Introduction: Early Childhood as a Global Agenda

- Early childhood care and education has become an important global agenda.
- The recent world forum on Early Care and Education held in May this year in Kuala Lumpur highlights the significance of Early Years provision, particularly in the Asia Pacific and East Asia region.
- The forum brought together key individuals from the international community, national representatives, global leaders of young children, academics, practitioners and all those involved in the work with young children, to advocate for the importance of quality early years provision.
- The forum highlighted key issues such as children’s rights, education and child advocacy.
Introduction: Early Childhood as a Global Agenda

- In the recent UNESCO Global Monitoring Report titled *Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education* (2007), the publication provided an overview of current early childhood provisions and services across Asia and East Asia.

- Based on 33 countries in the Asia-Pacific region and 15 countries in East Asia including Singapore, the report is explicit that providing ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) of good quality is a powerful means of guaranteeing the rights of young children, especially those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged’ (UNESCO, p.107).

- What these international agendas demonstrate is that the subject of early childhood care and education has become an important political undertaking for many countries across the globe.
Within this global context, one of the current issues is the provision of a culturally appropriate curriculum and the philosophical tensions that underpin it.

Several studies from East Asia have raised concerns over what constitutes a culturally appropriate early years pedagogy and indeed, philosophy.

They also highlight the dilemmas that preschool teachers face in their attempts to offer what they perceive to be an appropriate provision.
A Current Issue: A Culturally Appropriate Curriculum in Taiwan

- In a study by Ming-fang Hsieh for example, on ‘Teaching Practices in Taiwan’s Education for Young Children: complexity and ambiguity of developmentally appropriate practices and/or developmentally inappropriate practices’.
- Hsieh explores the philosophical dilemmas of 4 preschool teachers in Taiwan who are expected to deliver a curriculum based on a child-centred philosophy.
- But who significantly, lack the appropriate understanding of such a pedagogy to use it effectively in the classroom.
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- The Taiwanese teachers were interviewed with the aim of exploring the complexity of their teaching practices.
- What transpired from the findings are the tensions that the teachers face in delivering a curriculum that is in contrast to their cultural philosophy.
- As Hsieh explains, ‘child-centred philosophy is totally different from traditional Taiwanese education, which focuses on academic achievement and views students as passive learners, and where teachers are respected as absolute authority.’.
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- Hsieh goes on to provide a list of fundamental differences between the Western philosophy of child centredness and traditional Taiwanese philosophy of education.

- A main distinction is that the notion of child centredness as derived from developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is rooted in theories of child development whereas traditional Taiwanese culture is derived from the teachings of Confucianism.
Hsieh also makes the point that while the Western-influenced philosophy of childhood focuses on the individual child, traditional Taiwanese culture encourages collectivity and children as part of the wider cultural society.

Despite these philosophical disparities, the notion of a child-centred pedagogy remains central in teacher training programmes in Taiwan and preschool teachers in the country are expected to deliver it in their practice.
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- As a result, the teachers in the study often encounter tensions between their attempts to adopt an unstructured style of teaching as espoused by their Western influenced professional training.

- And their traditional cultural values which is based on Confucian philosophy with a focus on academic achievement.
A Current Issue: A Culturally Appropriate Curriculum in Korea

In Korea, a study on ‘Teachers’ Philosophical Orientation and Practices: a study of novice preschool teachers in South Korea’ (*CIEC*, Vol5 No3, 2004), explores similar philosophical and pedagogical dilemmas faced by preschool teachers in implementing a child-centred curriculum.

The author, Mina Kim, discusses how this philosophical tension is reflected in classroom practice through the teachers’ daily work with the children.
In Hong Kong, Yuen Ling Li argues that kindergarten teachers are caught in a pedagogical vortex of delivering an idealised version of a ‘child-centred’ curriculum while facing cultural and parental expectations for a more academic-oriented curriculum (Yuen, 2004).

Yuen explains that preschool teachers in Hong Kong have to overcome ‘a triangle of potentially conflicting expectations and orientations: the vision of early childhood education, the Chinese culture, and local constraints’, not least on the issue of play and the curriculum.
Yuen and other researchers noted that while the teachers are fascinated by and ready to adopt the philosophy of play and active learning, these notions of learning are not necessarily realised in practice.

The main reason being no matter how much the vision of early childhood educators, it does not appear to be easy for the kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong to cope with the Chinese culture, where parental and local demands are pervasive in driving the curriculum towards academic literacy and numeracy activities – the traditional objectives of education.
A Current Issue: A Culturally Appropriate Curriculum in Singapore

- In Singapore, there are similar philosophical tensions underpinning the Kindergarten Curriculum.

- There are competing maxims surrounding the curriculum which has implications for its implementation in practice (Ang, 2006).
A Current Issue: A Culturally Appropriate Curriculum in Singapore

- These tensions arise from a combination of factors: the idealised aspirations of policy makers and Early Years professionals in creating a child-centred, interactional curriculum.
- The ideology of a Chinese, Confucian culture which extols scholastic achievements and the pursuit of academic attainments.
- Parental expectations, and the demands of a meritocratic, economically driven society.
Philosophical Framework of Early Childhood

- These numerous studies from Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan and Singapore highlight the pedagogical conflicts of delivering a curriculum that is deemed ‘developmentally appropriate’ by Western standards, but culturally inappropriate by local standards.

- What they also demonstrate is a crucial philosophical dichotomy between what constitutes early childhood in different cultures and contexts.
What appears to have emerged therefore, is a widening gulf between notions of childhood in the West and the non-Western world, and this is evident not only in the policies and practices of childhood, but in the philosophies and attitudes toward children (Canella 1997; Penn 2004; Yelland 2005).

Given these contentious philosophical issues, teachers and providers of early childhood services have to negotiate complex, and at times, competing requirements.
Philosophical Framework of Early Childhood

- The studies discussed above illustrate that the widespread acceptance of any particular philosophical position and its associated pedagogy is problematic unless it also entails a critical appraisal of the values and world view which underpin it.

- The issue here is not about a total discount of Western theories and philosophies of children, but the need for a paradigm shift towards a philosophical framework of Early Childhood that is culturally and contextually appropriate.
It is therefore essential that any attempt to offer a culturally appropriate curriculum also entails a rethinking of the philosophy that underpins it.

The academic Canella argues that current notions of childhood and their underpinning philosophies remain heavily influenced by Western thinking.

Where in particular the science of child development has been privileged over all other ways of understanding children.
The notion of childhood for instance, is often founded on a Western ‘scientific construction’ of the child as an ‘independent biological organism’ to be observed and studied.

As in the study of the Darwanian child, children are often seen as developing according to a set of developmental norms.

Such a construction of the maturing child is rooted in the science of developmental psychology and Western constructions of childhood.
The problem as Cannella suggests, lies with the cultural appropriateness of developmentalism, where children who do not meet the milestones of developmentalism are deemed normal or abnormal, competent or incompetent, and in need of adjustment.

Current research has therefore seen a movement towards reconceptualising those dominant frames of reference that have informed early childhood studies.

Name a few, have taken a poststructuralist, even postmodernist stance in challenging the ‘grand narratives’ of child development.
Rethinking Philosophy by Western Thinking

- They call into question the canon of work generated by early researchers and psychologists such as Erikson, Freud, Bowlby, Piaget, Skinner, the majority of whom were European and American men who wrote from a particular economic, gender and racial position, but yet whose names continue to be synonymous with child development and universalist notions of the child.

- It is significant that alongside these dominant Western theories of childhood and child development, there are also ideas about childhood and education that have been conceptualised by non-Western paradigms.
Ancient Chinese scholars such as Confucius, Mencius and Lao Tzu from China, Eastern religious and philosophical traditions such as Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, have long influenced childhood practices and attitudes toward children in the non-Western world.

These knowledge form a significant philosophical base from which childhood is constructed and defined, and which have similarly influenced the way childhood is thought and practised in diverse contexts in Asia.
They are part and parcel of the complex and at once fascinating paradigm that underpin much of early years practices in the East.

Yet, oddly, they often go unmentioned in early childhood textbooks and professional literature.
The aim of this discussion is to therefore raise a central issue: the philosophy of early childhood is fundamental, and deeply interwoven into the discipline of early childhood.

The philosophical traditions of a country are part and parcel of the complex and at once fascinating paradigm that underpin much of the early years curriculum and practices.
The challenge is for early childhood educators to offer a contextually and culturally appropriate provision, by supporting the culture of the child and ensuring that the cultural mores and philosophical traditions are sustained.

Esther Chan, a teacher/educator of child development in Hong Kong puts it across fittingly when she shares her concerns about assigned teaching materials and theories on child development being adopted from the West, as she questions, ‘why is the Chinese philosophy of children’s nature is not included as a theme?’.
Any approach to early childhood is always underpinned by a particular philosophy of childhood.

What this paper suggests is the importance on the part of practitioners and all those who work with children to consider the philosophical premise on which they base their own conceptualisations of childhood, and how this translates to practice.
An understanding of philosophy is important for two reasons.

Firstly, different philosophies of childhood have a major influence on our own beliefs about children and how they learn.

Secondly, practitioners and professionals in early years settings often use different theories and philosophies to explain children’s behaviour and to make pedagogical decisions about their practice.
These philosophies involve different assumptions about children.

Early years educators therefore need to be aware of the assumptions they are making about children’s development, in order to ensure that they are in a good position to evaluate what works more effectively for them and for the children.

Understanding the philosophy of childhood is important, not least because it requires us to think beyond our own cultural traditions and be responsive to the cultures of young children that are different from our own.
Conclusion

- What assumptions and philosophy underpin our ideas of childhood?
- On whose knowledge do we define childhood?
- How do our philosophical beliefs about early childhood inform our construction of the Early Years curriculum and our perceptions of the children?
- As the various research studies have shown, a culture’s philosophies and values have a crucial impact on the objectives and designs of the preschool curriculum.
- Ultimately, the task of offering a culturally appropriate curriculum is a reflection of our own expectations and ways of educating young children, and our own philosophy of how children develop and learn.