

## Chapter 3-5

### The Scraper on the Gravel Road

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“As human beings, our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us is, that each of us has something that no one else has—or ever will have—something inside that is unique to all time. It’s our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression.”

Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood

The former First Lady Michelle Obama shared that “people are really hungry for stories” (CBS News, 2019).

Through narrative storytelling, I would like to share my life experiences and how two heroes and mentors helped shape my life as an early childhood professional. My path to teaching has been like traveling on a gravel road with its ups and downs. A scraper will pick up the gravel and dirt, smooth the high and low points, and make it even. I have been privileged to be evened by two scrapers, Dr. Christine Chen (Singapore) and Dr. James Hoot (Buffalo, NY, USA), who also became my lifelong friends. I hope you can identify with my nontraditional route to higher education through my successes and failures and how these experiences shaped who I am today.

As a child, people often asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I thought I could be a nun, a social worker, a zookeeper, or a *teacher*. Having been raised in a Taoist family in Singapore, I knew I could not be a nun. Although I love animals, I did not think I could handle the poop and the smell. These reasons narrowed my career prospects to either social work or teaching. Having completed my General Certificate of Education Advanced Level certificate (equivalent to high school in the United States) at 18 years of age and waiting impatiently for my results to be posted in three months, my father chanced upon an advertisement for a childcare teacher opening in the Chartered Industries of Singapore. They had an open position in a daycare workplace. My father drove me to my interview, and I got my first job as a childcare teacher. I never knew this would be where I met my first lifelong mentor and friend, Dr. Christine Chen.

In the early 1980s, teaching in childcare was considered a “nanny job” in Singapore. Teachers in this profession received low wages, worked long hours, and were poorly trained. Dr. Chen had a progressive view of early childhood education. She founded the professional organization for early childhood education in Singapore, now known as the Association for Early Childhood Educators, Singapore (AECES) [<https://www.aeces.org/>]. Dr. Chen used ideas from her education at Bank Street College of Education in New York City and from working there for several years. She implemented these ideas in the first childcare workplace in Singapore. At a time when Singapore classrooms were highly structured and teacher-directed, Dr. Chen provided interest centers in each room and allowed the children to explore centers through play-based and child-initiated approaches consistent with research-based insights of global thinkers like Piaget and Vygotsky. Another progressive idea of Dr. Chen was encouraging teachers to group children of mixed ages into classrooms. Mixed-age grouping taught me to differentiate instruction for various developmental abilities and interests. Finally, Dr. Chen believed strongly in lifelong learning and encouraged teachers to pursue higher qualifications to become even better teachers. To help poorly paid teachers pursue such learning, Dr. Chen was constantly sourcing funding to support the teachers’ professional development. She is a dreamer who instills that we should share knowledge because you will gain new knowledge once you give it away. She was my role model, showing me how to be a leader and mentor.

In the late 1980s, the Singapore government realized the importance of employing better-educated early childhood teachers since children increasingly spend more time (often around 12 hours a day) in childcare centers when both parents work. Because of this, the government started providing incentives and funding for teachers to become better professionally equipped. I took advantage of such incentives and completed all the certification courses offered by the National Institute of Education to the level of a certified director. I was working and studying simultaneously and had the opportunity to implement what I was learning through courses in the classroom with children. I needed a new challenge after working with children ages two to 12 for six years. I was offered a position as the director of a welfare childcare center that collaborates with the Family Service Center to cater to disadvantaged and at-risk families. My mentor, Dr. Chen, told me it was time to take on this new challenge as she noticed I was ‘rusting out’ in my current position. With her encouragement, I took up a new challenge, which was a rough start. Katz (1972) described that preschool teachers go through four stages of developmental growth in their professional life: Stage 1- Survival, Stage 2 - Consolidation, Stage 3 - Renewal, and Stage 4 – Maturity (pp. 50-53). Although I was considered a teacher at stage 4 maturity by the time I left the Chartered Industries of Singapore, being a center director required a new set of skills compared to working with young children. I felt myself drowning in these deeper responsibilities, often transitioning from a teacher to a director and managing a center. Do not be discouraged if you are at this transition stage; you will rise above these challenges.

As I began this new position, Singapore started accepting students for its new Diploma in Early Childhood Education. I was privileged to be accepted into this pioneer program in 1996. Being a director of a full

daycare and attending classes part-time is not easy. I was often the first to open the center before 7 am and close the center after 7 pm.

After three years as a center director of a welfare daycare in Singapore, I was offered the position of principal of a kindergarten in Jakarta, Indonesia, catering to upper-income families who wanted their children to have a bilingual opportunity to learn English and Indonesian. Since I had mentored the senior teachers for leadership positions in the welfare daycare, I decided to take up this new overseas position. I promoted the senior teacher to replace me as center director in Singapore and became the kindergarten's principal in Indonesia. Being immersed in a completely new culture, I realized that what worked in Singapore might not transition as well due to cultural differences. Indonesian teachers appeared more laid back and less self-directive than those I worked with in Singapore. Since there was no professional training for preschool teachers in Indonesia, I conducted weekly meetings and training and started daily checklists to ensure task completion. This position required much handholding and learning about different cultures and systems.

Nevertheless, teachers bonded and learned quickly, and I soon saw their professional growth. I worked in Indonesia for one and a half years until the May 1998 riots in Indonesia consisted of mass violence, demonstrations, and civil unrest targeting ethnic Chinese. Being an Asian, I returned to Singapore for my safety as advised.

When I returned from Indonesia, a private country club approached me about becoming the program director for a playgroup, planning educational programs for families in the club. Since I thrive on challenges, I took up this new position and started a playgroup for toddlers 13 months to three years of age. During this time, the highest qualification attainable in early childhood was at the Diploma level in Singapore. I knew that I had to keep learning to grow professionally. Being an active member of the early childhood professional organization where Dr. Chen was the President, there was an initiative to start a Degree in Early Childhood Education in partnership with a university in Perth, Australia. I was privileged to be in this pioneer group again and had the opportunity to complete my bachelor's degree in early childhood in 2000. I also realized that I needed to leave the program director position at the country club as the club's vision and philosophy did not align with mine. Although the remuneration was higher, I felt this was not my calling. Dr. Chen supported my decision and offered me the role of professional development secretary at the Association for Early Childhood Educators Singapore (AECES). I took up the position and started providing professional development training for teachers taking their required early childhood certifications in Singapore.

While providing adult professional development training, I needed to be more equipped. Dr. Chen encouraged me to write to the Lee Foundation for financial support to take up my master's degree in early childhood. I was blessed to be funded, allowing me to complete my master's degree in Sydney in 2013. All these globetrotting educational pursuits gave me a unique opportunity to have a blended perspective of education in the East and West. Coming from an Asian educational perspective in class, where you speak when called upon and

transitioning into collaborative learning, problem-based learning was a massive change for me. I began to learn from keeping my voice in my head to speaking up to be heard. This aspect is still a work in progress as I am often afraid that my ideas might be submerged by more vital voices who may think my ideas are not good enough. If you are feeling likewise, do not be scared, as we each have unique perspectives and thoughts, and we need to speak up to be heard.

After completing my master's degree in Australia, I became the executive director of the Association for Early Childhood Educators, Singapore (AECES). This position allowed me to work with leaders and professionals in Singapore and countries such as Vietnam, China, Cambodia, Indonesia, Australia, and the United States. AECES invited a professor from the State University of New York at Buffalo to speak at one of our international conferences in late 2007. At this conference, I met my second mentor and lifelong friend, Dr. James Hoot. Although it was a one-week interaction, he saw something in me and offered me a scholarship for my Ph.D. in Early Childhood in Buffalo, New York. Would you believe it? I told him "No" because I was at the point when I thought I wanted to go into missionary work. He continued encouraging me for a month, even after returning to Buffalo. I told myself that I would consider it, and after praying and encouragement from family and friends, I embarked on my next journey in Buffalo.

It was a massive change for me from a tropical, warm country, Singapore, to a cold Buffalo. I remember flying and arriving on January 1, 2008, in cold, snowy winter Buffalo after about 26 hours of flight. This journey was an educational pursuit and a personal growth experience from dependence to independence, which began my next phase of life, living in the United States. Dr. Hoot became my advisor, guided me throughout my educational pursuit in Buffalo, and became another lifelong friend. After completing my Ph.D. in Buffalo, New York, in 2012, I started my career in higher education at Middle Tennessee State University.

From my story, you can see that each mentor had a different impact on the various seasons in my life. Below, I wanted an update on the voices of my two mentors and to thank and share with them how they have impacted my life.

## **VOICES FROM MENTORS**

### **Dr. Christine Chen (Singapore)**

Jane's story brings me back to when she, as a childcare teacher, held her voice in her head. Every afternoon, when the children were asleep, another new teacher who started working at the same time as Jane would come into my office and blurt out her experience for that morning and seek my input. But Jane was always in the classroom, and I had to go to her to ask for her reflections. Jane learned to speak up more; you would hear her voice before you saw her appear now.

When Jane went to Indonesia, I humbly learned from her. For example, my methods of relating to the teachers in Singapore did not work for the teachers in Indonesia. I would visit Jane in Jakarta occasionally and share a bedroom with mosquitoes. Jane was very good at catching mosquitoes. As for me, I murmured a monotonous voice like the mosquitoes and exposed my legs so that the mosquitoes would land on them. At that point, Jane would slap the mosquito! This way, Jane was a leader, guiding and caring for me. We had different roles in our journey; we had fun and used our strengths. Mentoring is reciprocal, and learning works both ways. We are both heroes and mentors.

## Dr. James Hoot (Buffalo, New York)

I have always believed that children deserve the best this world offers. Our best chance of reaching this goal is to find a way for teachers of the world to share their successes and failures and develop research-based dispositions to become superb global teachers.

This philosophy greatly influenced my time at the State University of New York at Buffalo (SUNY Buffalo). In 1986, I accepted the position of Director of the Early Childhood Research Center at SUNY Buffalo. There, I had the honor of controlling eight assistantships for graduate students to pursue doctoral studies in Early Education while teaching in our childcare program. To achieve my global aspirations, I always tried to award most assistantships to promising students from countries outside the USA. In 2007, I was invited by a global powerhouse from Singapore (Dr. Christine Chen) to share my work at a conference organized by the organization (AECES) she founded. Having admired Dr. Chen's leadership in the global community, I was honored to accept her invitation. It was at this conference that I first met Jane Lim. From interactions with her in Singapore and the strongest recommendation I have ever received from a colleague, I began my quest to bring Jane to Buffalo. At our research center, Jane quickly earned the respect and admiration of students and faculty. Because of her competence and dedication to teaching, Jane was promoted to lead assistant and invited to teach one of our Child Development courses, where her student evaluations exceeded those of our regular faculty.

In addition to academic and leadership success at my university, Jane became active in the New York State Association for Childhood Education International, where she quickly became an inspiring leader. Through this organization, Jane became involved in the Association for Childhood Education International, the world's oldest professional organization for children. Jane's competence and global expertise in this organization resulted in her being elected as an officer of the Executive Board, and her leadership moved the organization in an even more global direction. From there, her legacy as an exemplary early childhood educator has continued to blossom.

The absolute best part of my 45-year teaching career has been the opportunity to play a small role in assisting promising students in obtaining positions that will allow them to impact hundreds of teachers in training who will have a lasting impact on the lives of the world's children. I will forever cherish the opportunity to get to know my *magnum opus*, colleague, and friend, Dr. Jane Lim!

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