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A Leadership Strategy: Coaching, A Singaporean Example

Marjory A. Ebbeck
University of South Australia

Connie Seah Geok Lian
University of South Australia

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Marjory Ebbeck
University of South Australia
Connie Seah Geok Lian
Agape Little Uni. Pte Ltd, Singapore

Abstract: The demand for recruiting and retaining early childhood teachers remains a challenging problem in the early childhood field in Singapore as well as in many other countries. A research study was devised to investigate if the use of a 'coaching approach' could bring about change in teachers' participation in their centre's management and organisational climate. The study involved 72 teachers and seven principals from seven, privately owned child care centres. A before-and-after study intervention was conducted over an 18-month period of time. Results showed significant statistical increases in that a coaching intervention had made a difference to both teachers and principals in their flexibility and openness to changing relationships within their centres. There was a statistically significant improvement in the principals' relationships, particularly how they listened to their staff and understood their concerns. The findings also showed that the role of a leader is critical in managing the change process.

Keywords: coaching; leadership; Singapore; principals; change

Introduction

The structure of this paper starts with a discussion of comparable poor industrial conditions for early childhood personnel in Australia and Singapore. Issues of change are embedded in the paper as coaching, a leadership strategy, is examined in the context of a research study conducted in Singapore. The findings of the study are discussed with some concluding comments presented in relation to how coaching could be a useful approach for staff development in Early Childhood Education (ECE).

The status and career opportunities of early childhood graduates are problematic in many countries. Waniganayake (2014) writing of the Australian scene states that this is a global issue as there is no consensus of clarity on what is expected of ECE graduates at the time of graduation from a three or four-year degree. The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) (2011) is responsible for the accreditation of course content but Waniganayake (2014) further proposes that there is limited progress in ECE in addressing issues of public visibility, validations and career pathways linked to formal qualifications.

To some extent, similar problems are prevalent in Singapore in the early childhood workforce. Accreditation of teaching qualifications is carried out by the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), a semi-Government Authority somewhat analogous to the Australian ACECQA. All early childhood educators and other early childhood workers are required to be certified by ECDA to be employed in child care or kindergartens (ECDA, 2017c). It can be stated that the early childhood workforce the world over is characterized by low levels of

academic achievement, poor industrial conditions including low salary and high attrition rates (Ang, 2012; Vandell & Wolfe, 2000).

Most employers in Singapore need to provide some form of in-service training or other staff development to extend preservice training, upgrade their staff and to improve job satisfaction. This is consistent with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Standard 6) which identifies "engage in professional learning" as an essential standard (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2014, p. 5). Likewise, Singaporean teachers need to broaden their professional knowledge and practice. There are many ways of doing this and the ultimate outcome is to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The quest, then, to improve the quality of early childhood education and care is a common goal in many countries. Quality teaching is fundamental to achieving this goal and Singapore, being a small city-state where people are the only natural resource, is no exception. The need to improve early childhood teaching, and hence, children's learning, prompted the Singapore Government as well as early childhood leaders to search for staff development programmes that aim to improve teaching quality as well as job satisfaction. Bloom, Hentschel, and Bella (2010, p. 8) highlight that "although staff development is usually advocated as a way to improve teachers' skills in working with children, it should also be recognised as an important ingredient in a satisfying and stimulating professional life."

Like governments in many other developed countries, the Singaporean Government has created policies in an attempt to ensure quality curriculum exists in all early childhood education centres. The Singapore Prime Minister, in his 2007 National Day Rally Speech, reiterated that "education is the best way to level up our society. Our aim is to give every child a top-rate education. Therefore, our emphasis is on the quality of all our schools in Singapore" (Lee, 2007). The processes, strategies, contents, and outcomes of early childhood centres have differed over the past decades, as has their quality. Many centres have engaged consultants and external evaluators to work with them in assisting to meet the government's thrust to improve quality standards (Ang, 2012; MacBeath & McGylnn, 2004; Murphy, 2005).

The Change Process and the Implications for Leaders

Early childhood teacher education in Australia has experienced many changes in the last decade. The specialist nature of early childhood programmes have been replaced with more generalist teaching awards. University staff teaching in early childhood programmes have been required to adapt to these changes and a review of University websites where this has occurred shows the evidence. Change has also occurred at the delivery level of services and most of these changes have been for the better as differing regulatory arrangements have been replaced, bringing about consistency, reducing duplication and monitoring of quality assurance (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010; Council of Australian Government [COAG], 2009a, 2009b). The emphasis throughout this paper is that change has been one of the fundamental, constant drivers of change in ECE teacher education and service delivery by providers in Australia (Waniganayake, 2014).

Early childhood teacher education and services in Singapore similarly have been subject to many changes, similar to Australia, brought about in part by too rapid an expansion of child care centres, insufficient staff, also as they are required to respond to Government policies in relation to quality assurance regulations. So, then, effecting change remains a critical challenge for early childhood services to remain viable in Singapore (Ang, 2012; Chu, 2014; Fullan, 2006; Ng, 2004; Rodd, 2013). Change always challenges the roles and reactions of leaders. Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) stated that if one believes that, planning and educating are important then in times of rapid change, the role of a leader becomes critically important (Rodd, 2013).

As the people in an organisation experience change, it is the role and responsibility of their leader, not only to steer the organisation forward but also to lead the people in the organisation to accept the change in a positive way. In order to be relevant in today's world, leaders are called to 'think outside the box' (Simpson, 2010) and lead change in proactive and diverse ways in early childhood settings (Bloom, 2014; Hsieh, 2013). As Chu (2014) states:

> *Making change happen in early care and education programmes is complex, and it begins with increasing individual and organisational readiness. If mentors do not find readiness for educational change present in a programme for young children, then backing up and working, over a longer period, with others in the community may be needed. (p. 105)*

Change also has an impact on staff stability (Rodd, 2013). Research shows that staff stability enhances positive developmental outcomes and more secure attachment for young children (Bloom, 2014; Commodari, 2013; Dinehart, Katz, Manfra, & Ullery, 2013). Teachers remain the key factor in providing quality education for young children. As such, reducing staff high turnover inevitably becomes a crucial factor in maintaining quality care; otherwise, the continuity of care for young children may be compromised. In addition, "many research findings have also indicated that if there is a single, most important factor in achieving high-quality early childhood services, it is the quality of the workforce" (Ang, 2012, p. 49). To enable a staff team to act requires a leader who is sensitive to group collaboration and individual accountability (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Rodd, 2013).

In each centre in Singapore, it is the principal's responsibility to assist in a professional development journey that nurtures staff. As such, the principal is the leader who motivates their staff to work in order to sustain change. The responsibility for making a difference in the quality of early childhood centres rests in the hands of the principal, who often manages the change process through staff development processes. Maxwell (2011) argues that "when the leader develops others, they become better, they do the job better and both leader and the organisation benefit, everybody wins" (p. 229). In a competitive world (and the early childhood education centres are usually located in the commercial sector), all principals realise that a stable and well-trained workforce could give them a competitive edge so as to attract more students and staff (Dibble, 1999; Mooney & Munton, 2002).

In coping with the competing demands of change, principals in early childhood centres in Singapore face considerable pressure as their roles are multi-faceted, including: managing and supervising staff; liaising with parents and other professionals; supporting and developing staff; managing budgets; increasing enrolment; and coordinating roles and responsibilities in the operation of their centre (Ang, 2012). In addition, they are also accountable to the different government ministries for maintaining licensing requirements. Researchers have indicated that principals spend 34% of their time in activities such as administration, attending to parents and calls, managing and supervising their staff and only devote 16% of their time supporting and developing staff (Muijs, Aubrey, Harris, & Briggs, 2004; Rodd, 2013). In other words, principals, out of necessity, focus on management and maintenance rather than on developing their staff.

Change is defined as a process, not a one-time event and it happens over time (Bloom, 2005; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003). However, "time is needed to broadly educate, gather evidence for needed proactive changes, and to build enthusiastic readiness" (Chu, 2014, p. 105).

Rodd (2013) has identified some of the blocks that are encountered by those engaged in the change process:

- Uncertainty or fear of change can be a significant block.
- Change being enforced and "top-down" rather than involving all stakeholders at the grassroots level.
- Insufficient information about a proposed change can create a block as if staff do not understand it then they cannot be expected to support it.

The process of change then, as mentioned earlier, needs time if it is to be effective. Human beings are creatures of habit and it takes time for people to accept a new idea and adapt it into their daily practices (Maxwell, 2011). The natural reaction to change in human nature is resistance. However, there are stages in the implementing of any change process. In the initial stage, people will deny change, next they will resist it, thereafter they will tentatively explore the new ideas and actions being presented and eventually become committed to them (Scott & Jaffe, 1989, cited in Humphries & Senden, 2000). These are the stages of response that are very common during the change process. Therefore, a leader should not be negative when resistance to change sets in, especially in the initial stage of the change process. Staff development training often helps to bring about desired change in any organisation and this is what the research project described here sets out to do (Rodd, 2013). As the Penn State Extension publication stated, "effective coaching helps educators become more intentional in their practice, helps facilitate use of best practices" (Mincemoyer, 2013, p. 1).

How Coaching is Defined and what it involves

Many staff development programmes have been attempted in Singapore with varying degrees of success (Ang, 2012; ECDA, 2017a). However, a strategy becoming more commonly used is that of coaching, an approach often associated only with sport. As Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, Sandahl, and Whitworth (2011) write, "Coaching as a field of interest has spread around the world" (p. x). Some organisations have used this approach to shape their organisation and the role of management (Hunt & Weintraub, 2007; Rush, Shelden, & Hanft, 2003; Slater, 2007; Western, 2012; Wise & Jacobo, 2010). Coaching has been defined as a "disciplined, structured process where one or two people form an ongoing relationship for the improvement of professional practice and achievement of goals" (Twigg, Pendergast, Flückiger, Garvis, Johnson, & Robertson, 2013, p. 74). Coaching is guiding people to learn what they can do rather than telling them what they must do. Stoltzfus (2005) considers that a coach pushes a person to think, to stretch themselves and, at the same time, to hold themselves accountable for their actions.

Coaching is a collaborative process whereby the coach serves as a catalyst for the coachee to find answers they seek by asking thought-provoking questions. It also assists by focusing on helping the coachee to move towards their desired goals (Hunt & Weintraub, 2007; Rodd, 2006; Stoltzfus, 2005; Whitmore, 2010). Coaching, then, is a short-term relationship as compared to mentoring, which is more of a long-term relationship. Hence, a short-term relationship, like coaching, may fit well in Singapore where more and more staff who cannot cope, tend to leave their employment (Ang, 2012).

Leaders are needed to develop people. In the early childhood field, in Singapore, where staff attrition rate is so high and time is not on the leader's side, coaching may be a better option for staff development than mentoring, for the coaching process may help staff to be more forward-looking rather than backward-looking in their behaviour. In recent years, many early childhood centres and schools have adopted a coaching method when supporting the professional growth of their staff (Rodd, 2013; Rush, Shelden, & Hanft, 2003; Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009; Wise & Jacobo, 2010). Coaching is viewed as powerful because it is based on principles of adult learning (Kolb, 1984/2015). It has been used by teachers and principals as a strategy to promote collegiality, resolving particular instructions, learning new skills as well as refining and sharpening those skills previously grasped (Diamond & Powell, 2011; Rudd, Lambert, Satterwhite, & Smith, 2009; Shidler, 2009).

There is a body of literature that identifies good coaching practices. These practices include: providing opportunities to reflect, explore options, 'think outside the box' (Simpson, 2010), show readiness to change (Leedham, 2005), and be able to set achievable goals (e.g., Moen

& Skaalvik, 2009; Robertson, 2008). There are many types of coaching in the literature but the approach used in this study was an expert based coach with both goal-oriented and adult learning approaches used (Rush & Shelden, 2011, p. 7).

Research has indicated there are many benefits in getting leaders within an organisation to adopt a coaching behaviour. One obvious benefit is cost savings (Frisch 2001; Hunt & Weintraub, 2007) as compared with the fee required to hire an external coach. However, some leaders may believe that an external coach may be more objective. An internal coach has an edge when considering most aspects of the organisation and this insight will hasten the initial process of suggesting a development agenda (Frisch, 2001; Longenecker, 2010; Watt, 2004). Working in the same organisation also means that the leader, as coach, can make observations of their staff and give them immediate, constructive feedback (Frisch, 2001). Trust is viewed as an integral characteristic of a coaching partnership and allows the coachee to be honest and open (Buell, Han, Blamey, & Vukelich, 2010).

Objectives of the Study

In view of the issues confronting early childhood leaders in Singapore, it was decided to embark on a study that sought to use a coaching approach with principals and their relevant staff in order to investigate if a coaching strategy could bring about needed change. The broad aim of this study was to examine if a 'coaching approach' was an appropriate strategy for staff development in relation to changing their practice. This paper reports on part of a larger PhD study and does not set out to present views of children or families in the centre. Ethics approval for the study was conducted in the relevant University and at the Singaporean local level by the relevant management committee including approval by parents and teachers involved.

The specific research question reported on in this paper is:

In what ways, if any, does coaching training become a change agent strategy that supports a principal's ability to coach the teachers?

Methods
The Approach

In conducting the study, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to provide a comprehensive investigation into principals' and teachers' perceptions of a 'coaching approach' towards achieving a quality organisational climate. A multi-method research approach was selected (Bloom, 2005; Creswell, 2014; McMurray, Pace, & Scott, 2004). This approach enabled the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data incorporating multiple techniques within and across each of the research stages. The multi-method approach enhanced the validity of the study and allowed for the research question to be answered in more depth (Bloom, 2005; McMurray, Pace, & Scott, 2004). Both process and product were deemed essential to the conduct of the research study, process in terms of how the participants experienced the coaching process and product being outcomes in terms of embracing change and demonstrating professional development.

A before-and-after design (Kumar, 2014) was selected to assist the researchers to investigate, without bias, if a 'coaching approach' intervention programme was an effective staff development strategy. To determine the effectiveness of the intervention there were two investigation points. The data were obtained by means of pre-test and post-test measures including interviews before-and-after the implementation of the coaching programme. The instruments used to measure the outcomes outlined in the study included the Early Childhood Work Environment

Survey; Teacher's Working Profile Questionnaire; Focus Group interviews and Observation Field Notes, all designed by Bloom (2005). The procedures for implementation also followed very closely those outlined in Bloom's extensive and helpful publications (Bloom, 2005, 2014).

The Setting
Participants

The study was conducted in Singapore in seven child care centres offering child care programmes for children from 18 months to below 6 years of age. All seven child care centres in the study were licensed for operation by the Early Childhood Development Agency to operate as a child care centre (ECDA, 2017b). The study included 7 principals and 72 teachers (see Table 1).

Professional Qualifications	Teachers		Principals	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Untrained	15	20.8	0	0
Certificate in Infant Care	1	1.4	0	0
Basic Qualification Early Childhood Care and Education	5	6.9	0	0
Certificate in Preschool Teaching	11	15.3	0	0
Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education	37	51.4	2	28.6
Degree in Early Childhood Care and Education	3	4.2	5	71.4
Total	72	100.0	7	100.0

Table 1. Respondents' professional qualifications.

The Intervention

Before the intervention began the principals underwent intensive training by the researchers. Training involved five steps so as to guide a coach through a coaching session. These five steps were 1. Connect: Engage, 2. Outcome: Determine Session Goal, 3. Awareness: Reflective Dialogue, 4. Course: Action steps, and 5. Highlights: Learning and Action Steps (Webb, 2004/2016). This process helped to prepare the principals for the work ahead in the intervention with their respective staff group members.

In addition, a focus group was set up which met regularly where at meetings, principals were supported by their coach and able to share their insights into the coaching process and how it was progressing. The focus group meetings were one of the significant aspects of the study. This was indeed one of the significant aspects of the study.

There are many models of leadership, however, as Hujala, Waniganayake and Rodd (2013), stated "leadership is not easily dissected and understood because it is essentially a holistic, multi-dimensional and multi-layered complex phenomena that, to be effective is embedded in the context which it is enacted" (p. 29). In this study, principals were encouraged to participate in what is known as a "distributive model of leadership" whereby the collective views were shared and individual views were seen to be important as collaborative, participative, shared and valued (Waniganayake, 2014). This model was chosen for this study as it was a move away from a leadership top-down model with an individual leader making decisions without collaboration. The planned focus group discussions were ideal for this sort of shared distributive model and the collaborative nature of coaching, as discussed earlier in the paper, lent itself to this

approach.

The intervention itself was conducted over a six-month period and included the seven principals meeting with their relevant staff on a weekly basis and discussing the coaching issues which had been determined. The intervention strategies focused on were: assisting the teachers to be self-reflective, to question their practices, to be critical thinkers, to be able to set goals and be able to accept feedback from their coach.

These strategies were the ones that would help the teachers to cope with change, to improve the classroom climate, to manage classroom issues that impinged on the teachers' work. These discussions occurred in a climate of openness. Teachers were encouraged to be open about issues that needed clarification. Over time, there emerged in the teachers a willingness to be flexible when accepting the changes agreed upon by coachee and coach.

The strategies for principals were to improve their listening behaviours, to also be more receptive to change and to be more flexible in their work with teachers as they helped them to identify needed changes in the classrooms.

The teachers in the study, participating in adult modes of learning, were assisted to build new knowledge, skills and capacities and were able with support of a coach to function with increased confidence and flexibility. It was hoped that by the end of the study the teachers would be able to work effectively and independently.

Making provision for time is always problematic but in the research study the principals and teachers always planned a month in advance and it seemed to work well. It is the policy of most centres in Singapore to allow 1-2 hrs a week for some sort of planning. This could be changed into longer periods of time if staff preferred, on occasion, block of 2 hrs, for example, meeting fortnightly.

Gathering the Data

A pilot test was conducted prior to the implementation of the main study to determine the validity and reliability of the instruments (Bloom, 2005). The instruments proved to be effective and pre-intervention questionnaires, interviews and observations were conducted and analysed before the intervention began. Coaching training was set up for the seven principals followed with a six-month intervention programme in the seven centres. The researcher visited the centres weekly, maintaining regular contact with those involved in the intervention. She observed how the classroom observations were conducted and likewise how the interviews were managed. As with the pilot step, all observations were conducted in accord with the procedures outlined by Bloom (2005, 2014). The post-intervention data from questionnaires, interviews and observations were collected and analysed after implementation of the intervention programme.

Data Analysis Process

A series of paired sample t-test were conducted to examine if there were any significant changes before and after the intervention. Significance level of 0.05 and below was established to identify any significant change in the result. Cohen's (1988) d was computed to check if the effect sizes were large enough to have any implication. One-way ANOVA test was administered to check if there were any differences between the centres.

Results and Discussion
Flexibility to Change

As seen in Figure 1, initially both teachers and principals were not very dynamic or change-oriented as they scored 10.90 and 10.00 respectively, out of 20. The benchmark for this assessment to be considered as dynamic or change-oriented needed to be a score smaller than 6 for the tools that were used as the basis for this assessment (Bloom, 2005). In spite of the lesser dynamic views of participants prior to intervention, both teachers and principals developed a mind-set that was more dynamic and change-oriented after the intervention. The intervention helped both groups to be more dynamic, as they scored 3.33 and 3.86 respectively after the intervention.
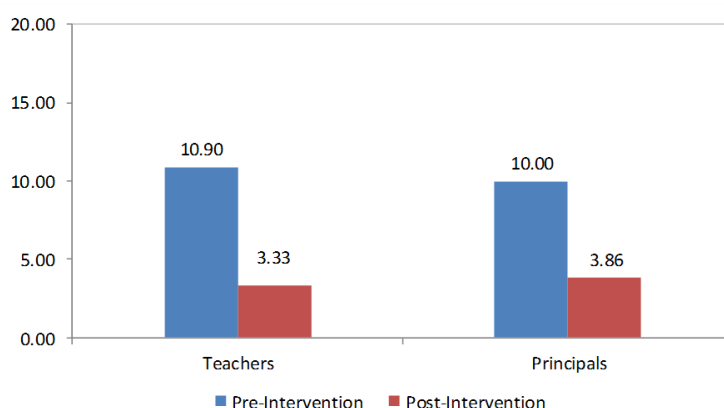
Figure 1. Overall flexibility and openness to change

A paired sample t-test was conducted to check if a change in the score for flexibility and openness for pre- and post-intervention periods was significant. The test showed that the difference was statistically significant for both teachers and principals at the significance level of 0.01. There was a significant difference in the score for teachers for pre-intervention (n=72, M=10.90, SD=2.53) and post-intervention (n=72, M=3.33, SD=2.43); t (71) =-21.35, $p < 0.01$. There was also a significant difference for principals for pre-intervention (n=7, M=10.00, SD=6.49) and post-intervention (n=7, M=3.86, SD=1.47; t (6) =-10.33, $p < 0.01$. The effect size for both teachers (Cohen's d=2.51) and principals (Cohen's d=3.91) was large.

One-way ANOVA test was conducted to check if there was any difference for the scores for pre-intervention and post-intervention among the centres. The subgroup analysis was limited because of the small sample size of some centres such as C1 which had only 4 in the sample size. For pre-intervention, there were some differences between the centres, but these differences were not statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ ($F (6, 65) = 0.945$, $p = 0.469$). However, the differences between the centres after the post-intervention were statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ ($F (6, 65) = 2.475$, $p = 0.032$). Hence, the results showed that the intervention had a positive impact on the flexibility and openness to change of teachers, regardless of the centres they were working in.

The results for flexibility and openness to change also contributed to the improvement in the performance of the teachers. Results showed that the teachers were more willing to talk about issues in the centres and were more prepared to change for the better. As a consequence, the centres have come to recognise that the principals need to be the agent of change, intentionally coaching their staff so as to imbue their teachers with the need for flexibility and openness to change (see Table 2).

Centres	n	Pre-intervention		Post-intervention	
		M	SD	M	SD
C1	4	12.75	3.20	3.50	2.52
C2	7	10.14	1.07	4.00	1.73
C3	10	11.10	3.18	3.20	2.39
C4	7	10.00	5.03	2.71	1.38
C5	10	10.70	0.82	3.60	1.58
C6	10	10.20	1.93	5.50	2.27
C7	24	11.46	2.06	2.33	2.73
Total	72	10.93	2.53	3.33	2.43

**Table 2. Overall flexibility and openness to change by centres**

Principals' Listening Behaviours

The coaching training showed an improvement in principals' listening behaviours. This helped the principals see the importance of effective listening. As a general guideline, an overall score between 15 and 20 indicated that respondents felt their principal was attentive, genuinely interested and supportive when engaged in conversation. A score lower than 5 indicated the needs for principals to build stronger listening and communication skills (Bloom, 2005).

Before the intervention programme, the teachers' evaluation of the principals' listening behaviours was low; the score for positive statements was only 5.99 out of 10 and the score for negative statement was nearly 10. The overall score was 6.36, which was just above the threshold of a level (5 points), which reflected the need to build extensive listening and communication skills.

After the intervention programme, the score for positive statements increased from 5.99 to 9.42, while the score for negative statement decreased dramatically from 9.62 to 0.50. The overall score also went up from 6.36 to 18.91 reaching the level that indicates teachers felt their principals were attentive and genuinely interested in their conversation. Paired sample t-test was conducted to check if the difference between the overall score before (n=72, M=6.36, SD=2.66) and after the intervention (n=72, M=18.91, SD=1.14) was statistically significant. It was found that the difference was statistically significant at $p < 0.01$ level; t (71) = 37.411, $p < 0.01$ (see Figure 2).

Listening behaviour is an important element in a 'coaching approach'. The results show that, over time, the principals practised the art of listening and had come to understand that being an effective coach means they must first learn to be an effective listener.
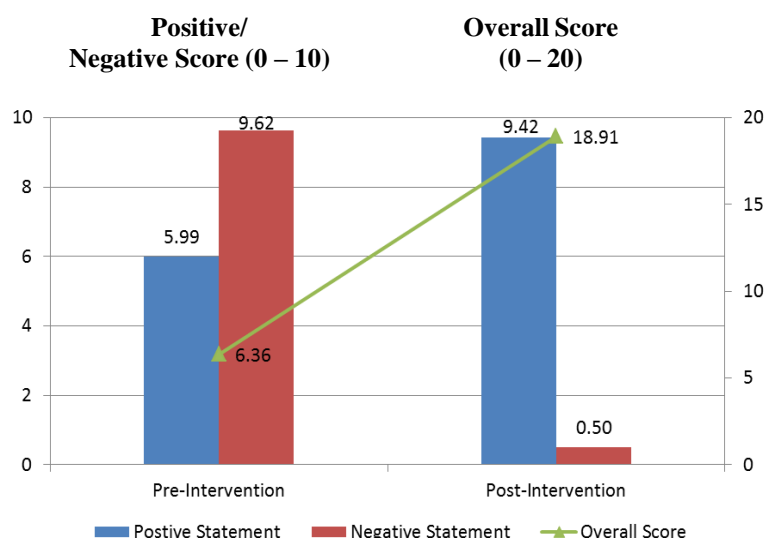
Figure 2. Changes in principals' listening behaviours

Coaching Training

To find out if the coaching training was effective, qualitative data were collected using focus group interviews. As the overall design of the study was a mixed method approach, means testing analysis was conducted to determine possible differences in the quantitative data that were used to triangulate the quantitative findings.

Results from the qualitative data indicated that coaching training for the principals was helpful and improved the relationship between principals and teachers, assisted them to be more effective in applying time management, motivated them to see their staff grow, become more confident, and helped them to see the capabilities of their staff and the importance of staff development (see Table 3).

Post-Intervention (*n* = 7)	Responses	
	n	Percent of Cases
Better relationship as we get to know each other better	6	86%
Helps me to be more disciplined and learn good time management	5	71%
Motivated to see staff grow/confident and independent	5	71%
Helps me to see the capabilities of my staff and the importance of staff development	4	57%
Able to see their viewpoint better and empathise with the challenges they face	3	43%
I learn to step back and I learn a lot from my staff too	2	29%
Teachers appreciate my care in coaching them to do better	1	14%

Table 3. Helpfulness of Coaching – Principals

The coaching programme was useful for the teachers as it assisted them to reflect on who they were, to identify what their profession required and the purpose of their work. It also enabled them to manage their classes better as well as to be more focused in their tasks.

The coaching also aided teachers to be more confident, independent and able to function better. They realised their capability; strengths and weaknesses better (see Table 4).

Post-Intervention (*n* = 71)	Responses	
	n	Percent of Cases
It helps me to know who am I/Helps me to identify what this profession requires and the purpose in this field	40	56%
Helps me to manage my class better	29	41%
Helps me to be focused and disciplined/ I am more disciplined and systematic in approaching my task	28	39%
I am more confident as a teacher / Increase my confidence level/ I am able to function better and be more independent	27	38%
Help realise my capability, strengths and weaknesses better	26	37%
Helps me to see that I am not alone, and I can rely on my principal to coach and guide me in my professional walk	12	17%

Table 4. Helpfulness of Coaching – Teachers

Training supported the principals in gaining a skill that was useful in the coaching programme – a skill to help the teachers in setting their goals; developing an action plan and asking appropriate questions. The training also helped them to realise the importance of attitude as an essential element in coaching (see Table 5).

Post-Intervention (*n* = 7)	Responses	
	n	Percent of Cases
Learning how to ask right questions to support the teachers in their goals and action plan	6	86%
Attitude as a Key towards coaching	4	57%
Helps one to be sensitive to teachers' feeling on coaching	3	43%
Provide steps and good foundation in learning the right techniques for coaching	2	29%
Equipped one with the knowledge and skill, especially in handling the staff attitude	2	29%

Table 5. Training Support in the Coaching Programme

Principals commented that regular meetings together with other centres' principals had also provided them with a common platform to discuss, in a more structured yet open manner, the issues and concerns that all members experienced every day. This networking allowed principals to learn from one another as well as develop a collaborative team approach (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Rodd, 2013) that supported and accounted for one's learning. Hence, it is suggested that a coaching approach be offered as a choice when staff attend in-service training and

workshops. The coaching approach may build a sense of community of learners through peer learning, mentoring and coaching (Austin & Hopkins, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 1995, 2004, cited in Wagner & French, 2010; Rodd 2013).

Challenges of the Study

These were more common at the beginning of the intervention when the process was new, particularly to the teachers. The expectations of teachers varied and some felt inadequate. At the beginning of the study collegiality of co-workers were rated at 77.8% and feedback and support from supervisors at 40%. At the end of the study, collegiality of co-workers were rated at 95.8% and feedback and support from supervisors at 86%. These results do highlight the importance of principal's support and feedback. The expectations of teachers changed positively over time.

The problem of staff retention was mentioned in the introduction section of this paper at the completion of the study data study showed that over the 18-month period a total of 11 teachers left the centres before the study was completed. Teacher attrition rate overall was 13.2 %. None of the principals left and exit interviews were conducted with the teachers who did leave. Three teachers cited low pay as the reason for leaving, five said they were looking for new challenges, three said they needed more guidance from their principals. A rate of 13.2 % is low by Singapore standards where there has and still is a very high attrition rate.

"Currently, the annual attrition rate for Singapore's ECE sector is about 15 to 20 percent", Singapore, 12 August 2014
http://lienfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Lien%20Fdn-SJCK%20PPC%20Presser_Combined.pdf

Conclusion

The most robust finding was that the coaching approach assisted principals with their complex role of improving the quality of their centre. Specifically, the results showed that effective child care centre principals need to focus on improving classroom instruction, not only on managerial tasks. One way to improve teaching is to continuously improve oneself (Bloom, 2014; Hsieh, 2013; Maxwell, 2011; Rodd, 2013). The leader as coach offers an opportunity for staff to grow together and thus develop a learning culture within the organisation (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006; Frisch, 2001; Phillips, 1996).

In relation to embracing change the outcomes of the study did show that a trusting relationship had developed between the principal and teacher. The openness that had resulted in this trust helped teachers to set achievable goals and not to be reliant on someone telling them what to do. The principals had shown confidence in their respective teachers encouraging them to think for themselves and be more intentional in their teaching. Developing insights into one's practices by discussion and reflection through a coaching approach was a valuable outcome of the study.

The study results showed that a principal needs to take on a proactive role as a change agent. Through the coaching process, principals learned to be more flexible and receptive to change. Once they acquired the necessary knowledge and skills through learning within the centre, they improved their instructional practices and developed effective communication and leadership skills. When able to see improvement, they were motivated to keep going (Kotter, 2012). An implication here is that through change, the potential for improving staff professional growth can be raised to a higher level of excellence. In addition, staff recruitment and retention in the early childhood industry could be improved.

The principals, through their support to their staff, yielded many positive signs of change in both classroom management and the organisational climate in their centres (Bloom, Hentschel,

& Bella, 2010; Chenot, Benton, & Kim, 2009; Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002; Griffin, Patterson, & West, 2001). Confidence in teachers had grown and they expressed the view at the end of the study that they now had the abilities and knowledge to function without the support of a coach. Many of the teachers said that "the consistent support and feedback motivated them to move towards providing quality early childhood programmes and deepening their commitment to the children they care for" (Seah, 2014, p. 235). Too often, we underestimate the power of care, a kind word, a smile, honest feedback and a genuine compliment (Bloom, Hentschel, & Bella, 2010; Hsieh, 2013; Nolan, 2008). It is all these essential, often unexpressed elements that empower staff.

Developing leadership is certainly a life-long learning journey. Leaders have to be change agents. As mentioned earlier, change is a process, not a one-time event and it happens over time (Bloom, 2005; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003). If a change process is to be managed effectively then leaders need to know the causes and effects that contribute to resistance to change. A coaching approach can allow a leader to work in a distributive leadership style that values participation, collaboration and the views of the staff. Given the diversity of ECE centres in Singapore, the flexibility inherent in distributive leadership may allow for flexibility and encourage commitment and reduce attrition.

Irrespective of the size, large or small, profit or non-profit, if ECE centres are to survive in Singapore, they need to respond to change. Sometimes the changes will be top-down from government, and regulatory in content, for example, change required to meet licensing standards (ECDA, 2017b). The ECE environment in Singapore is very competitive and small centres may offer a diversified programme, therefore, if high quality is evident, then whatever, the change requires, it is important that the leader and staff discuss together, understand the need for change, analyse what it means for them and plan for its implementation and achievement.

The results in this study showed that both teachers and principals gained in confidence and did embrace change. The trust that was engendered in the coaching relationship was fundamental to the acceptance of change. The findings of the study have relevance to other countries where there is also a high attrition rate of staff as evident in the work of Bassoppo-Moyo (2010); Brown and Wynn (2009); Hughes, Matt, and O'Reilly (2015). Principal support plays a prominent role as to whether or not teachers stay in an organisation.

The role of the early childhood principal, whatever the country will remain complex for it involves teamwork. Change is always occurring in both roles and responsibilities and this is one of few constant principles of this profession (Waniganayake, 2014).

Finally, it can be said that this study shows that a coaching approach was implemented successfully as a staff development strategy for early childhood principals and policymakers to consider. The provision of early childhood services deeply affects the lives of young children and families, thus, an investment in staff development is essential.

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