



AECES

ASSOCIATION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS (SINGAPORE)

The understanding of social emotional skills and resilience in Singapore: A qualitative study from the perspectives of early childhood teachers and leaders.

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Introduction

Our founding fathers have always reminded us that the only resource that the island nation has is human resource. As such, since 1965, the Government of Singapore has been investing heavily in education. In the early childhood education (ECE) landscape, the major investment is with the formation of the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA- 2013) and the National Institute of Early Childhood Development (NIEC- 2019). The ECDA regulates Childcare Centres, including Kindergartens, and NIEC is the institution for teacher preparation for both Childcare Centres and Kindergartens. Childcare Centres operate from 7am to 7pm and care for children from 2 months to 6 years old; while Kindergartens operate for 4 hours in a day and provide for children ages 3-6.

The development of ECE in Singapore, represents a dynamic interplay of policy initiatives, societal values, and educational practices, reflecting the nation's commitment to nurturing its youngest citizens for future success. Through a synthesis of insights gleaned from articles such as "Critical Reflections of Early Childhood Care and Education in Singapore to Build an Inclusive Society" Ang, L., Lipponen, L., & Lim, S. (2021)., "Vital Voices for Vital Years 2: Perspective on Early Childhood Development in Singapore," Lipponen, L., Ang, L., Lim, S., Hilppö, J., Lin, H., & Rajala, (2019) and "Inclusion in High-Achieving Singapore: Challenges of Building an Inclusive Society in Policy and Practice" Walker, Zachary & Musti-Rao, Shobana (2016), we gain a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted dimensions shaping ECE in the city-state.

The ECE scene in Singapore is characterized by a holistic approach that integrates academic rigor with socio-emotional development, laying the foundation for lifelong learning and holistic well-being. In the recent update to the Curriculum Framework, Nurturing Early Learners (NEL-2022), more emphasis has been given to the building of social emotional skills and nurturing joyful learners. Central to Singapore's ECE philosophy is the recognition of inclusivity as evidenced by efforts to ensure that every child, regardless of background or ability, has access to quality education and support services. Ang et al.'s (2021) shed light on Singapore's ongoing journey towards building an inclusive society by highlighting the need for continuous evaluation and refinement of policies and practices to address diverse needs effectively. Additionally, "Vital

Voices for Vital Years 2," (2019) underscores the importance of collaborative partnerships between stakeholders, including parents, educators, policymakers, and the community at large. These voices serve as advocates for children's well-being as members of society who are given the opportunities to achieve their potential. They provide the driving force for positive change and innovation within the ECE sector.

Since the early 80's with the economy booming and women being required to join the workforce, the availability of childcare centres was being advocated to support working mothers. At that time, the government strategy in providing childcare centres was to promote availability, accessibility, and affordability but the fourth pillar was added later to ensure quality for all. The number of centres grew from 90 in early 1980s to currently, 1,665 childcare centres and 344 Kindergartens. In addition, the Ministry of Education (MOE) also runs 43 Kindergartens with 17 more opening by 2027. As such, by 2027 there will be 60 public centres operated by the Government (MOE) and the rest of the centres will continue to be privately operated. However, to make them affordable with quality for all, the Government provides subsidies, with a fee cap, for Anchor Operators (AOP) as well as Partner Operators (POP). AOP are large chains of childcare centres with a community service focus and POP are smaller chains with at least 300 children in total. In Singapore, there are 600 centres under AOP and 323 POP schemes. The rest are standalone private centres.

The ECE sector has always been a private undertaking, but the Government of Singapore recognises the critical role it plays in human development. In recent years, much has been invested and this reflects the nation's aspirations for its youngest citizens to achieve its potential. As we navigate through the following presentation, we understand how social and emotional skills (SES) and resilience are being understood by our ECE teachers and leaders.

This qualitative study is timely because as stated earlier, the Curriculum Framework, NEL (2022) has been refreshed with a strong focus on SES and the nurturing of joyful learners. It includes one-on-one interviews of 9 interviewees. The data was analysed manually for emerging themes and reported below. The profile of interviewees is found in the next paragraph.

Background of the Teachers

In total all 9 female teachers were interviewed over the zoom platform for about 45 minutes to an hour. There were 4 playing the leadership role and 5 teaching role. Out of the 4 leaders, one is in the age group of 20-29, (10 years in ECE) two, 30-39 (13 and 18 years in ECE), and one 40-49 (29 years in ECE). They were in the leadership role for 2, 8, and 18 years. As for the teachers, there were 2 senior teachers both in ECE for 10 years and in the age range of 30-39. For the other 3 teachers, 2 of them have been in the sector for 1.5 years; one in the age group of 20-29 years and the other 30-39 years. The younger teacher had her teacher preparation before she joined the sector while the older was a switch career teacher and received her teacher preparation after she joined the sector. The third teacher has been in the sector for 13 years, 5 years in the Philippines and 8 years in Singapore. This profile of the three teachers reflects the diversity of our Singapore ECE teachers. It includes the young ones who would join the sector after 10 years of formal schooling, the mid-career switches, and foreign teachers with working permits to work in Singapore. These 9 interviewees worked in different types of centres; 5 work in AOP centres and 4 in private centres. They were

interviewed for their views on SES, resilience, adversities of children 4-6 years, how children bounce back, how the preschool can help and how preschools assess the teaching of SES and resilience. This report ends with how the interviewees respond to the challenges children face in the EC classroom.

Social and Emotional Skills

All 4 leaders and 5 teachers have heard of social and emotional skills during their teacher preparation course. The 4 **leaders** gave an overarching definition of SES as self-awareness, self-regulation, self-management and building relationship with others as well as engaging in problem solving. One leader described it as “intra and inter” awareness. They describe children with a high level of SES as one who play well with others, able to express their needs, take on challenges and are confident learners. “He/she is able to use words to navigate the awkward challenging situations”. They believe that SES is the recipe for “success in life”, “growth in life” and it includes the 21st century skills of communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking that prepare them for management of stresses/challenges and to excel in life.

The 2 **senior teachers** had somewhat similar definition of SES as the leaders, but they gave another perspective of what a child with a high level of SES looks like. “He/she is able to adapt to different situations and interact with different people”. This ability to adapt and deal with diversity, according to one senior teacher is necessary for facing life in the future. To them, interacting with peers is the most essential skill. This requires the ability to accept other people’s point of view and understand others with differing needs. Children with a high level of SES are those who would offer help to children with special needs. They will help to explain what is required and show care with patience. They also can express themselves calmly when frustrated.

The 3 **teachers** also had similar definition of SES, but they believe that children with SES are those who communicate well and foster positive relationship which contributes to their high self-esteem. “The child needs to recognise own feelings, if not, will not have the sense of security”. The teacher believes that it is the sense of security that gives the child confidence in communicating his feelings. One teacher used the example of toy snatching as an example of what a child with a high level of SES would do. “He understands the need of the other child and will not take it badly. He may negotiate or get himself another toy”. Another teacher gave the example of what a child with a high level of SES would do “in a situation where his/her friend is sad. He/she is observant and will be able to respond accordingly. He/she would ask if there were anything he/she can do to help. He/she is also not fearful of others as he/she knows that there is always the teacher who can support him/her”. A child with a high level of SES is secure.

It appears that all 9 interviewees agree to the definition of SES and that it is an important life skill that contributes to academic performance (Hachem et. al., 2022). The interviewees were able to describe what children with a high level of SES look like. They are observant, able to respond appropriately, communicate well because they are secure, adaptable, and able to cope with diversity. And it was the teachers who were able to give concrete examples of what children with a high level of SES would do in the classroom.

Resilience

All 9 of the interviewees have heard of both terms SES and resilience. The concept of SES is not new as it is one of the domains in the Curriculum Framework NEL and introduced in the teacher preparation programme. However, the term resilience is one which is picked up along the way. Some of them reported that they learnt about resilience during their school days, working days and when they work with their preschool children in class e.g. when they observe the children persevering to pick up a skill like skipping. One teacher reported that she learnt about resilience from the therapist who was working with one child with special needs.

Regarding the definition of resilience, the **leaders** were the ones who were able to craft it in a clear and concise manner. "Resilience is the capacity to adapt and navigate through adversity and challenges. A child who is resilient would not give up. He/she is independent in thought and behaviour and has the mental capacity to deal with challenges." Another leader described it as having the grit to overcome situations and getting out of the situation in a creative way. She described SES and resilience as working hand in hand in getting out of difficult situations. She gave an example of when a resilient child with a high level of SES wetted his pants. The 4-year-old, instead of being embarrassed and helpless, informed the class teacher that he needed to change. He went to take his bag, proceeded to the toilet, and changed his pants independently.

A **senior teacher** described resilience as being associated with self-regulation where the child can overcome negative feelings. A resilient child would be willing to try new things, accept challenges and interact with teachers and peers to overcome the challenges. Again, it was the **teachers** who gave concrete examples of resilience in the classroom. One gave the example of how the child practised hard at school and at home to master the skill of skipping. Another teacher shared "some children are slow in language development. They find it difficult to express themselves or understand others. But they keep trying to express themselves. However, sometimes these children get angry, and become aggressive when it doesn't work out. When the teacher guides them, they start to identify their own emotions. So, resilience building is stage by stage." Here this teacher brought in the role of the teacher as being important in helping the child build resilience, and building resilience takes time and support from adults.

Resilience is important because it is a lifelong skill and especially so in today's context. It has been reported that children are not very resilient, they give up easily. They would often be heard saying "I cannot" or "I don't know how to..." because parents or home helpers do everything for them. As such, a 4-year-old would come to school without knowing how to hold a spoon to feed himself and many, at 4 years, are not toilet-trained and are in diapers (senior teacher from a private centre). The adversities that children 4-6 face are reported below.

Adversities for Children 4-6years

The **leaders** described the adversities as arising from school and home. One leader shared that not having friends at school would be an adversity for 4 year olds, and for 6 year olds, it

is the transition to formal school in Primary 1. Challenges from home can come in the form of abuse or change in family structure when families go through separation or divorce.

Both **senior teachers** addressed their concern about children being over dependent on adults. “Everything is being done by the adults in the home. As such, the child becomes dependant, does not take responsibilities, or make decisions about simple things like what he/she wants to wear”. She went on to describe how the child would throw a tantrum when the mother packed two dresses that she did not like. Meanwhile, the **teachers**, highlighted other issues like separation anxiety, difficulty in communication where they are not able to extend their ideas, poor eye-hand coordination, poor fine and gross motor skills, and difficulty in writing. But who would be the child who bounces out of these adversities?

The Child who Bounces Back

“The child who bounces back would be one who is happy to talk about his/her feelings, open and willing to share his/her thoughts, less withdrawn and able to share what he/she has gone through”. As such, the resilient child is one who is cheerful and able to “patch back his relationship after fighting”. For those who are overly dependent on adults, they should be able to take over responsibilities for their own belongings, pack their own school bags and be able to do things for themselves e.g. “see I can zip the bag now”. One interviewee shared that she knows of children who would bounce back with the help of therapy. This implies that the role of adult support is important. The next paragraphs will address how the preschools can help in building children’s SES and nurturing their resilience.

How Preschools can Help?

Generally, there is no specific or structured program to promote SES and resilience. Teaching of these skills are weaved into the daily interactions and practice. One **leader** highlighted two examples on providing opportunities for failure as a means of nurturing resilience. “When child builds with blocks, the teacher may plan and intentionally knock it down. She then observes the child’s reaction and facilitates strategies for child to cope with the situation”. “Also, during a game, we can help children to cope with not always being first e.g. a teacher may lead a group in a line and then goes to the end of the line and changes the position of the child from being the first to be the last”.

A **senior teacher** added praise as being an important strategy to build SES and nurture resilience. “For example, we praise child who is able to do whatever they are unable to do before. We plan for learning opportunities that hone their resilience. We share our experience of failure with children to convince them that it is common to fail. During the COVID, we sometimes hold hands with children and asked them to write a card for their friends”. The other senior teacher commented “Teachers should also provide opportunities for children to make decisions and be assured that they are not alone, and that the teacher is always there to support them”.

The **teachers** agreed with the senior teachers’ of providing opportunities for children to learn skills. “Teach children a lot of skills through routines. Teachers encourage children to take ownership of their roles and to be more independent. When there is a misunderstanding and

conflict between children, teacher will give the children the opportunity to solve their own problems". Another teacher used story reading as opportunities for children "to express ideas, present in front of their friends and have two-way communication; with children asking questions and teacher facilitating their peers to answer".

While there is no specific programme teaching SES and resilience, it is being "taught" incidentally through spontaneous activities and providing appropriate opportunities for children to practice SES skills. However, one leader and a teacher from an AOP identified STEMIE (Science, Technology, Engineering Mathematics, Innovation and Entrepreneurship) as teaching SES and resilience.¹ STEMIE is included as part of the AOP's curriculum. "This program creates opportunities for children to come up with their own solutions. They learn to express and explain how they come to the solution. Coming to the solution requires persistence and resilience." However, generally, SES and resilience is being taught incidentally, as such, assessment of SES skills and resilience may pose an issue.

How Preschools Assess the Teaching of SES and Resilience?

All interviewees responded that there is no formal assessment of SES and resilience. However, in the NEL curriculum framework there is an item in the child assessment that relates to the child "showing determination and perseverance". Also, teachers from one AOP are given a checklist to assess the social emotional development of their children. However, in practice, on a day-to-day basis, the teachers make informal assessment through "observation during play; focusing on how children respond to each other". The teachers keep anecdotal records and would share them with the parents "I will share with the parents the successes that the child has made in his ability to express his feelings and be able to cope with difficult situations". However, "most parents are more interested in academic areas not so much in making friends and dealing with conflicts, although some parents are beginning to be more concern about SES" because recently there has been much public education on how a high level of SES impacts future learning and academic achievement.

It appears that there is no structured programme for teaching SES and resilience, as well as no formal method of assessment. The teaching of SES and resilience depends on the teachers' spontaneity and incidental strategies during routine time and any possible opportunity during the school day. Teachers are also not too familiar with the term resilience, but they are expected to respond appropriately to children who face emotional challenges in the classroom. The following paragraphs unveil the interviewees' responses to children's challenging behaviours.

How Teachers Respond to Challenging Behaviours

In the interview, four case scenarios were provided, and the interviewees selected two or more to answer: "How would you interact as an early childhood educator? And "Why would you do so?" Most of the interviewees commented on the first two case scenarios. For the first scenario, interviewees were asked for their response to the situation in which a child has

¹ <https://www.ntu.edu.sg/pace/programmes/detail/stemie-invention-professional-development-for-educators#outline>

been left out or not included in the group of friends. The common strategy is to talk with the child. One **senior teacher** said “Talk to child who is being left out. Ask him/her for the reason of not being involved – does he not know how to gain entry into play, or his friends do not want to play with him.” The other senior teacher said “not only talk to the child, but also to the group of friends. “I will ask the children what has happened and why is the child left out. I will find books and plan for activities that is based on the things the child who is left out is good at”.

One **teacher** said that “we are to first acknowledge the child because it will make him feel secure and then ask the child why he was left out or why he was not joining in”. The why questions can be quite intimidating for the young child who may not be able to articulate the reasons. In the above responses, the teachers were talking and trying to understand the situation and not so much getting the child to be aware of the feelings involved.

However, the **leaders** adopted different strategies. One suggested “observation first unless safety is an issue”. Another leader suggested “Child is first to identify the feeling. Teacher might ask: How are you feeling now? If child cannot express himself, teacher says: I know you are feeling upset. (It’s ok) Teacher might ask: So how now? do you want to play with someone else or approach this friend again later? When the child recognises that he is not alone, and that the teacher understands his feeling and affirms him he will be ok. The general message is that ‘It is ok’”.

This leader used the same strategy for the second scenario in which two children were fighting. “First identify feeling. How do you think the other child feels? Do you like feeling that way? What do you think you should do then? Say sorry or hug him/her? The child apologises so that he knows what he did is wrong”. But another leader did not agree with having to apologise. She suggested directing the child to a place to calm down, reflect and recall what happened and come up with a solution which is initiated by the child with some adult facilitation if necessary. “There is no need for apology but have a proper closure”. What’s important is that the child knows what to do to address the issue. A simple apology does not help children develop skills in dealing with a conflict situation. In fact, children may learn that the way to make things right is to simply say “I am sorry,”. Another strategy adopted by another leader was “First intervene by separating them- safety first. Have them identify feelings, use positive guidance technics as children share what happened. Have them reflect on what happened and allow the child to calm down and think of a solution by using words appropriately. This process may need teacher’s guidance”.

From the contributions of leaders and teachers above, it is evident that the leaders addressed the child’s feelings and guide him/her to reflect on possible solutions. The teachers, on other hand, tend to take the strategy of talking to the child to understand the situation and then take control of the situation by coming with appropriate activities to address it. Teachers take the case as a problem-solving situation while the leaders take it as an opportunity for children to be aware of his/her feelings and that of others as well and an opportunity to give positive guidance. The different strategies the interviewees undertake have implications for this study.

Implications

The leader who believes that SES is about “inter and intra” awareness of one’s emotions addressed the child’s emotions in relation to others in the case scenarios. The teachers on the other hand tried to ask questions to understand the situation and then come up with solutions. The teachers were approaching the challenging situation as a problem-solving exercise. This implies that the leaders have much to do in guiding teachers in addressing the child’s emotions by modelling and engaging them in reflective practise. Leaders can also help teachers to work with children in reflective practise so that they can come up with their own solutions.

The role of the leader is critical as they also seem to have a deeper understanding of what SES and resilience means. They were able to craft a comprehensive definition while the teachers gave different aspects of it. On the other hand, the teachers were able to give concrete examples of what a child with a high level of SES and resilience would look like in the classroom. This implies that both leaders and teachers have much to learn from each other. They can engage in rich dialogue on social emotional learning and resilience and improve on their practice. And since there is no structured curriculum or formal assessment, the development of children’s social emotional learning is done incidentally, at opportune moments and left to chance. The question is, should the teaching of SES and resilience be left to chance?

Recommendations

The answer is obvious. For such important skills which have been described as a recipe for “success in life” and “growth in life” it just cannot be left to chance. Teaching the teachers to teach a standard curriculum is also not a solution. Most teacher preparation programme focus on teaching pedagogy. However, in “teaching” SES the teacher needs to be aware of his/her own feelings, communicate them effectively and recognise the feelings of others. The “intra and inter” awareness as a leader described, is important and teachers need to learn to communicate, collaborate and engage in problem solving. They need to take care of their social-emotional wellbeing, take on a positive disposition and embrace the “I can!” approach to living and learning.

Teacher preparation should direct its focus on nurturing the teacher as a whole person who is happy with self, adaptable, open to different perspectives and whose life’s goal is to touch lives and make a difference in nurturing the future generation. SES and resilience is caught and not taught. A teacher who is resilient and has a high level of SES would model resilience all through the day. She does not need a curriculum to follow, she integrates SES during arrival time, routine time, storytelling time, outdoor play, nap time and going home time. This philosophy of integrating social emotional learning into the school day is promoted by UNESCO’s publication “Asia- Pacific early childhood care and education: teacher training handbook for social emotional learning” UNESCO Office Bangkok, UNESCO (2022). <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/asia-pacific-early-childhood-care-and-education-teacher-training-handbook-social-and-emotional?hub=66925> Author: Singh Diwan, M. (2022)

It is also recommended that parents and families be part of the social and emotional learning movement which would enrich family life and provide a safety net for every member. A stable and happy family provides a strong foundation for a thriving nation. It is interesting to note that even though there is no formal programme or assessment for SES, teachers made it a point to give feedback to the parents on the child's progress because they know that it is an indispensable part of learning. Social and Emotional Development (SED) of children can be a common language in which teachers and parents make connection and work collaboratively. All of us, as part of the human fraternity have emotions. Often, at ECE settings we communicate to parents about academic matters, but the time has come to communicate about feelings and emotions. Children these days face challenging issues because they do not have the words to express their feelings. If teachers and parents use descriptive words for feelings, children will be able to use words to express their feelings and in turn learn to regulate and control their emotions.

Conclusion

Social Emotional Skills (SES) and Social Emotional Development (SED) need greater prominence in our ECE settings. Grounded in an ECE system that embraces both social emotional development (SED) and academic achievement, this study aimed to understand how the ECE practitioners in Singapore view socio-emotional development, especially one of the most vital parts of it, resilience. The findings from the study demonstrated that our ECE practitioners are familiar with the notion of SES, SED and resilience. They took the time to observe and reflect on their observations of children's SED. The research also serves as a reminder to us that there is limited support provided to practitioners to uplift their abilities in reflecting on practices. Most of the participants in this study are relying on their knowledge acquired from the schools and non-systematic reflections. Sustained and ongoing centre-based support by scheduling time for teachers to have dialogues with each other is critical for teacher learning on the job. In addition, teacher preparation institutions could review their programme to include SES and SED for teachers and how they can collaborate with parents and families to make SED a critical part of Singapore's ECE landscape. In doing so, we create a collaborative movement in bringing social emotional skills and resilience to the fore front and be the driving force of our ECE system.

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Other links for the Singapore ECE landscape

<https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/17/08/singapore%E2%80%99s-pre-school-sector-assessing-its-growth-amid-challenges>

<https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/article/progress-of-the-early-childhood-sector-in-the-past-decade>

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