

BOLD Annual Report 2021

2021 continued to be a difficult year for many not-for-profit voluntary organisations like BOLD. In particular, it has been hard for the children with learning difficulties and their parents whom BOLD serves. The continued lockdowns, school closures and social distancing rules meant that many of our core activities like Play Group and Social Group as well as all face to face teaching for Focus on Literacy and the Literacy Camp had to be put on hold. We were able to conduct 2 out of 4 shared programs with our partner organization, Asia Community Services (ACS). However, our Focus On Literacy team has risen to the occasion and continued to make great progress with more new teaching materials and trainings Online with a view to reach out to more children with learning difficulties including those from the B40 communities.

A. Impact of the Covid 19 Pandemic

2020 had already seen both BOLD and our partner organization ACS making drastic adjustments in response to the Covid 19 Pandemic. The staff had, within a month of the first lockdown in March 2020, successfully pivoted to conducting *some* of our intervention programs Online. Training and upskilling further improved and sharpened the efficacy of Online services. Nevertheless, *most* of our programs could not be conducted Online.

As the Pandemic continued into 2021, it became obvious that more drastic re-thinking and adjustments were necessary.

We decided to continue Online sessions for Focus on Literacy (FOL) and First Step but would not attempt to return to the other Centre-based programs. Instead, when the Pandemic eases or ends, the new strategy would be to go out into the community to reach children from poorer families.

In line with this decision, and to reduce costs, we moved out of Pusat BOLD @ Minden in May, to 227 Jalan Pemancar to share space with ACS. Pusat ACS-BOLD in Seberang Jaya was also moved to a smaller space at 57 Tingkat Kikik 4, Taman Inderawasih, Perai.

BOLD records our thanks to ACS, in particular Ms Khor Ai Na, who gave unsparingly of her time and energy in every step of the process of planning, organizing and physical moving out of our 2 Centres.

The positive side to all these challenging adjustments is that the 2 organizations are now more closely linked than before, strengthening the partnership that began in 2009.

B. Programs and Activities

1. Shared Programs with ACS: First Step

First Step Early Intervention for children with special needs from birth to pre-school age was the first of 4 shared programs with ACS to go Online in 2020. Our staff worked hard to grow the Online sessions but due to various constraints, in particular holding the attention of very young children through hand-phones or tablets, First Step was able to reach only 41 children in 2021.

2. Shared Programs with ACS: Support for Inclusive Education

For the first half of 2021, our Consultant on Inclusive Education continued to provide support for 16 Children with Special Needs in 4 preschools and 2 primary schools, all on Penang island. Initially she was still able to visit some of the preschools and schools to assess the children's needs and suggest strategies for management. But, as the pandemic continued, all counselling and support had to go Online, through phone

calls with parents or teachers. As schools came under stricter SOPs, it became impractical to continue this program.

On the sale and distribution of the series “We are Friends”, Kah Cheng’s family made a donation to buy up unsold hard copies of the series to be distributed free to primary schools in Penang so that the series will be more widely available, thereby promoting more effectively the principle of Inclusive Education. Liok Ee undertook to work out the best way to implement the distribution with the help of school principals who are members of the BOLD committee.

All 5 books in the “We are Friends” series are now available on BOLD’s website and Facebook pages as short video storytelling sessions by Ms Tasha Merican. We hope these video clips will be used by parents and teachers for children to view and be more sympathetic to their “special” friends.

3. Focus on Literacy & Storytelling

- a. We successfully completed the Yayasan Hasanah Project of 2020 in March 2021 and submitted a full report that was well accepted. The Project enabled us to grow our teaching teams through more systematic training programs. The team members have proved to be highly dedicated and conscientious. They have continued to serve on BOLD’s FOL project throughout 2021. As a result, we have had 35 active FOL team members, the highest number since FOL began.

Secondly, 2021 was the first time FOL was conducted in 3 languages in all 3 types of Malaysian primary schools, i.e. National Primary (Malay) and National Type Primary (Chinese and Tamil).

With a larger number of team members trained to reach out to more children in 3 different languages in more schools, our FOL Consultant as well as Coordinators worked very hard throughout 2021 to improve and expand our teaching materials in all 3 languages.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the experience of taking FOL as Outreach to preschools and primary schools, located in lower income areas, highlighted to us that these children were in greater need of free and easily accessible intervention for their reading difficulties than the children whose families are able to bring them to our centres for FOL sessions.

This became even more apparent when the continuing Pandemic and closure of physical classes required teaching to go Online. Though most of our teams managed to pivot to Online teaching, we lost many children who were originally part of the Yayasan Hasanah Project when schools were shut down and face-to-face teaching sessions were impossible due to changing SOPs in the schools. We were not able to reach children from the poorest families as their families were not able to support them in Online sessions.

This was our first-hand experience of the now well-documented severe educational deprivation of the poorest sectors of society due to the impact of the Pandemic on the school system. In comparison, the families of children who enrolled through our centres were largely able to support Online sessions, highlighting again the disparity between children able and unable to come to our centres for intervention services.

It is this experience that has led BOLD to make the decision to grow FOL as a community-based Outreach Program and phase out centre-based FOL teaching sessions.

- b. Overall, FOL reached a total of 110 children in 2021, including those who began in 2020 as part of the Yaysan Hasanah Project. Of the 110 children, 22 were unable to continue to attend teaching sessions and 21 “graduated” i.e. they finished the FOL syllabus and were essentially able to read at age appropriate levels. 67 are continuing to attend FOL sessions in 2022.

- c. Storytelling sessions have been an integral part of BOLD's FOL Program as it is the most effective way to build oral language fluency as the basis for early literacy. Storytelling is also an effective way to engage and encourage participation and motivate interest in books and learning to read. We have a dedicated Chinese language storyteller, Ms Khoo Poh Hong, who has been conducting monthly storytelling sessions at BOLD's Minden Centre for many years. Ms Khoo successfully took her sessions Online in 2020 and continued faithfully this year, making up a total of 12 monthly Chinese storytelling sessions this year. Tasha began monthly Storytelling sessions in Malay in July and conducted a total of 6 sessions in 2021.
- d. Finally, the FOL Program has undergone some important changes in 2021. As part of BOLD's re-organization exercise in 2020, a Sub-committee headed by Ms Chia Kien Eng was set up to oversee the FOL Program. Under Ms Chia Kien Eng's leadership, the FOL Committee has, in 2021, reviewed many important aspects of the Program. The Program's objectives are more clearly stated with well-defined guidelines for the Intake process, including a new Pre-Intervention Assessment Tool. Kien Eng has brought in a more professional approach to FOL which will definitely strengthen its implementation in future as the FOL Committee continues to conduct its ongoing review on teaching programs, resources, training and criteria for recruitment of team members.

As part of this ongoing review, our FOL Consultant Mr. Tan Kien Hooi, is working closely with our staff to review and improve teaching materials in Chinese and Malay, bringing in essential adaptations and more "hi-tech" teaching tools for Online classes.

All FOL team members and staff came together in a wonderful year end meeting on 16 December 2021 to share their experiences working with the program and their hopes for the future of the program. Many team members revealed that the most valuable aspect of their experiences working with FOL was not in the skills that they had learnt but in the personal development that they had undergone. They found that they had, through teaching children with special needs, become more patient, more understanding, and more aware and accepting of how different individual children could be. And, of course, they had become more confident as teachers in the process.

A second, and no less important, aspect that emerged from the year-end meeting was that as a result of FOL going Online, the teacher-parent relationship had become stronger and warmer compared to when teaching sessions were Face-to-Face. When teaching sessions were conducted on-site in the schools, the team members rarely got to meet with the parents. And, for those conducting FOL at our centers, parents would often drop off and pick up their children without much time for interaction. But, having to arrange for Online sessions and help their children with devices and timing, there was more occasion for interactions with parents, especially mothers. As a result, there is now a stronger and closer relationship between parents and team members. Perhaps most interesting of all is that some parents sat in on the Online sessions and a couple of mothers actually learnt together with their children and reported to team members that their own literacy levels had improved by following their children's Online classes.

4. Talks & Workshops

The 2021 Calendar was packed with In-House training workshops to upskill FOL Team Members and to support them in conducting teaching sessions effectively as they switched almost completely to Online sessions.

Starting from February all the way to December, there were either workshops on major topics for all team members or training sessions for separate groups of team members in smaller groups as the training went into more specific and detailed aspects of teaching materials.

With so much work needed in organizing training workshops for our team members, there was much less attention on general awareness talks. In 2021, there were just 2 talks, both Online and in Malay, by Ms Tasha Merican, on "Understanding and teaching Children with Special Needs".

C. Funding/ Fundraising

Despite the Covid-19 Pandemic, BOLD has been very fortunate in being able to raise enough funds to cover this year's expenditure.

This is mainly because we continued to receive generous grants or donations from our regular supporters — the Penang State Government, Lim Lean Teng Foundation, Star Foundation, and Saw Seng Kew Foundation, all faithful supporters of BOLD in the past few years. BOLD also received some special funds related to the Pandemic; firstly from the Government's Prihatin scheme and secondly, from Yayasan Sin Chew. And, as in previous years, we received donations both big and small from many generous individuals, corporations, and organizations.

But, it was a special fundraiser organized by Ms Chia Kien Eng that gave BOLD's finances the essential additional boost to cover expenses for year 2021. On the occasion of her mother's 99th birthday, Ms Chia and her family organized a "Paper Flowers by Madam Liang" fundraiser for BOLD, targetting RM99,000/= to mark her special birthday. The unique appeal of a 99-year old making beautiful bouquets of paper flowers for a charitable cause eventually resulted in surpassing the targetted 99 figure and attaining a total collection of slightly over RM160,000/=.

A special Thank You to Madam Liang, Kien Eng and her family for organizing this special fundraiser for BOLD.

2021 has been a busy and eventful year for BOLD. Clearly, we have managed to reach and to help far fewer children than in pre-pandemic times. But we have worked very hard on doing everything we can to reach children through Online sessions and we have also worked very hard on training as well as improving our teaching materials and strategies. All this will, hopefully, be good preparation for the time when we will be gearing up to reach out to the children who have suffered the most from the ravages of the Pandemic. We foresee a difficult year ahead in fund raising. I take this opportunity to urge each and every one of our members, volunteers and supporters to continue to help us raise funds to help us help the children in need.

*Dr. Tan Liok Ee
President
March 2022*