level. Studies have shown that the pressures of the education system in Singapore are such that parents want and expect a formal, teacher-directed education, as they deem it necessary and desirable for their children's learning (Tan-Niam 2000, Ebbeck & Gokhale, 2004). It is not unusual for parents in Singapore to prepare their children for the academic rigors 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). However, this parental demand for a more academic education provision appears to be at odds with the pedagogical underpinnings of the *Framework*, which advocates a curriculum that emphasizes the value and importance of play and stipulates that the daily schedule of activities for children at preschool age should be flexibly designed and "starting from the child" (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.28).

There is a recognition in the *Framework* of the child as an active learner, where learning is best supported through opportunities for play and interaction (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.11). Even though the curriculum, to an extent, is prescriptive in its specification of activities and goals, the stress is simultaneously on an informal experience of learning. The principles of the *Framework* serve as a reminder that the preschool curriculum is not meant as "just a preparation for the next stage" (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.11). The kindergarten stage is to be regarded as important in itself and "should not be confused with trying to accelerate learning in the kindergarten years by providing children with a simplified primary school curriculum" (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.11). This assertion in the *Framework* about what a preschool curriculum should entail is the clearest indication yet of the complex dichotomy and tension that surround the curriculum: where the pedagogic vision is for a less academic and informal experience of learning but parental and societal pressures are forcing the curriculum into a more formalized model of learning (Ang, 2006).

Amidst this complexity, the role of the teacher or educator in delivering an 'appropriate' early years curriculum is made all the more problematic and complex. Researchers have argued for the importance of the role of the teacher or educator in providing children with a quality care and education provision. A number of studies

have stressed the role of the educator in facilitating children's learning (Brown, 1998; Siraj-Blatchford, 1994; Edwards & Knight 2001; Pugh & Duffy, 2006; Anning & Edwards, 2006). Edwards and Knight point out that the role of the educator is vital in providing an effective early years curriculum, and in making decisions about what the curriculum should entail and how it can be delivered.

Given that the literature points to the importance of teachers as major stakeholders in early childhood education and as mediators of the success or otherwise of the implementation of new policy requirements, a small scale study funded by the British Academy was undertaken to investigate teachers' views on the preschool curriculum document.

The Focus of Study

The focus of this study is to explore preschool teachers' perceptions of the *Framework*. The objectives were to:

1. Explore preschool teachers' perceptions of the *Framework*
2. Identify the challenges that practitioners face in implementing the *Framework*
3. Investigate teachers' perceptions of the benefits of the *Framework*
4. Explore practitioners' perceptions of possible strategies in helping them better understand and implement the new curriculum

Sample

The sample and scope of this study were determined by the financial margins and duration of the grant; in this case it was for a year from January 2007 to January 2008. The study was based on a small sample of fifteen teachers from three preschool settings, with five teachers drawn from each setting. The settings were chosen to reflect the diversity of preschool provision in Singapore, in terms of their location, type and socio-economic stratum of families which they serve. All three settings were also selected for pragmatic reasons, due to their accessibility and geographic proximity. The three settings are: a private childcare centre, a government kindergarten, and a private kindergarten.

Setting one is a privately-owned childcare centre located in the Queensway area, in the Western part of the island. The centre has been in operation since 2004, catering full-time care for children aged 18 months to 7 years. The centre is opened six days a week, 7am to 7pm. At the time of the interview, the setting had an enrolment of 120 children for both full and part day care. The centre employs twenty members of staff, including the manager. The setting's fee structure at S$1 312.50 per month for full days and S$829.50 per month for half a day is almost fifty percent more than the national average cost of childcare. A survey carried out by the MCDYS on 'statistics on childcare services', shows that the average cost for full day care at a childcare centre in Singapore is $647, with fees ranging from a low S$300 to a high of more than S$800 a month (MCYDS 'Statistics on Childcare Services', 2006). The high cost of fees marks out the setting's clientele at the higher-end of the market. Setting two is a private kindergarten attached to a church. It is located in the housing estate of Serangoon, in the north-eastern part of the island. The kindergarten first started in 1953 and offers a 3 year educational program catering for children aged 2 ½ to 6 years. The setting operates two sessions daily, an afternoon and morning session, each lasting 3 hours. Classified as a private business, the kindergarten is not subsidized by the government or eligible for state funding. According to the centre's records, the majority of the families come from the lower to middle income group, with a proportion of the parents having manual or non-professional occupations. The average monthly income for families of children who attend the centre ranges from S$2,000 to S$4,000, with the majority of families falling into the lower end of the spectrum. This is below the national average income per household in Singapore, as evident from the last survey carried out in 2003 by the Singapore Department of Statistics which shows that the average monthly income for families is S$4 867 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 'Report on the Household Expenditure Survey 2002/2003')[1]. The manager acknowledges that the setting's fees at $300 per month is kept at a minimum in order to ensure that the cost of childcare remains affordable for

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1) The Singapore Department of Statistics conducts the Household Expenditure Survey (NES) once every 5 years. The latest survey was carried out from October 2002 to September 2003, published in the 'Report on the Household Expenditure Survey 2002/2003'.

parents and families.

Setting three is a government funded, PCF kindergarten, situated in the south of the island, in the housing estate of Woodlands. Similar to most kindergarten provision, the setting offers sessional preschool programs catering for preschool children aged 2 ½ to 6 years. The setting caters for the average income group of families from the surrounding local neighborhood. As a government funded kindergarten, the setting is eligible for additional funding and resources from the management committee of the Woodlands branch. The sample for the study was drawn from a group of fifteen teachers from across the three settings. The teachers were chosen for pragmatic reasons, due to their availability and wiliness to participate in the study. All fifteen were available on the agreed interview dates and were able to allocate some time away from the routine of their settings to participate in the interview.

Methodology

A qualitative approach, with the use of face-to-face interviews as the main method of enquiry, was undertaken. An interview schedule was drawn up containing mainly open-ended questions to ask all interviewees (see attached appendix). Goodwin & Goodwin (1996) suggest that the schedule serves as a general interview guide for the interviewer in outlining the topic for questioning as well as to ensure that the important areas are covered. This will also ensure that an extent of uniformity from one interview to another (p.135). Based on this methodology, a total of 6 questions were drawn up. The first 4 questions of the schedule focused on participants' perception of their setting's curriculum and how this related to their use of the *Framework*:

1. What preparation have you had for the *Kindergarten Curriculum*?
2. What difference has the *Kindergarten Curriculum* made to your practice?
3. What are some of the benefits of having a national early years curriculum such as the *Kindergarten Curriculum*?
4. What are some of the challenges that you face in implementing the *Kindergarten Curriculum*?

Interview questions 1 and 2 asked participants to describe their preparation for

the curriculum and the difference it has made to their practice. Questions 3 and 4 were specific in asking participants the benefits and challenges as they perceive when implementing the curriculum. Question 5 was 'What training or guidance would you like to have to help you better understand or implement the *kindergarten curriculum*?', which explored participants' views on possible strategies or training needs that they require to facilitate their implementation of the *Framework*. A final question asked participants if there was anything they would like to add about the curriculum: 'Is there anything else that you would like to add about using the *Kindergarten Curriculum*?'. A full interview schedule is provided at the end of this paper.

The interview questions were deliberately semi-structured and open ended, in order to allow participants flexibility in expressing their opinions and expanding on them when necessary. Fetterman (1989) coins the terms "semi-structured" and "informal" to describe the main types of interviews generally used in qualitative research. Researchers in many studies have espoused the use of semi-structured interviews as a popular and useful method in eliciting participants' perspectives about a particular phenomenon (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996; Naughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2004; Cannold, 2004; Greene & Hogan, 2005).

In order to ensure that the interviews were conducted as ethically and productively as possible, a pre-interview meeting was arranged with myself as the researcher, and the manager and teachers of all three settings. The purpose of this meeting was to firstly, build a relationship of trust between myself and the participants, and secondly, to discuss the nature and purpose of the research. The pre-interview meeting was also an opportunity to address any questions that the teachers might have about the interview or research. This initial contact with the participants proved vital in the subsequent meeting to help put the participants at ease and facilitate the interview process. During the interviews, prompts were built into the conversation as necessary and an informal approach allowed me opportunities during the interview to prompt the participants where appropriate, and to build on their responses.

The fifteen teachers were interviewed individually. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes and took place in the staff room at the settings. The interviews

were tape recorded and notes were taken during the interviews. The recorded data were transcribed in the four months following the interviews. The timing of the interviews was deliberately chosen to coincide with each setting's schedule, in order to minimize disruption to the teachers' and children's routines.

Limitations of Study

The scope of this study is consciously limited in the way that it is a small exploratory study which focuses on three preschool settings with a sample of fifteen teachers. The study does not purport to present a universal account of all preschool teachers' responses to the *Framework* in Singapore, and its findings cannot be generalized across other preschool services because of the distinct size and context of the chosen settings. However, what this study will hopefully reveal are the implications of the *Framework* for implementation from the perspective of the fifteen teachers, and the possible benefits and significance of the findings for an extended study.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the pre-interview meeting, letters were sent to all participants inviting them to participate in the interviews, with an outline of the proposed research. The letter also informed the participants that the interviews were strictly voluntary and confidential. At the pre-interview meeting, all participants were explained the nature of the research and were encouraged to raise any concerns that they may have. All the teachers were informed of how the research would be conducted, approximately how long each interview will take, and ways in which the findings will be used and disseminated. When seeking informed consent, all participants were also guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without obligation or explanation. On a more formal level, ethical approval was also sought from the ethics committee of the researcher's institution. This ensured that the study complied with the ethical regulations set at an institutional level.

Findings and Discussion

At the start of this paper, the main aims of the study were identified, which are to: 1) explore preschool teachers' perceptions of the *Framework*; 2) identify the challenges that practitioners face in implementing the *Framework*; 3) investigate teachers' perceptions of the benefits of the *Framework*; and 4) explore practitioners' perceptions of possible strategies in helping them better implement the new curriculum. The results indicate that notwithstanding the diversity of settings in which the teachers work, all fifteen teachers share a common knowledge of the *Framework* which they had gained either through their preschool training or work in the preschools. Question one asked participants what preparation they have had on the *Framework*, to which eight teachers said that they had attended seminars on it during their preschool training. Six teachers said that they had staff development sessions on it in the workplace. One teacher deviated from the majority in that she said she received no prior training on the *Framework* and would like more communication and training in her current workplace as to how to implement it.

On the second question (Q2) as to what difference, if any, has the *Framework* made to the teachers' practice, all fifteen teachers found the curriculum document useful as a frame of reference. For example, eight teachers found the suggestions it offered on designing the learning centres or areas of learning to be helpful in their practice, and two teachers thought that it helped to reinforce their current practice. Two stated that they found it useful as a benchmark for a preschool curriculum. Two other teachers said that they were pleased to have a clear statement from the Ministry on what constituted an appropriate curriculum. These responses were reiterated to some extent in the answers to question three (Q3), on teachers' perceptions of the benefits of the *Framework*.

The following questions, Q3 and Q4, inform the study's core objectives in exploring teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of the *Framework*. There was a diversity of answers, which range from highly detailed to sketchy. The responses to Q3 and Q4 are presented in the tables below in order of the frequency of each responses.

*Table 1. *Responses to Question 3*

Questions	Teachers' responses	Number
Q3 What are some of the benefits of having a national early years curriculum such as the *Kindergarten Curriculum*?	provides a benchmark/ standard of preschool curriculum	7/15
	provides a resource of suggested activities－assists with curriculum planning	5/15
	as a guide for practice	4/15
	reassurance from the Ministry of what constitute an appropriate preschool curriculum	2/15
	emphasis on play and informal learning	6/15

Table 2. *Responses to Question 4*

Questions	Teachers' responses	Number
Q4 What are some of the challenges that you face in implementing the *Kindergarten Curriculum*?	parental expectations for a more academic based curriculum, as opposed to a play based, informal approach of the *Framework*	12/15
	teachers' perception of the aim of preschool education is not the same as parents'	6/15
	as a guide for practice	3/15
	Lack of resources to implement suggested activities in the *Framework*	2/15

* *For both tables above, some teachers gave more than one response*

Given the high frequency of teachers' responses to particular issues noted in table 2, a discussion of these issues will provide further details to the study The issues raised are expressed in broad themes and discussed in the paragraphs below. It is significant from the results collated that three major concerns emerged:

1. Parental expectations for a more academic approach to the curriculum as opposed to the less formal approach of the *Framework*
2. Lack of funding and resources for teachers implementing the curriculum
3. More training and guidance

Parental expectations

The issue of parental expectations and the impact this has on the *Framework* can be best understood within the country's wider educational context as discussed in section 2.2. The discussion highlighted a key aspect of Singapore's education system, which was to prepare children for an ability-driven, knowledge-based economy, and how this inevitably influenced parental expectations of their children's academic achievement. This issue of parental expectations and its implications on preschool education was reiterated in the findings. Twelve out of the fifteen teachers acknowledged that parental expectations had a significant bearing on the way they delivered the curriculum.

This was because from the teachers' perspectives, the majority of parents expect a more formal and academic approach to the curriculum, as opposed to the informal and play based approach espoused by the *Framework*. Teacher I was quoted as saying, *'generally they [parents] want their children to be taught, the alphabet, spelling, very academic. I think generally parents who send their children to kindergartens they expect their children to be able to spell, read and write'.* Ten teachers admitted that part of their challenge as educators was convincing parents of the value of learning through play. Teacher J said that *'three-quarters of parents still think play is fun but not useful. Locally and culturally, our people still think play is just for fun But if you can emphasize the knowledge of play, the thinking skills... play can be something... We can explain to them...'* To manage parental expectations, Teacher C said that *'it is not just about educating the children but the parents as well'.* Teacher D commented that it was not just about the parents but the public as well, *'[b]asically I think it is how we educate parents and the public about the play based kind of curriculum.'* Teacher E reinforced the need for more parental awareness about the educational value of play, *'parents I think... need as much insight into play based as teachers do, because parents don't understand it, ...trying to encourage and persuade them [parents] that this is education.'* Teacher N suggested *'providing seminars to parents so that they can understand why the curriculum has changed from academic based to play based, because they don't know that when their children play they learn as well.'* Interestingly, teacher H commented that in the parents' defense, their expec-

tations are influenced by downward pressures of the primary school system.

As such, a common perception amongst parents is that their children receiving a formal, academic based preschool education would mean a higher chance of doing well later at primary school. As Teacher H says, *'Nowadays parents, there are still those who can't accept the idea of play, they want the children to sit down quietly and do their homework, a few still can't accept that children learn through play. ...but you can't blame the parents, at primary one it is a different curriculum, there is no transition, it is pressurizing.'* All twelve teachers also felt that parents were often anxious about their children competing in what they perceive to be an increasingly competitive world of school and work.

Closely related to the issue of parental expectations is also the mismatch between teachers' and parents' expectations of preschool education. When two of the teachers were probed further about what they meant by 'parental expectations', it became clear that they viewed a clash between their own perceptions of what preschool education should entail and parental perceptions. Ideally, as teacher C says, both teachers and parents should work towards the same goals *'I think it is quite important that since we are revolving around the child, everyone should have the same idea and same goal.'* The teachers thought that many parents send their children to kindergartens in the belief that an academic oriented preschool program will put their children on the track to a successful education. What is apparent therefore, is a disconnect between what some of the teachers see as the aim of preschool education and what some of the parents expect of their children's education. The kind of learning that the teachers perceive as contributing to a successful preschool experience is not always the same as what parents think they are.

However, despite the overwhelming responses to the issue of parental expectations, three out of the fifteen teachers were simultaneously optimistic that parents' mindset are changing. Teacher A commented, *'I think, parents are more open to the idea of play based... they don't ask for worksheets all the time.'* Teacher F said, *'in my experience, my parents are actually very open minded, they will accept my explanation and I will explain to them in details what actually the children are playing and what do they learn through play.'* Teacher K thought that parents' views were chang-

ing due to increased communication with them, *'Parents' mindset are changing, they are changing. In the past, they are asking why no spelling, how come there is not much spelling, how come there is so much play? We encourage parents to attend meetings, to help them understand what their children are learning in school.'*

Overall, the responses to question four indicate that the majority of the teachers are acutely aware of the expectations from parents to deliver a curriculum that is academically driven, in order to prepare the children for formal schooling. As discussed earlier, this demand for more formal and structured learning is in direct correlation with an education system which is highly competitive and regards academic attainment as key to the individual's and country's survival. All the teachers interviewed felt under pressure by parental demands to deliver a content-driven curriculum, which focuses on numeracy, literacy and other formal experiences of learning. As a result, while the new *Framework* espouses the importance of play and child initiated learning, all the practitioners admitted that in reality, this was often relegated to make way for a more formal approach to the curriculum, with the aim of preparing children for primary school.

Lack of funding and resources

Secondly, the findings highlighted the issue of funding and resources and this, as we shall soon see, has implications on the type and funding structure of the settings described in section 3.1. The lack of funding and resources was brought up by five of the teachers as being a challenge to implementing the *Framework*. As teacher N said, *'[r]esources —normally we don't have enough so whatever we have we just improvising, especially art and craft areas.'* When prompted as to why the setting is not able to order more resources, she replied, *'budget —tight budget.'* Teacher O said, *'sometimes, we... we don't have that much resource, we try to do our best, but we need more resources.'* Teacher B said that as they had to rely on other resources which the setting did not possess, she thought that the *Framework* 'was restrictive'.

It is significant that all four teachers who raised the issue of funding and resources came from setting two, which is a private kindergarten catering for largely low income families. All four teachers felt that in order to implement the *Framework*,

they had to have more access to materials and equipment, and therefore more funding for resourcing the areas of learning as identified in the *Framework*. When interviewed, the manager of setting two indicated that all equipment and materials were paid for by income from the setting, and while they strive to allocate a larger budget for resources, the limited income of the centre meant that this was restrictive.

As a private kindergarten, the setting is not eligible for government funding and therefore could not rely on the government's support for resources. As Sharpe states, private programmes are not subsidised, 'unlike those operated by community groups' or those are run by the government (Sharpe, 2000). The implication of this is that the only recourse for the kindergarten to acquire additional funds is to increase its fees. However, as discussed earlier in 3.1, the setting caters for predominantly low income families, and any initiative to increase the fees would have a direct impact on enrolment, and therefore on the overall income and viability of the centre. The overarching concern for the teachers and manager was that policy makers and those endorsing the implementation of the curriculum, are not aware of the needs of young children and of the resources necessary to meet these needs.

It is significant that this issue of funding and resources reinforces the findings of the pilot study. The setting which participated in the pilot was a private childcare centre which faced similar issues in implementing the curriculum. Six teachers participated in the pilot, and all found it a challenge implementing the activities suggested in the *Framework* due to a lack of resources in their setting. The implication of this socio-economic issue appears to be all the more stark when set against the findings of a Ministry of Education (2001) evaluation of the likely impact of the *Framework* prior to its launch in 2003. The new curriculum was argued on the basis of the evaluation to hold "more benefits to pupils from low-socio-economic status and non-English background, giving them a more holistic foundation for formal school" (Ministry of Education Press Release, 2003). The teachers' comments in the present study suggest that funding and resources can make a significant difference to the way they are able to deliver the curriculum. Private non-government funded services catering for children from low income groups are less likely than other services to be able to realize the benefits intended by government in the promulgation of the

Framework.

This issue of funding and resources is also embroiled in a much wider debate over childcare as part of the private/public sector divide, where Early Years provision are frequently regarded as services and commodities in the private sector for parents to purchase. This market oriented provision of Early Years services as Colley suggests, "has come to seem commonplace in a world of privatized services" (Colley, 2006). The implication of such as a system is that childcare is subject to the market forces of demand and supply, with the majority of settings being run as for-profit businesses, offering childcare to working parents with a lowly paid workforce, low levels of qualifications and often less than desirable working conditions. Amongst others, Moss and Brannen (2003), Cohen, Petrie and Wallace (2004), have all questioned the sustainability of such a system and highlighted the damaging consequences of such an economy on the Early Years workforce, parents and ultimately, children.

As Moss and Brannen assert, as care continues to become a marketized commodity, it simply means care work "is transferred from one group of (unpaid) women to another group of (paid) women" and with the overload of care work, there are "deleterious implications for the care which these paid carers can provide for their own children and families and for themselves" (Moss and Brannen , 2003). As the interviews from this four teachers have revealed, similar issues beset setting two with regards to its financial viability on one hand and aspirations to enhance the curriculum on the other. The problem with the limited resources that the teachers face can only be resolved with more funding, but the setting's income cannot be supplemented by increasing fees as most parents will not be able to afford the cost, and this has an overall impact on the provision and conditions of the setting, not only for staff, but for the children.

Further training and guidance

The penultimate question (Q5) of the interview schedule explores teachers' perceptions of the kinds of training or guidance that they would like to have to facilitate their implementation of the *Framework*. The findings indicate that all fifteen teachers welcomed further training and guidance on the curriculum. They were keen to find

out more about possible training sessions and were willing to attend these development sessions if available. There was a diversity of responses, from requests for training in specific areas of the curriculum to more general comments. Teacher G suggested that she would like practical sessions, 'more hands-on training', on designing and setting up the suggested areas of learning in the classroom. Teacher K requested for more training on *'classroom observation'*. This was reinforced by teacher H who commented, *'I've already had some training, but if new training, I would like more ideas, for the learning centres. I am very happy to attend.'* Teacher I was generally enthusiastic about the possibility of further training, *'it would be wonderful to have somebody in this area to come and work with us, talk to us.'* Teacher E suggested a dialogue or question and answer type session that could address any queries that teachers may have about the *Framework*. Teacher A from the private childcare centre said that rather than training or guidance, she would have preferred to know more about any evaluations that may have been carried out by the Ministry on the *Framework*, on 'whether it has been successful or not', and suggested making links with other preschools to find out how they were implementing the curriculum.

Conclusion

The findings from this study suggest that there are many competing factors that influence all fifteen teachers' responses to the *Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum*. Significantly, a key finding from the study is that of the tensions between the teachers and parents in providing what they thought would be a more appropriate curriculum. The teachers interviewed suggested that parental demands were strong for an academic driven curriculum which emphasizes on literacy achievement and a more formal experience of learning, and that this was at odds with the expectations of the *Framework* which espouses a more play-based curriculum.

The findings also demonstrate that the teachers would like to have training that provides them with more information as to how to deliver the *Framework*. More attention needs to be focused on how the teachers who work with children can receive support and training that will assist them in their efforts to provide a quality curri-

culum. The research highlighted the legitimate concerns of the teachers in their efforts at utilizing a document which they paradoxically welcomed yet in some ways, found delimiting. All fifteen participants indicated that they found the *Framework* a valuable document as a national benchmark and framework of provision, but they all nonetheless felt that unless some of these concerns were addressed, the document will fall short at their particular settings in fulfilling the needs of the young children and their families.

As mentioned at the start of this paper, the limitations of the study are such that the responses collated are representative only of a group of 15 teachers in Singapore and are therefore not generalizable. Nevertheless, this study has raised important issues for further consideration. What the findings have hopefully revealed are the implications and significance of the *Framework* on preschool practice in Singapore, and thereby provide the impetus for a follow-up study on a larger scope and scale. It would be interesting to see if the issues that emerged in this small scale project are reiterated in a larger study.

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Appendix

Interview Schedule

Singapore Pre-school Teachers' Responses to *A Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum*

Part One. General Information

Date and time of interview: _____

Type of Setting: _____

Name of participant: _____

Job Title: _____

Qualifications: e.g. Cert/Diploma in Preschool Education

Years of experience in practice: _____

Part Two. Interview Questions

1. What preparation have you had for the *Kindergarten Curriculum* (KC)?
2. What difference has the *Kindergarten Curriculum* made to your practice?
3. What are some of the benefits of having a national early years curriculum such as the *Kindergarten Curriculum*?
4. What are some of the challenges that you face in implementing the *Kindergarten Curriculum*?
5. What training or guidance would you like to have to help you better understand or implement the *kindergarten curriculum*?
6. Is there anything else that you would like to add about using the *Kindergarten Curriculum*?

Thank you very much for participating in this interview.