

Prof. Ph.D. Shu-Chen Yen – Interview

“Sometimes it is enough to get out of your conformed zone and think what can I do to make things a little bit better.”

In the period from May 28 to June 3, 2023, Prof. Shu-Chen Yen Jenny, PhD, visited Faculty of Teacher Education. Prof. Shu-Chen Yen, PhD is a distinguished professor and researcher in the field of early and preschool psychology at the Department of Child and Adolescent Studies at California State University, Fullerton, USA. The collaboration between colleague Jenny and prof. Sanja Tatalović Vorkapić, PhD started during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, resulting in the translation of one of her social stories, “Something Very Strange Happened in My Town”, from English to Croatian: . The professor is known for her extremely high involvement in her local community, since she creates social stories aimed at strengthening the well-being (especially the social-emotional well-being) of children and young people during certain challenging situations in life, which can be seen here: Social Story Center (<https://socialstorycenter.com/>). Given our shared professional interests aimed at achieving a higher level of children’s well-being in the world, colleague Jenny is involved as an external associate in the UNIRI project: Children’s Well-Being During Transition Life Periods: Empirical Validation of the Ecological-Dynamic Model (uniri.drustv- 18-11) and, as part of the agreed project activities, she was invited to visit the faculty at the end of the summer semester of the academic year of 2022/2023 . After several working meetings with the project manager and members of the project team, prof. Jenny held two lectures: the lecture Using Social Stories to Empower the Young Generation Combating COVID-19, Racism, and the Ukraine/Russia War (for students of the undergraduate study programme Early and Preschool Care and Education and for students of the Integrated Teacher Training Study at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka; and for students of the undergraduate study programme in Pedagogy at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka;); and the lecture How to Customize a Social Story to Help Young Children’s Psychological Needs (for students of the graduate study programme Early and Preschool Care and Education). As part of her guest appearance, prof. Shu-Chen Yen, PhD visited kindergarten Đurđice, reading

her stories to the children of one nursery group and one older, preschool group of children. During her lecture at the faculty and her visit to the kindergarten in Đurđice, the professor presented the students and children with her social stories, which she had brought in printed form. Also, prof. Jenny collaborated within working meetings on the topic of joint research work and the creation of new social stories on the topic of the war in Ukraine (in collaboration with colleague Olesya Saban) and on the topic of transition from family to kindergarten. In addition to all the above activities, on June 1, 2023, the professor gave an interview for the journal Educational Issues, which follows below.



Dear professor Shu – Chen, it is our pleasure to have you here at our faculty and thank you for accepting our invitation for this interview.

- Please, tell us something about yourself - your professional and private identity.

Thank you for your invitation. I'm enjoying staying in Croatia and learning about your school system. So, I grew up in Taiwan, a small island in Asia next to China. I came to the USA to pursue my degree. The plan was to get my Master's Degree there and come back to Taiwan, but I fell in love with preschool education during my volunteering there and decided to do my MEd. and PhD in preschool

education. By that time, I had fallen in love with my husband here in USA and now I have two children and a dog.

I have been teaching at California State University for more than 25 years and I teach classes related to early childhood development. I'm very happy to have two Teaching Assistants for each class. It is important for them to learn how to build a relationship with students. One of their jobs is to immediately respond to students when they need help with studying because that is the teaching moment. If a student has a question, you should help them right away or tell them that you don't have an answer right now but that you will try to find it and get back to them with answer as soon as possible. In that moment, the student will know that you care about them. It is crucial that students see the importance of a trustful relationship between teacher and student. During my courses, students can do service-learning projects. We ask in kindergarten what they need, and then my students decide what kind of project they will do. One of the projects was to teach children Spanish and they labeled everything in English and Spanish. In this kind of course, students are more involved and they are more open to ask questions. Also, I did a jump start program in which children who only speak Spanish were learning English with students. Students had to do the listening plan and read stories to them. Firstly, they did 1 to 1 reading and then we discovered children liked to read in groups so we switch to groups of 3 or 4. In this way, children are more relaxed and have fun while learning. Not only children benefited from this project, but students did, as well. They made new friendships and they were more open.

- Can you explain to us what are social stories and storytelling?

Most social stories are about children with special needs. I'm making my social stories available to all kids all over the world. Storytelling is very powerful. During storytelling, people express their emotions and feelings. By using social stories, I want to empower children because children are often scared and they do not understand what is happening around them. You need to tell the child what is happening in the way they will understand, in an age-appropriate way. Then, you will empower them, teach them and help them to better understand the world. We need to teach our children how to say "NO" when they are not feeling comfortable. Firstly, we need to talk to our children and explain to them what to do. Secondly, you need to teach your child how to deal with it. Thirdly, you need to allow your child to practice. It is important to prepare an environment so children can do what you want them to do.

- Which social stories have you created so far? Why these topics?

When you want to create a social story, you need to care about the person. Because, when you care, you will try to do something for this child. On 9/11, when the terrorist attack happened, I was on my way back from work. When I came home, my daughter was in tears and then she asked me what happened. So, I was thinking how I could explain terrorist attack to 4-year-old child. She was in shock because she saw what had happened in the news, she saw people crying but nobody explained to her what was happening. When a child is dealing with fear and you don't help them and talk to them, they will get traumatised. After that, I did a social story about 9/11 for my child and then shared it with my colleges and dean. They decided to put it on the university website and I decided to let anyone download it for free. At that point, we didn't have enough time to draw pictures. Timing is important so we just put pictures from the internet. The beauty of social stories is that you do not need professional illustrator, you just need to use some pictures that will present what the story is about. What is important is that pictures do not traumatise the child. So, I picked the pictures very carefully so children could also see the positive side of this tragedy, like policemen and firemen helping people. When a child has understood what happened and what he or she can do about it, they will feel better. They will empathise with other children and find a way to help others. After that, I did a social story about natural disasters – Hurricane/Typhoons; Anti-Racism and most recently about the Russia-Ukraine War. My motivation is to send a message to kids all around the world.

In my stories, I use animals because kids like them and understand them better. I'm always thinking about how can I explain things to young children. It is important to send positive messages in the end so that children can follow that. For the story about the Russia-Ukraine War, I decided to use A Pola for the main character because A Pola is a teddy bear that every child from Ukraine gets when they cross the border to Poland.

Many people approached me to write a story about gun violence. This is a huge problem in the USA. Many children died because of it. I still haven't written it because my emotions are too strong. Schools should be a safe place, but they are not that safe anymore. There is no safe place any more in the USA because people are free to carry arms. Even one 6-year-old boy carried a gun to school and shot the teacher. Parents should know that their son has a gun in his bag. I don't know the answer to this problem so I can't write a social story about it. Sometimes, the solution is to write a story just for that one child who is dealing

with some problem. That is the beauty of social stories. You can write them just for one child, use their pictures and then help them to get over their problem. That child will feel loved and know that someone cared enough about them to write a story where they are the main character.

My first social story was about a girl who had a problem with going to bathroom. She was very active and very playful so she didn't have time to go to the toilet. Her parents contacted me and I decided to try to write a story where she was the main character. So, I used her pictures and eventually helped her to get over her problem. Also, I became the most popular person in the kindergarten because all kids would come to me to tell me that they were also ready to go to the toilet.

- Do you have feedback from the children, parents, kindergartens or schools about the impact of those social stories?

My COVID-19 story had a huge impact. When the story came out, many people were happy because it promoted vaccination, but also a group of people were not happy about it. The group contacted me by e-mail I told me what they thought about it. This means that I also had reached out to them and made an impact on them. So, this means sometimes you have an impact on people you didn't even aim for.

- What about your international cooperation and translations of these books?

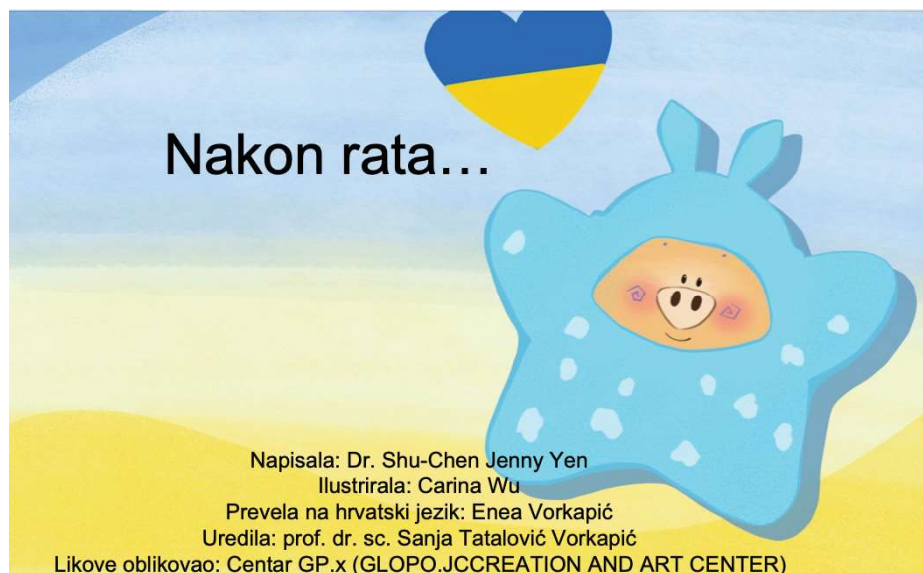
All my story books are free. The beauty of knowledge is to share it. Especially, it is important for children's books to be free so they can read and expand their knowledge. When I wrote a book about Russia and Ukraine, I made 200 copies which were paid from fundraising and sent it to Ukraine. When people see that you are helping someone and that you care, they will open up and help you to reach your goal. Even Jackie Chan, movie star and director, saw my work and he was interested in my project. He decided to cooperate with me and helped me with animation. Also, many people helped me with translation so the story could be told in as many languages as possible.

- Finally, do you have a message for our readers?


Education is critical and it takes time. Maybe, I will not see the impact of my work now, but I'm sure it will be seen after 50 or 100 years. You need to think about your life purpose and be guided by that to make a change or help someone. Sometimes it is enough to get out of your comfort zone and think - what can I do to make things a little bit better?

Education is in the hand of the educator and education is the key to everything.


Education will take a long time, but educators are here to plant a seed for the next generations.



Tena Pejčić;

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4492-9607>

Sanja Tatalović Vorkapić;

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9170-8455>