

Finding your Voice, Honing your Message

Advocacy Writing for Early Childhood Education

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The views in this paper are those of the authors and do
not necessarily represent those of Wheelock College or
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Abstract

What do we mean by advocacy and why is it important for Early Childhood Education? This paper argues that writing is a particularly effective means of advocating on behalf of the interests of the families and children served by the profession as well as for the status of the preschool teaching profession itself. It offers advice on different outlets for writing: the traditional opinion column, the letter to the editor and on social media. It also highlights the importance of the cultivation of expertise by early childhood professionals, not only in order to engage and shape the public debate on particular issues from a position of knowledge, but also to raise image of the profession by the performative act of publicly sharing specialized and useful knowledge.

What is Advocacy?

Advocacy is speaking out on behalf of groups of people, organizations or ideas you believe in. By presenting a case to decision makers as well as others who are likely to share or at least come around to your views, advocacy allows you potentially to influence the outcomes of decisions.

Advocacy is not adversarial or a form of protest. It is reasoned dialogue that puts forth arguments that try to be convincing about the merits of the position. When we talk about advocacy in written form, advocacy writing expresses an opinion and the author is upfront about that, and usually has some expertise or standing to opine. In this paper, we put a great deal of emphasis on the notion of expertise and argue that in the early childhood sector, it is important for advocates to develop or refine their expertise as they take part in public discussion.

Why is Advocacy Important for ECE?

In Singapore, the early education landscape is dynamic and rapidly changing. Over the past fifteen years, requirements for teacher training have increased (Khou, 2010), new forms of centre accreditation and certification such as SPARK have emerged (MOE, 2010), the kindergarten curriculum framework has been revised several times (MOE, 2013a), a new autonomous governmental agency to oversee kindergarten and childcare programs was created (MOE, 2013b), and new anchor operators have been solicited (Ng and Chia, 2014) to highlight just a few of the changes.

In such circumstances, questions invariably arise from the community, parents and the profession about what the changes mean. In addition, these developments impact those groups as well as children, so advocacy can become a form of information sharing, interpretation of modifications to the sector for the various constituencies, and suggestions for how to best conceptualize or implement proposed changes.

Another argument for advocacy has to do with the nature of the profession. At heart, it's about doing what's best for children and families. Every policy change that affects the lives of children and families needs to have advocates to ensure that their interests are taken into account and are well represented. This is a role that can be played by early childhood educators.

The profession, too, needs advocates. Despite the longer and more rigorous training that teachers must complete before they can enter the early childhood classroom in Singapore, and despite the fact that evermore teachers are upgrading their skills beyond minimum requirements, it has been hard for them to shake off the public perception of them as nannies (Chia, 2014.) Without the recognition that early childhood training is on par with other established professions, it is difficult to secure the working conditions that are commensurate with high-skill work in terms of salary, respect, and autonomy.

Arguing on behalf of the profession, we contend, can happen in two ways – both directly and indirectly. In the first instance, early childhood professionals can be advocates by presenting a line of reasoning on topics that affect their work lives. These might include matters such as teacher training, ethics, working conditions, or new regulations.

But there is an indirect way in which the mere act of advocating on behalf of the profession or on behalf of children and families can become its own form of advocacy. That happens when the construction of the arguments presented relies on specialized knowledge or area expertise. Such a form of discourse often requires research, a deep and nuanced understanding of the issues and the different sides, and a persuasive logic. The aggregation of such arguments, over time and in the public eye, may be one way to shift the popular image of the profession away from that of unskilled care work to one built on a bedrock of specialized, necessary skills.

Such a transformation will not occur overnight and it will require a concerted effort on the part of the members of the profession and the associations that represent them to make it happen. In addition, it will require efforts to ensure that such labour is not undermined by obverse activity: public assertions by teachers that are poorly thought through or presented, that exhibit disrespect for children, families or leaders in the field, or that display a form of particularism without regard for the consequences of their arguments for the interests of broader social segments.

This is not to argue that advocacy writing is the only or even the most important activity in which the profession can engage to begin to alter how it is viewed. Levels of training, activity in the classroom, outcomes for children are all factors on which it will be judged. However, for the teaching professions, writing plays a particularly critical role in the public's perception because it is one of the specialized skills that practitioners are supposed to transmit as part of their core mission. Thus, communicating well and effectively in written form in public forums is consistent with the image the profession ought to project. In the sections that follow, we offer advice and guidance how early childhood professionals can most effectively represent those whose interests they serve and at the same time highlight their professionalism to a public that is not always aware of it.

Developing Thought Leadership in ECE

The concept of thought leadership is inextricably tied up with authority and expertise – the ability to take knowledge and ideas and apply them to problems or situations in a given field in ways that offer solutions, answer questions, provide guidelines for future activity and shape public discourse.

In Early Childhood Education, leadership can come from those on the ground whose experience can help them see salient issues first-hand. Yet, while such experience is invaluable, leadership and advocacy also require a bird's eye view and deep understanding of the system in order to contextualize the experience and analyse the effect of proffered solutions on the interconnected parts of the system.

Thought leadership and advocacy also demand in-depth knowledge about relevant issues. For example, in Singapore there are many topics of considerable public discussion or of debate within professional circles. These include what to do about the teacher shortage in ECE, the best way to train new teachers, the transition from Kindergarten II to Primary I, and what school-family collaboration or engagement should look like. In order to add to this debate or advocate on

behalf of a particular position, ECE professionals must educate themselves about the various positions on topics by the relevant actors and often the history of the issue.

To present a credible position, thought leaders must develop a logical argument about why their view is sound and why their ideas will work. It is not enough to advocate in favour of a position; rather those in a position to do something about it or whomever the target audience is must be convinced of its merit.

Sometimes, this means taking the audience through an argument, step by step, to show how one point follows from the last to end up at a powerful conclusion. Often, however, this also requires advocates to present evidence. This is where educators' expertise comes in. By bringing evidence to bear on their topics, they can help raise the level of debate and offer compelling ideas.

Where do early childhood professionals get such evidence? They must become deeply enmeshed in and aware of the ideas around relevant topics. They may bring new ideas from best practices from other countries. If they have participated in study tours abroad, there may be ideas relevant for Singapore. New research by education researchers, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, neuroscientists, organizational behaviourists, or policy makers is another place that early childhood practitioners may find evidence for their ideas.

This does not mean that those who seek to be advocates or thought leaders need to know everything about all the developments in early childhood education. People will typically specialise in those areas of most interest to them, whether it is something like literacy for bilingual learners, creating inclusive classrooms, parent education programs, mentoring young teachers, or creating effective learning organizations. It does, however, mean that they need to keep abreast of developments on the ground and in the research in those areas. Doing so deepens and strengthens the expertise of advocates, which in turn makes them better advocates and also expands their knowledge of related areas as they continue to become informed, thus broadening their expertise as well.

Once armed with evidence and arguments, advocates need an outlet for their views, a place to engage with the public. Traditionally, or at least since the 18th Century, one of the common places to influence and participate in public debate and argue on behalf of groups or ideas in free and literate societies has been in newspapers with the opinion column. We now turn to a discussion and advice for advocating on behalf of early childhood education in writing.

Writing Opinion pieces

Opinion pieces in the newspaper by members of the public, whether solicited or unsolicited, are often referred to as 'op-eds'. That harkens back to a day before electronic media when newspapers were actually paper -- think of the opinion page as your local Hyde Park Corner. Traditionally, the unsigned opinion piece that occupied the left-hand side of a broad sheet was the work of the newspaper's editor or the editorial staff. Even today, open a hardcopy of Singapore's paper of record, the *Straits Times*, to the last page of the front section and you will find the copy on the top of the left page is an editorial by the STN editors.

Opposite that, or opposite the editorial – 'op-ed' for short – on the right-hand page, there are opinion pieces by the public. These may be invited by the editors – they ask someone who is a known expert or a knowledgeable advocate to contribute a piece on a topic they think is important for their readers to consider – or they may be unsolicited pieces sent in by members of the public that the editors find compelling and important.

The 800-word essay

Typically, the kind of opinion piece that editors are looking for is the 800-word essay. Of course, they do not have to be exactly 800 words but the range of about 750 to 900 words is what fits in the world of paper publications and even

today with electronic versions of the news, the 800-word essay remains the standard. Much shorter and editors may suggest that it would be more appropriate for a letter to the editor, and much longer and an editor will request that even the best essay be cut down, or will simply reject it.

How We Write The process is a civil one – the commonly accepted rule in opinion writing is that you may disagree without being disagreeable. This is not about attacking or disparaging or belittling someone or her position. It is about patiently explaining what you think about some issue of importance to the general public. If you disagree with an opinion, your job is to respectfully show why it is wrong.

Suppose, for example, you wanted to counter someone’s argument that children need worksheets in kindergarten to prepare them for Primary I. You might begin not by attacking that argument but by acknowledging common ground – that you both want what’s best for children – and showing that you understand why someone might conclude worksheets are necessary. Then you would show, with the evidence, that inquiry based learning is actually a more effective way, or at least no less effective, to prepare children for school. That approach is far more likely to win converts to your position than simply dismissing your opponent’s argument as uninformed.

Why We Write Think about your ability and your right to contribute to the public dialogue. In some ways, as an experienced and informed professional, it is your obligation to speak out about things that affect the public that you know first hand, and about which you have specialized knowledge. It is also important to advocate for your line of work, and for what you do. You have the ability to educate the public about things related to your work that they might not know or about which they may be misinformed. For a piece on how teachers can raise the public’s awareness of ECE-related topics by one of the authors of this paper, see Tom Benner’s [Teaching Moments](#) on the website of the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) in Singapore.

Editorials and opinion columns offer one of the strongest and most effective outlets for you to express your viewpoints. You can make a difference with high quality pieces. Policymakers and the public do read – and often react positively to – suggestions that are made in a constructive way. Opinion pieces should not be an afterthought -- they should be planned, based on public concerns, researched carefully, and logically developed.

What to Write About Ideas can be found in many settings. You must be or become an informed observer of early childhood issues but beyond that, you may find that casual conversations with colleagues, students, or parents, a speech by a politician, or a story in the news can lead to ideas. In addition, academic work is also a potential source of ideas. Many opinion pieces serve the role as a kind of cultural translator of scholarly work for the general public, both explaining it in language that is intelligible to the non-academic and showing the practical implications of the work. Early childhood educators may also produce their own scholarship and scientific findings, either as the result of work done for an advanced degree or as a practitioner-researcher.

Becoming an informed observer Ideas for editorials and columns can be found in the news and features sections of any good publication, print or online. To follow the public discussion on issues or new policies, become a regular reader of the newspaper. While it is difficult to go through all potential publications on a daily basis, thanks to technology, you do not have to. It is possible to customize the information you receive so that it covers many sources and is not overwhelming. You can set a Google Alert (or other notification service) for the kind of topics you want to stay current on. For example, you could get links to all stories that concern Early Childhood Education Singapore or any other topic of interest by setting up an alert that will deliver articles to your inbox. That way, you are unlikely to miss them and will often find important stories in publications you do not typically read. To learn more about Google alerts, see [here](#).

For pieces related to current news such as the release of a new report, a speech, an incident, [timeliness](#) matters. When a topic is in the news or is a headline, it is far more likely that an editor will publish a piece if you get it to him quickly while it is still fresh in the minds of the readers. This means that you must keep up to date on issues and when something becomes newsworthy, and you need to be able to pull a piece together quickly. Example: In mid-2013, an incident caught on film of a teacher reacting violently to a child at a day care centre in Singapore went viral. Public condemnation of the teacher escalated in some discussions to a condemnation of all teachers. Calls to install cameras in all classrooms was one reaction. As an ECE professional, if you thought such responses were over the top, you might have wanted to advocate on behalf of the sector. You might have come up with an argument against cameras, but for such a claim to be effective in the debate, you would have had to put your ideas forth within a short time so that your contribution fell into the news cycle. An editor would be much more receptive to such a piece within a week or less of the incident than she would be in 2015.

[Ideas can stem from your daily life](#) Ideas may come from discussions with colleagues, your students, parents at your school, your family, or at the water cooler. They may simply occur to you. This is a source of ideas that should not be discounted. Why? Because those stories should reflect the concerns of your constituency, and the public at large – educators, parents, students. When you realise that people are talking about a topic and are concerned about it, this is a chance for you to comment on it. It may require that you do some additional research on the topic, but if it is something that you notice many people are talking about, especially the kinds of people you hope to reach, jump on it. Your contribution will be a timely addition to the public discussion.

When you begin to keep your eyes and ears open, you will find yourself having many ideas. For example, you might have been struck by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s [National Day Rally speech](#) in 2012 when he begged parents to “Please let your children have their childhood!” Not only would that have been a good topic for an opinion piece, but you would have had a natural ally to quote in PM Lee.

There is an almost infinite number of topics for op-eds that will come from your daily interactions: you might hear parents complain their children should be learning examinable things in child care rather than playing in sand boxes, or your colleagues wishing that parents would see the need for partnership in a young child’s education and the need for reinforcement from school to home. Any of these issues could be the basis for an opinion piece – one you can write after you do the required research. All editorials and columns should reflect informed opinion. Without doing research to inform yourself, you won’t know what kind of editorial or column to write.

[Research itself as the basis for your piece](#) You can also ‘translate’ academic work or important studies for the lay audience. This helps establish your qualifications as an expert or can be a function of your own expertise. This is not just a matter of reproducing what the research says; for an opinion piece, you still need an argument about why it is relevant for your audience or the general public, and it is helpful if there is some sort of news hook. That could be that the study in question has just been released, or the work could relate to a pertinent local issue.

Consider these two examples recently published in Singapore. In [this example](#) from *Today*, Dean K Ranga Krishnan from the Duke-NUS Medical School talks about the staggeringly high rates of myopia in Singapore and some other Asian nations. While the medical research he quotes is not breaking news, it does relate to a growing public health concern and is therefore timely, as are his suggestions about how to alleviate the problem.

In this [recent piece](#) about the Singaporean labour market, Wheelock College Executive Director, Trisha Craig, argues that spending time abroad in work or study attachments can give young workers important skills. By not only relating this argument to the government’s much discussed [ASPIRE report](#) but also using the news hook of a large, important study just released by the European Union, it has a timeliness that would appeal to an editor.

Your own research Finally, your own original research may provide good material for an opinion piece. Many ECE professionals in Singapore have carried out research as part of graduate or post-graduate programs. For those who have taken that task seriously and have interesting and reliable data or findings, this can be the source of an advocacy piece.

However, it is important to note that the tone and purpose of advocacy writing is quite different from that of academic prose. In part, it is a matter of knowing your audience. When writing for the general public, it is important to refrain from the use of discipline specific terminology or assumptions your lay audience may not share. Whereas academic writing may attempt to answer a very concrete question or test a theory, advocacy writing is typically more concerned with ‘pragmatic questions’ (Hillman, Tandberg, and Sponsler, 2015, p.46) about how to address or solve problems.

Studies by themselves are not typically the point of an advocacy piece. Your research may be merely the jumping off point for commentary or an incidental part of your piece, where you use your findings to illustrate a larger point or give credibility to your argument. A common error is to over-describe the scholarly research conducted, leaving little room for linking it to issues of interest to the public.

To use your own research in an opinion piece, think about how it illuminates a current issue or extends the debate but is not the main focus of the piece itself. In this [example](#), the author uses some of her own research to suggest some reasons why a relatively high percentage of trained ECE teachers decide not to enter the field, but this is secondary to the overall point about what the sector needs to do to retain qualified teachers.

Writing the Essay

In the 800-word opinion piece, there is little space for extraneous material. It is tight and so must be your argument. In addition, you are competing with other stories of the day so it should be clear from the outset what your point is. If your reader has to get to the middle or the end before she knows what you are arguing, it is likely that by that point, you’ve lost her.

A common structure for this type of piece is:

- A creative lead paragraph
- A nut paragraph
- Body paragraphs with argument and evidence
- Body paragraphs with your proposed solutions
- A wrap up

Unlike other forms of non-fiction writing, news paragraphs, including those in opinion writing, tend to be short – just a sentence or two. The lead should grab the reader’s attention and the focus should be apparent from the outset. In one of the examples referenced above, K Ranga Krishnan begins an opinion piece on increasing myopia in children with “We learn about the world mostly through what we see. Our eyes are our connection to the world.” This is a catchy, almost poetic way to introduce the importance of the eyes.

This creative lead can then be followed by what is known as a ‘nut paragraph’, or one that introduces your main point. You should always be able to sum up what you are writing in a sentence. If you are not clear from the outset what the piece is about, it will be much harder to write. Typically, the nut paragraph introduces that idea.

Then, body paragraphs should present facts and data that you’ve collected as you sought supporting evidence for your claim. Here, you can quote sources (including previous news stories that your piece may be reacting to), give examples and statistics, refer to your own data, or use analogies. In the myopia piece, for example, the Dean highlighted a study

of children of Chinese heritage in Australia to compare them with Chinese children in Singapore in order to show that myopia rates are not entirely a function of genetics.

This is also the place where you can point to your allies. For example, if you mention the Prime Minister’s admonition to parents to let children have a childhood in a piece you are writing about the importance of play, you strengthen your case by association.

After presenting the evidence, you then need to spend a little time offering solutions to the problem or situation you have described. It is important not to preach or moralize but simply to show why your suggestions will have the desired effect. If yours is only a partial solution, it is fine to say that. To continue with the example of the myopia piece, the author proposes more outdoor time for children as one way to ameliorate the problem since exposure to sunlight is one of the factors that help eye development. Yet, he also points out that new drugs are being pioneered for myopia.

He recognizes that this is another, different solution than the one that he is proposing but also notes that drugs are not without side-effects and concludes that both remedies may be important. That is, he implicitly shows those who might say there is no need to send children outside when soon we will have drugs to fix the problem that they are mistaken. This is an effective way of presenting your case: tacitly acknowledge that there are other views and that you have taken them into account, but then show why you believe your position to be right or at least crucial to include.

Sometimes the solution you want to propose will be expensive or time-consuming or have some other significant downside. Acknowledge that but ask your reader to consider the costs of not adopting your solution: will the costs increase by waiting; by investing now, will significant problems be avoided in the future; will outcomes for children improve by making the change now; are there ways to decrease the downsides – by cost-sharing with parents, encouraging volunteers, etc. Make sure your solutions are not just feasible but think creatively about how to devise ones that would garner a lot of support.

You may want to include a final sentence or paragraph that wraps up the piece by returning to where you began. This is optional but the symmetry of such a structure makes this a common way to end. In the examples of opinion pieces we have provided here, Craig’s labour market column does that by ending with the play on words “that is something we can all aspire to” as a way to refer back to the ASPIRE report, which she mentioned at the outset.

The importance of research No matter what the topic, all good opinion writing requires research. Your opinion needs to be based on concrete facts and accurate reporting, or the whole point of your piece may fail -- or worse, it may libel someone. When we talk about research for opinion writing, we do not mean academic research or carrying out studies, but rather searching for evidence, facts, relevant statistics, interviews with knowledgeable people. These are what support your particular viewpoint and strengthen your ability to persuade your reader.

While there is a place for personal story in these sorts of pieces, there are several caveats about using them. Ensure that your story is related to your professional position or the guise under which you are offering your expertise. It should not be simply a personal anecdote. Nor should it come off sounding like a case of ‘sour grapes.’ Ideally, it is an example that you show to be generalizable. “As a principal who has led many schools in the heartland...” “My experience as a Mother Tongue Teacher in Malay...” “Having worked with the families of special needs children...” All of these types of example suggest to your reader that what you are saying has resonance beyond your particular circumstances and helps establish your own authority and credibility.

Be sure to research and understand *both* sides of the issue about which you are writing. You cannot adequately defend your opinion if you don’t understand the opposing arguments. If you think there is a program or policy that is flawed or not working, talk to those in charge to find out why it was implemented – and demonstrate to the reader your

understanding of the opposing argument. Then write your editorial explaining *why* the policy is problematic, weak or unfair. You must also be flexible and willing to give up or modify your position if your research shows the facts don't justify your original position.

Finding data Sometimes you will want to include recent statistics related to your topic. You may need information related to the sector such as average pay for teachers or the number of childcare centres that have operated over time. It may be that you want more general information about Singapore, such as a breakdown of how much different kinds of households spend per month on pre-primary education. Or you may want to say something about how Singapore compares internationally on the topic you are writing about.

It may be that in reading newspaper articles or more specialised publications that you find the figures you are looking for. Indeed, it may be that such figures are the spark of an idea for you to write about. Sometimes a newspaper article or interview will mention the publication of new data that are publicly available. However, often you will find yourself wanting to know some fact that you do not have. While there is no one place that gathers all such material, getting to know your way around Singapore's and international sites that collect and publish data is a skill well worth developing. While not everything you need will be available online, there is a great deal of data that *is* published.

Here are just some examples to get you started:

Singapore data

Ministries and agencies in Singapore publish a phenomenal amount of data that is useful to those interested in education and Singaporean society as a whole. Much of the data is collected annually so you can also track developments over time. Often when a governmental agency releases annual data, it will also publish the highlights of what it found. This is a good way to see what topics are covered and may give you the answers you are looking for but you can always go to the more detailed reports.

[Statistics Singapore](#) is always a good place to find data. They publish the [annual report](#) on household expenditure, which contains a wealth of information on how households at different income levels spend money. There are many additional reports they offer as well. The data may not always be in the exact form you want, so you may need to do some further calculations, but there is a wealth of information available.

[MOM](#), the Ministry of Manpower, has data on different aspects of the labour market in Singapore. For ECE professionals, one interesting report they release annually is the starting salary table for different polytechnic and university programs. While it is limited because it only includes graduates of national institutions and the graduates themselves supply the data, which are thus subject to reporting bias, MOM is nonetheless an important source of information. Its [interactive website](#) makes it very easy to compare salary conditions for early childhood trained professionals compared to other courses of study.

[MSF](#), the Ministry of Social and Family Development, may also have information of use. While it does not have a separate part of its website dedicated to data, you can find useful information in different places on the site. For example, suppose you want to see the trend in the number of childcare centres operating in Singapore over time or the average cost of those over time. Those [data](#) are available through MSF.

There may be other topics you are writing about where you can use government data you might not initially think about. For example, suppose you are writing a piece on how Singapore's art museums can be a source of learning for pre-schoolers and how teachers can build curricula based on current exhibits. You might wish to consult the annual [Cultural Statistics Report](#) compiled by the MCCY that includes data on museum visitorship. It may not have everything you are looking for, but would certainly contain good background information.

Global data

There are many sources for comparative data that you might find helpful. The very common places to look for education data are [UNESCO](#), the [World Bank](#), the Asian Development Bank ([ADB](#)), the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development ([OECD](#)). These are all worth getting to know.

At the same time, there are smaller data sets that allow you to compare issues globally. For example, the World Economic Forum every year releases a [report](#) on the economic competitiveness of countries, something that Singapore does very well on. Social capital, a measure often thought to be correlated with a variety of positive social outcomes, is measured for many countries by the [Legatum Prosperity Index](#). And while most ECE professionals in Singapore are familiar with the [global ranking](#) of the preschool sector done by the Lien Foundation, not everyone has focused on how other countries fare compared with Singapore. There are so many sources of information that can be used to situate Singapore in comparative context that it would be impossible to list them. Get to know them by doing an online search for whatever concept it is you are addressing and the term ‘data.’

Tips for Writing As you write, here are some suggestions to keep in mind.

- Provide sufficient support for your premise, but don't overwrite. Stay focused. Studies show that the longer the piece, the less likely it is to be read by the audience.
- Make an argument – express a point of view on a subject and support it with evidence – go beyond stating facts.
- An argument is usually a main idea, a “claim” or “premise” or “thesis statement,” backed up with evidence that supports the idea.
 - “Child care teachers are teaching children during the most important brain development years of their lives.” That is a fact, not an argument.
 - “Child care teachers are teaching children during the most important brain development years of their lives. Therefore, society needs to place a greater premium on ECE.” That is an argument that now can be backed up with evidence.
- Include a solution to any problem you are criticizing, and suggest specific action.
- Research, come up with your findings, and introduce your evidence to the reader. You must say why and how this evidence supports your argument.
- Your evidence may be based on stats, news, reports from credible organizations, expert quotes, scholarship, history, first-hand experience, your own research, your expert analysis of other research, authoritative opinion. Cite a number of examples.
- Give your interpretation of the evidence.
- Do not assume that readers already know what you are talking about; walk them through the evidence that supports your claim.
- Show that you have a deep understanding of the issue you are discussing and anticipate and address counterarguments or objections.
- By considering what someone who disagrees with your position might have to say about your argument, you show that you have thought things through, and you dispose of some of the reasons your readers might have for not accepting your argument.
- Your closing point usually goes back to and reinforces your opening statement.
- An “open ending” suggests rather than states a conclusion, while a “closed ending” states rather than suggests a conclusion.

What to do with your draft Now that you have a draft of your piece, you are half way there. The first thing to remember is your first draft is not perfect and must be revised. Give it to someone to read for clarity who will give you honest feedback. Does he know what you are trying to say? Is it persuasive? Are there things that don't seem relevant? Perhaps most important, is it interesting? Remember that an editor wants something that her readers will want to read. It may be coherent but if it's boring, you will want to figure out a way to make it appeal to readers.

When you incorporate changes as a result of your own first read or that of someone else, it may be necessary to cut out part of the original in order to keep to the desired length. This can be hard – you must be prepared to let go of sentences that you slaved over and are now very attached to.

Also, if a reader asks you a question that you don't know the answer to but realize it's important for the piece, you may need to do a bit more research for the revision. That may be something as simple as Googling some facts or figures, but it's important to note that the revision process can include more research, not just grammar and wording fixes.

Remember Advocacy Opinion pieces are a great way to advocate for the sector and to establish your personal brand or that of your organisation. You should also pay attention to the identifying tagline that lets readers know who you are. These are short and do not give you a lot of room to introduce yourself. In addition to saying who you are, it can help situate the piece for readers. If it says you are a principal with more than 10 years in the sector, the reader knows what kind of experience you bring. If it says you are studying for a Bachelor's degree in ECE, you offer the voice of the future. In terms of identifying yourself, it is important for the sector's image that the public see you as part of the sector rather than just an individual. However, before mentioning the organisation where you work or study, do make sure you clear this with your organisation if you identify yourself as one of its members or employees.

Getting it Published In Singapore, two of the most widely read newspapers with daily opinion columns are the *Straits Times* and *Today*. However, there are also other outlets for your work such as Community Centre publications. The Association of Early Childhood Educators Singapore ([AECES](#)) has a print publication, *Early Educator*, a bi-annual journal for the profession that considers submissions on topics around advocacy. All newspapers have electronic addresses to which submissions may be sent. You can send your piece directly or first contact the editor to see if a piece on your topic is something the paper would consider. If you decide to send an inquiry first, explain in a short paragraph what your piece is about and give a short summary of the argument.

Sample inquiry letter

Dear Editor, I am writing to see if you would be interested in an opinion piece on the latest research on language development in young children and the importance of engaging in back and forth conversation. In the piece I explain the research and how it contradicts some prior views, then show the importance of this for Singapore. I offer examples of what can be done in pre-school classrooms and what parents can do at home to help with children's language acquisition, which is crucial for future learning and academic success. May I send you the piece for consideration? Yours sincerely, Ms X, preschool classroom teacher.

Getting Published

How a *Straits Times* editor picks her pieces for publication

"People often ask how I make my choices. I am guided by whether an article offers information, insight, and instruction. The first tells you salient facts; the second offers an interpretation or perspective on events; and the third leaves you enriched, educated, or edified."

- Chua Mui Hoong
Opinion Editor, *Straits Times*

Letters to the Editor

Not ready to write a full-fledged opinion column yet? Letters to the editor (LTE) are a good way to start. Writers of these range from those with expert opinion to people who are simply having their say. Letters to the editor have a long history and became popular in the 18th Century when newspapers were filled with back and forth debate in the letters section. Think of them as the Twitter of the past.

Letters typically range from 100 to 150 words, although the *Straits Times* will accept up to 400 words. Remember though: The shorter something is, the more readers you'll attract.

Timeliness matters a great deal. Letters are often in response to a published story or an event or even other recent letters so it is important to strike while the iron is hot. Indeed, you will often find in the print edition of the *Straits Times* a letter about a feature story that ran the day before. The time-sensitive nature of letters highlights again the importance of following the news closely and on a regular, daily basis. You may have something important to say on an issue but if you write a letter about an event or article a week after it has happened, you will likely have missed your chance to comment on it.

This is important not just because you have something to say but because you are not writing and commenting in a vacuum. Other people are always shaping public opinion and discourse and as an advocate, you do not want the terms of the debate to be shaped without your contribution. So you must strive to have your voice represented. That is one reason why many letters to the editor are from interested organizations or individuals who want to explain their side of the story or to correct what they see as an erroneous portrayal of their position.

Similarly, when you see something that you agree with, a letter to the editor reinforcing that is also a way of advocating by showing the public that there is a lot of support for the position expressed. For example, if a story appeared where a Minister visited a childcare centre and said something complimentary about the work being done there, you could write a letter to the editor expressing appreciation for the Minister's visit and then elaborating further on whatever he was complimentary about. By doing this, you reinforce the Minister's message but also extend the public's knowledge. In that way, you both advocate for the sector and help show the high level of professionalism that characterises those in the sector.

Types of Letters

As you become a regular reader of letters to the editor, you will notice several types that appear. We put them into the following categories: official responses, expert opinion, concerned citizens, and particularistic claims. For the purposes of advocacy, we recommend that you try to focus on the expert opinion category or the most highly qualified end of the concerned citizen category. We explain the categories in more depth below and then discuss letters that are part of a concerted, coordinated advocacy strategy.

Official responses Letters in this category often come from Ministries, government agencies, businesses or other organisations where a clarification or response to an article or letter is warranted. For example, a few recent LTEs in the *Straits Times* by young people talking about why youth are participating in fewer sports activities than in the past prompted a curriculum director at the MOE to write in to explain all the programs the government is doing to provide all students a chance to have opportunities for sports. This kind of letter is a chance for an organisation to add additional content to the original story or a letter, to correct perceptions, or invite the public to engage in an ongoing dialogue.

Expert opinion This kind of letter is written by an expert who identifies herself as such and brings specialised knowledge to the conversation. The information given could support the point of view with additional evidence from the scholarly or professional literature that was not included in the original article or letter, or it could dispute facts or

conclusions by referring to the same literature. A labour economist could write a letter to comment on a piece about hiring foreign workers; the head of the Nursing Association could offer her opinions about a story on eldercare; an allied educator could draft a letter on a report on special needs programmes; a male ECE degree candidate could counter a parent's letter about not wanting male preschool teachers in her child's school by explaining that the current regulations already have rules in place to address her exact concerns. This kind of LTE can be a very effective form of advocacy because it adds important information to the conversation and shows the high level professionalism of the advocates themselves.

Concerned citizens In some ways, these are the most common type of LTE. Citizens want to have their say about issues and they have taken the time to put their thoughts on paper and share them with their fellow Singaporeans. Whether it is a letter about how to deal with trash problems, what to do with the CPF scheme, the importance of reviving the kampong spirit or how to promote better science education in schools, it is extremely important to read these. First, any time someone writes in to express his opinion, as editors we assume that there are many more people with the same view who are represented by the letter writer. That in and of itself is important. Second, it can be the start of a lively and productive dialogue if people who disagree then write in. Third, and crucial for advocates, responding to such letters represents another way to get your message across. It is a mistake to assume that only feature articles merit responses. LTEs are a way to directly engage with the community and get your message across and to raise the standing of the profession in the public's mind. By responding to a 'concerned citizen' type letter with your own 'expert opinion' letter, you engage in a teachable moment.

Particularistic claims These are the kind of letters by individuals that pursue a claim that would seem to only benefit them or their narrow group. Indeed, sometimes they read as blowing off steam, a complaint or request for assistance. Examples of this could be a letter from a parent with numerous children who wants the government to subsidise the COE for large families on the grounds that taking public transit is difficult with multiple children and such families have little money to spare for a car because of the costs of raising children, or a letter complaining about poor service or missing money in the writer's account at the bank. Newspapers publish letters like this because they have an obligation to act as a voice for the community. When citizens do not know where else to turn for help, the newspaper is a place where they can air their concerns. And typically, such letters do get a response, albeit in a general, and therefore more globally useful, way. An official might respond by explaining why subsidising the COE for different groups would undermine the goal of keeping traffic manageable but suggest other alternatives or a bank representative might explain how customers can file a claim with the bank. Particularistic letters provide an important note of caution for advocates. Advocacy, while advancing ideas on behalf the interests of a group such as children and families, should not attempt to frame their arguments in a particularistic or adversarial way. Rather, advocates should advance their claims based on notions of the common good.

Echo campaigns Sometimes you may read a letter and not realise that it is part of a coordinated effort to get a message across. Echo campaigns are designed to spread messages by having the supporters of an idea get involved in the process. So, for example, suppose a VWO working on behalf of the rights of foreign domestic workers launched a campaign to require a weekly day off for helpers. In addition to the news story that might cover such an initiative, the VWO might ask its supporters or board members to help spread the word and gather public support by writing letters in favour of the proposed idea. By having a lot of 'echo' in the community for ideas, support for them may grow more quickly, and letter writing campaigns can be one effective way to accomplish this.

Social Media as Advocacy Tool

Social media is a powerful tool for advocacy in Early Childhood Education. You can use it to raise awareness and further the public dialogue around preschool practices and policies. By developing a strong presence on social media, you can become a resource and font of information, and use it to establish your expertise to your followers and the public. In addition, you can magnify the impact of what you write by sharing it on social media. Echo campaigns can be conducted.

Developing your Social Media Presence

Your public, professional presence, which you should take pains to differentiate from your private social media existence, must be impeccable. This will help you establish your credibility and that more generally of the profession. As you think about your role as an advocate, consider whether you have a particular expertise you want to share – it could be something like teaching literacy, curriculum development, mentoring, infant and toddler care, or inclusive education. In that case, it makes sense to focus on that topic and continue to develop your expertise on the subject. You might decide to write opinion columns on it and share information and news about the topic on a blog or Twitter. Or you may prefer to work in a more general vein, writing and reacting to ECE-related topics as they arise in the news and public discussions.

When developing a social media presence and strategy, you must also decide who your audience is. Knowing that will help determine the kinds of ways that you use social media. Is your target audience the parents of your students, parents in general, the ECE profession, policy makers? The answer to that question will guide your strategy and choices about what to post. Over time you may refine or expand your target audience, and that is fine.

It is also important to decide how much time you want to devote to writing and advocacy via social media. Some forms of social media, such as blogs, can be time-consuming (although as we will see, that is not necessarily the case.) Others such as Twitter tweets are typically very short, and Facebook can be used quite effectively on a more occasional basis.

Bloggging

The purpose of this paper is not to instruct readers about how to blog – there are many worthwhile books and websites dedicated to that, which we recommend the new blogger consult. Rather, our intent is to offer some suggestions about using social media, including blogs, for advocacy purposes.

While you may write an opinion piece once or twice a year (and use social media to disseminate it), some bloggers post once or twice a day. While that may be unrealistic for those whose regular professional commitments prevent them from that kind of engagement, a weekly update is quite common. Blogs can be content rich in terms of your original posts or they can be minimal – you can curate information for followers. For example, a minimal or more passive strategy would be to post links to articles in the popular press or specialized journals with a short statement about why the piece is interesting or important. This can be an effective way to raise awareness among your audience and bring new ideas to the public debate. Note, however, that while in some ways aggregating information can be easier than generating a great deal of original content, it still takes time to find and read new source material before deciding whether it merits sharing.

Here's a good example of a more passive blog / website created by Wheelock College BSc student Koo Yi Jie. While it is a personal website, it also serves as a blog because she regularly updates the section on ECE research with articles on topics she thinks are important for the profession to consider:

<http://missyjie.blogspot.sg>

Twitter

Twitter is just one of many online platforms, along with Instagram, Pinterest and others, that can be useful for advocacy work. It is a good way to keep in touch with followers, such as the parents at your school or professional colleagues and to keep up with leaders and developments in your field. It is suitable for sharing articles of interest or the latest from thought leaders you admire whose own posts you can retweet. Twitter can also be used to raise the visibility of the profession, for example by tweeting photos from events like the annual ECDA conference.

The use of hashtags (#) allows you to connect with others with similar interests and to establish yourself as a member of that community. For example, suppose you are interested in the ‘word gap’, the well-documented phenomenon that very young children from poorer households tend to lag much behind their middle class counterparts in terms of language acquisition, which has a cumulative and devastating impact on their ability to perform in school. If you were to advocate in favour of measures to close the word gap in Singapore, say, by writing a letter to the editor about it, you could tweet a link to your letter and accompany it with #wordgap. Thus anyone interested in the word gap on Twitter searching for items with that hashtag would be directed to your letter.

Expanding your networks and highlighting your advocacy work can also be done through Twitter. Suppose for example, you are interested in the transition from K2 to P1 and have written a piece or devised an intervention about how to lower the stress that is often associated with that transition. In addition to tweeting about it, you could direct it to people or organizations that you want to know about it, for example the Ministry of Education or @MOEsg.

If you are using Twitter as a professional tool, you must keep it separate from your personal account if you have one. You do not want to compromise or confound your professional identity by mixing your work with more light-hearted or intimate information about yourself.

Facebook

While it is likely that you are already using Facebook to keep in touch with friends, family and even colleagues, it can also be a tool for advocacy. Certainly, if you do publish a piece or a letter, it is easy to share that on Facebook to help it reach a broader audience. You can also use Facebook to post links to articles or research on topics that help raise awareness of early childhood education and teaching. Even with your Facebook friends liking the post, however, the circulation may tend to stay within your established network, depending on how extensive your contacts are.

There are other ways to use Facebook for advocacy. One is to contribute to discussions on professional or advocacy pages. In Singapore, for example, the Preschool Teachers Network Singapore ([PTNS](#)) Facebook page is place dedicated to advocacy where the more than 7,000 early childhood professionals in the group can discuss issue of importance to the profession. A smaller but distinguished [group page](#) is the Early Childhood Community of Practice, which like PTNS, is a closed group.

Open organisational pages present another opportunity to advocate. For example, both the National Library Board and the National Heritage Board have Facebook pages where they announce events for children and families or new exhibits. One can offer comments on these posts that present another chance to advocate for early childhood education: for example, on an announcement about a Mother Tongue story time at a library, one could write a short comment about how important it is to develop a child’s skills in his mother tongue as a foundation for learning other languages later and include a link to a scholarly article or for a notice about a new art exhibit, one could talk about how it could be used by parents or teachers to inform a fun learning activity for small children. By engaging in this way with organisations, you demonstrate the expertise that exists within the early childhood community and act as an advocate for children in the programming of the institutions, something they may not always think about.

Another use of Facebook is to log into online comment sections using your Facebook credentials so that when you engage in discussions, it will also be shared on your Facebook page. Let's say that you have read an online article or op-ed that allows comments. You can add your professional voice to that discussion. In the myopia op-ed example used above, ECE professionals could engage in the online discussion in a way that both exhibits a thoughtful understanding of the topic and advocates for a change in mindset about outdoor play in Singapore. The existing comments criticise the piece as being an incomplete piece of research and offering advice without sufficient evidence. Yet, five minutes spent researching myopia and sunlight exposure in children on the Internet shows that the evidence is actually quite strong and that doctors do advise sending children out of doors, specifically for about 14 hours per week.

An early childhood advocate could add an online comment to the effect of "Although the Dean does not cite all the medical literature here, presumably for lack of space, the scientific evidence is quite strong that sunlight can help prevent heritable myopia. Recently researchers at the Ohio State University have suggested that sunlight helps children's growing eyes conform to the proper shape, thus helping to prevent nearsightedness and they recommend that children try to get about 14 hours a week of natural light. As an early childhood educator, I appreciate the importance of outdoor play and encourage my peers to advocate for more outdoor time built into the daily curriculum and to explain the scientific rationale to parents, who might have objections to their children playing outside."

A response such as this has the effect of responding not just to the original piece but also to other less well-informed commenters. It adds new information on the science, enhancing the credibility of our imagined ECE commenter and offers a science based rationale for arguing for a curriculum change. It also acknowledges that parents may object to outdoor play but suggests that armed with evidence, teachers may be able to convince them otherwise. This is a form of advocacy.

Common Sense Cautions about Social Media

Remember the 'social' element of social media: platforms meant for sharing mean that even in closed groups, others you may not know can see it and you have no control over how it is disseminated. As many people have learned, posts they thought were private or funny turn out to be neither when shown to the world and sometimes this has led to disastrous, life-upending consequences for the poster. You do not want to be the next Amy Cheong, Anton Casey or Justine Sacco. Before you post anything remotely related to your professional activities, ask yourself if your colleagues, school parents, boss, former employer or future employer saw it, would it reflect well on you?

As a member of the ECE community, always take the opportunity to demonstrate expertise and professionalism. By commenting on posts and offering an early childhood focused interpretation, you help advocate for the sector by reminding people of its importance and how education is not just what happens in school. By addressing policy issues, you help focus the conversation.

The language you use is important. The impact of what you write will be blunted by poor style and grammar. Even when posting on professional sites where other commenters are using slang, stick to flawless grammar and spelling. This is especially true where the general public or parents may read what you are writing. As someone in the business of education, an early childhood educator should always seek to display the excellent communication and writing skills society expects from those whose role it is to teach the young.

Do not engage in making particularistic claims that seem to benefit only a narrow group at the expense of others. Always think of the general principle you are advocating or asking about and try to show how there are broad benefits to be gained from your suggestions.

Even on closed pages or sites, never engage in making negative comments about parents, other teachers, employers, the government, or rival organizations even in the abstract. This does not have to mean you agree with everything anyone says; indeed, part of advocacy is often discussing a situation you want to change. However, the point is that you should use logic and argumentation to get your point across, not attacks on people who disagree with you or institutions that pursue policies with which you differ. Understanding the point of view of the other is crucial for being able to develop effective counter arguments.

What happens if you are participating on a closed professional board (or even open board) where members are engaged in a form of ‘trash talking’, for example, about parents or government agencies? It should be your task to bring the debate or discussion to a higher level. You can do this by asking people in the conversation to take a step back and think about solutions rather than simply complaining or suggesting some alternatives to policies that are disliked and asking for strategies to start to influence official thinking about them. Imagine the public outcry that would ensue if it were found that doctors on a professional site considering the problem of smoking or rising obesity were talking about their patients and laughing at them as foolish or weak-willed, rather than offering each other advice about how to approach their patients to discuss stopping smoking or losing weight. This would undermine the professional image of doctors and hurt their reputation with the public and their own patients. It might even make their patients less likely to ask for help. The same is no less true for early childhood. If we want the public to consider it a skilled and trusted profession, its members must always act as consummate professionals. Advocating for the profession means not just offering well thought out solutions to specific problems, but doing so in a manner that demonstrates the highest levels of expertise, knowledge, and communication ability.

Final Considerations

The written word is a communication tool that lends itself to powerful form of advocacy. We hope that we have given you some ideas and encouragement about how to get your message across in writing. Whether you compose an op-ed, a letter to the editor, or a post on social media, the focus should always be on contributing to the debate with clarity and expertise. Within the Early Childhood sector, the more people who add their voices and ideas on behalf of children and families, the more the public will be exposed to the value of early education. And the better, more deeply knowledgeable and convincing the message put forth by early childhood educators and specialists, the greater the esteem in which the public will hold the profession.

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About the Paper

This developed out of a Wheelock College Singapore professional development workshop we delivered in Singapore in February, 2015. We are grateful to the participants for attending and whose questions helped focus the paper. While the audience for the workshop was Singaporeans and the example chosen were local, the subject matter is relevant for the early childhood sector more globally. For those who might be less familiar with Singapore, we offer these clarifications about the examples used. Kampong spirit (p.12) refers to the communal, village life in Singapore before the rapid economic growth of the 1980s transformed it into the towering metropolis it is today. The COE (p.12) is the Certificate of Entitlement that anyone wishing to purchase a car must buy first. The policy is to encourage people to use mass transit and avoid the problems of gridlock that plague other major cities in the region. The price is determined by monthly auction of the available certificates and as of early 2015, the COE is around \$50,000 USD. On page 15, we list some victims of self-inflicted social media injuries. While Justine Sacco is known world-wide, Amy Cheong and Anton Casey were Singaporean examples of how insulting those of other races or social classes can go viral and send you packing.

We wish to express our thanks to SEED Institute who offered us space for the workshop, to Koo Yi Jie for allowing us to share her beautiful website and blog, and to PTNS who helped generate interest in the workshop.