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Front Cover by Rachel Pang, Technical Executive, UniSIM

#### Notes and erratum for Issue No. 26

1. National Heritage Board, Singapore article by Chin, Ai Ying Karen -

The photographs of the learning moments do not refer to the specific centres in the text.

2. Chinese article : 台湾幼儿园的语文教学, the writer is Chen Jen Jen.

# Contents Page

Page 3	From the Editor
Page 7	First Steps Toward Inclusion - Tracy West
Page 11	Planning with UDL: Meeting the Diverse Needs of Children - Eun Kyeong Cho
Page 18	Using Assistive Technology to Support the Participation of Each and Every Child - Chih Ing Lim
Page 28	Teaching Early Communication and Language Skills to Young Children - Steven Warren and Eva Horn
Page 33	Programme Development in a Large Organisation: A Relationships-Based Curriculum for Birth to Three - Marjory Ebbeck, Geraldine Teo-Zuzarte, Sheela Warriar and Mandy Goh
Page 36	The Value of Play - Stan Chu
Page 39	The Importance of Physical Activity for Young Children: Right from the Start - Deborah Morgan
Page 45	On Playfulness: Neurodevelopmental and Psychological Insights from Creative Therapy - Caroline Essame
Page 50	Notes from a Travelling Playworker - Suzanna Law
Page 55	Beyond the Preschool Classroom: Utilizing Singapore's Museums to Create Lifelong Learners - Karen Chin Ai Ying
Page 61	Creating Inclusive Parent Engagement Practices - Christine Soo
Page 67	Effecting Change in Preschool Education in Beijing through Family-Centered Practice and Servant Leadership: The Road Travelled and Lessons Learned by The Little Oak - Gan Wang



### *From the Editors*

We are pleased to have a collection of articles contributed by several presenters at the 'Born to Play and Learn' Early Childhood Education Conference at SIM University (20-21 June 2016). Given the fairly short timeframe in which we had to put together this volume, we are grateful to all who have contributed so willingly. These articles are clustered according to topics around which the conference has been organised: a) inclusive practice; b) play and well-being; and c) leadership. Due to the space limitations of this special issue, we present four articles with recommendations for inclusive classrooms, six articles focusing on different dimensions of play, and two articles on building and strengthening home-school partnerships. The December issue will feature articles on leadership and policy, so, do look out for that!

### **Including Every Child**

The first cluster of articles addresses the importance of and strategies for including every child in our practice. As Cho points out, the term 'inclusive practice' needs to be defined more broadly rather than mainly considered as recommended practice for children with disabilities. All four articles highlight the importance of intentionality in planning, the engagement of children's interest and the embedment of learning goals in routine as well as targeted activities to facilitate participation by *everyone*. **West** offers practical strategies for capitalizing on teachable moments and embedding learning through the story of a teacher seeking to facilitate participation by a child with developmental delays in her classroom. Ideas for more targeted and individualized strategies are also presented along with the importance of collaborating with educators with specialized knowledge of disabilities in the design of these plans. **Cho** proposes using the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in lesson planning, and illustrates the natural links that these principles have with several prominent theories of learning and development. **Lim** offers insights into how assistive technologies can be used to support participation by children with special learning needs. Finally, **Warren and Horn** offer very practical strategies for facilitating the development of early communication and language skills through the use of "milieu teaching" which involves procedures and techniques such as the *mand-model* and *incidental teaching*.

Moving forward, we encourage teachers, administrators, and policy makers to continue to rethink the notion of *membership* and *participation* in early childhood classrooms - think

about what we can do so everyone can be a *full member* of the class, to putting ourselves in each child's shoes and asking whether and to what extent each feels included. Participation goes beyond being physically present in an activity.

### **Including a Variety of Play Experiences**

While play has been viewed as a cornerstone of learning in the early years, since the time of Pestalozzi and Froebel, there have always been critics who advocate for direct instruction and more adult-structured activities (Johnson, Sevimli-Celik & Al-Mansour, 2013). Many attempts continue to be made over the years to understand play and its role in early childhood education – for instance, it has been seen by DeVries (2001) as 'work activities' that promote children's construction, experimentation, investigation and problem-solving; play has also been advocated to enhance children's physical and socio-emotional well-being, to promote their imagination and creativity, as well as be the 'leading activity' in children's process of learning and developing (Leontev, 1981). Our understanding of play and learning, however, is intertwined with our desired goals for children. While many would argue for school readiness to be a key goal, scientific evidence from neuroscience studies continue to demonstrate how young children's brains are inevitably shaped by physical and active learning through their senses, and that motivating and meaningful learning experiences help shape the development of their executive functions (e.g., self-regulation, memory, mental flexibility) and social competence.

There are six articles in this special issue that remind us of the multiple facets of play and how these should be included in children's lives. Each article describes a perspective that can help us to be more mindful of the importance for advocating for a balance of child-initiated, and adult-initiated play-based learning experiences that are co-constructed over time as an enjoyable learning process to be experienced by both children and adults. **Ebbeck, Teo-Zuzarte, Warriar & Goh's** article describes how their organization has created a responsive curriculum for the youngest children to facilitate their development as emotionally secure explorers who are actively engaged and involved in the daily routines and play activities throughout their time in school. **Chu** addresses the playing and learning needs of older preschoolers, with recommendations to support and extend children's interests through interactive wooden unit block play as well as real-world investigations and draws our attention to the work of neuroscientist, Adele Diamond, who emphasised the mind-body-emotion connection in human

growth and learning. **Morgan**'s article follows from Chu's ideas with suggestions for adult-led physical play activities that can be carried out indoors or outdoors. **Essame** writes from an art therapist's point of view, providing us with reasons to allow children to take the lead in their creative art activities, while **Law**, a playworker, shares her insights from her travels around the world, advocating for all children to have spontaneous play opportunities using open-ended scrap material. Playwork is an accredited profession in the United Kingdom that supports children's play, especially in deprived communities.

This cluster of play-based articles ends at home in Singapore, with **Chin** giving us pointers for how we can better utilise museums and galleries as learning spaces. It may be a surprise to some of us, but Singapore has close to 60 museums and galleries that allow us to dive into a wide range of subject including transportation, water technology, history, art and stamps. To maximize children's experience in these specialized spaces, we should first and foremost, visit and understand the exhibits and stories themselves. This understanding will then enable us to work with museum educators in the best possible way.

#### **Including Parents**

Finally, the last cluster of articles reminds us of the importance of building a collaborative home-school partnership, involving parents in the early education equation. Although this has been accepted as a best practice principle by early educators, our challenge continues to revolve around the *HOW* of building such a collaborative relationship. Soo and Wang both draw upon theoretical frameworks for guiding the development of strategies for involving parents. **Soo** suggests that preschool leaders can leverage on Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Parental Involvement (Epstein et al, 2002) to generate solutions for strengthening the home-school partnership and proposes several recommendations for its application.

Through the story of The Little Oak Children's House, a preschool that she had co-founded out of desperation to find a preschool that not only offers quality, progressive holistic education for her son, **Wang** sends home a strong message about the importance of *servant leadership* in enabling the effective implementation of family-centred practice. Echoing the message conveyed by the authors of the inclusion articles, both Soo and Wang also highlight the importance of including parents. The building of trust and mutual respect underlie the success of schools' efforts in including parents.

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Dora Chen, Sirene Lim, and Chien-Hui Yang

SIM University

## Call for Manuscripts

***Submission due date for the December 2016 issue is 1<sup>st</sup> August***

*An invitation to grow as a local professional community of early childhood practitioners who are also readers, writers, explorers, and thinkers.*

*Early Educator* is AECES's bi-annual journal published two times a year, in June and December. Some articles are invited while others are peer-reviewed. Most of the issues are multi-themed, with articles that appeal to a readership of fellow practitioners, in- and pre-service teachers, and other professionals who work with children and families in Singapore. We welcome submissions of original articles that reflect the variety and extent of both research and practice in early childhood care and education from AECES members and other educators.

Please submit:

1. Original articles between 1500 and 2500 words in 12-point Calibri or Times New Roman font, 1.5 line spacing.
2. Use plain language following APA (6<sup>th</sup> edition) citation and referencing style.
3. Include 3 key words before the main text.
4. Include photographs and other relevant visuals to illustrate your permission for the use of these materials.
5. Manuscripts written in Chinese, Malay and Tamil are also welcome.
6. Submit your manuscript in MS Word format to:  
Dr Sirene Lim at [sirenelimmy@unisim.edu.sg](mailto:sirenelimmy@unisim.edu.sg)

You will be notified of the receipt of your submission within 4 days of receipt, and of the review decision with comments by the end of August. Articles may be:

- a. Accepted
- b. Accepted pending revisions – to improve clarity for the readership
- c. Rejected

## First Steps Toward Inclusion

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Tracey West, PhD., is an Investigator at FPG Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH). Dr. West brings extensive knowledge of professional development and of inclusion in early childhood from both practical and research-based experience. She has coordinated a validation study on the Inclusive Classroom Profile and leads and conducts reliability training on the measure. Dr. West has also worked intensively to facilitate the collaboration of leaders of NC's state-level early childhood agencies in the development of a state-wide system of professional development to support the inclusion of young children with additional needs. She brings years of practical experience working as a teacher of young children with and without disabilities, and their families, in a range of settings.

*Maria looked around her classroom. All of the children had chosen a center and were busy playing and talking with their friends except for Sarah. She was sitting by herself, again, at the puzzle table watching the children playing in the dramatic play center. Maria knew that Sarah had developmental delays and she had been nervous when she learned Sarah would be in her class this year. Maria had been teaching preschool for several years but this was the first time she had a child with a disability in her class and she wasn't sure what she should be doing to support Sarah. Shuhua, the Learning Support Educator (LSEd) who came in once a week to work with Sarah, had asked Maria to encourage Sarah to interact with the other children. Maria always gave Sarah her choice of centers hoping she would choose to go to the dramatic play center where she could play with the other children. Maria could tell from the way Sarah watched the children that she was interested, but Sarah always sat by herself at a nearby table. Maria decided to arrange time to meet with Shuhua to find out what else she could be doing.*

### **Expand on Existing Strategies Used with Typically-Developing Children**

Figuring out the type and level of support to provide for a child with disabilities can feel overwhelming for teachers new to inclusion. It can seem challenging to find a balance between meeting the child's individual needs and meeting the needs of other children in the class. What teachers may not realize is that they, through use of

a quality preschool curriculum, are already individualizing as they plan to meet the needs of the typically developing children in their class (Horn, Palmer, Butera, & Lieber, 2016). Teachers can build on or expand these activities to embed strategies that support the goals and needs of the child with disabilities. Embedding activities and support into the daily routine provides multiple opportunities for learning new skills and for practice and

reinforcement of skills. Research has shown that by embedding specific, targeted interventions into the daily routine, teachers can effectively support children's learning (Sandall & Schwartz, 2008) with the preschool or child care classroom providing a natural and meaningful context for learning.

Let's think about Maria. Maria was already putting into place an important first step in supporting Sarah's individual needs. She was providing opportunities for Sarah to play and interact with her peers. For many children, providing opportunities for social play is sufficient, but for children with disabilities, more active support for learning is often needed. A child with developmental delays like Sarah will need planned and intentional supports to help her develop the skills needed to participate in interactions with her peers.

Maria has also decided on an important next step, to meet with the LSEd to learn about some additional strategies. Together, Maria and Shuhua can collaborate and share their knowledge and perspectives to more fully support Sarah's learning and development. Shuhua brings specialized knowledge about Sarah's goals and recommended interventions and Maria brings her knowledge of Sarah's interests and day to day needs and functioning throughout the day. Together they can develop a comprehensive plan for when and how activities that encourage and support Sarah's interactions can be incorporated into the daily routine.

### **Explore Specific Evidence-Based Strategies**

So how could this look for Sarah? Maria and Shuhua incorporated multiple opportunities for Sarah to interact with her peers throughout the day. They realized that the more comfortable Sarah became

with her peers, the easier interacting would become for her. They planned a series of activities using evidence-based strategies (e.g., modeling, prompting, expanding, peer support, scaffolding) (Division of Early Childhood, 2014) and incorporated these into the class routine. They began with some simple strategies to help build Sarah's confidence and comfort with her peers. Some of the activities were planned for the whole class, for example:

- Pairing children for center time, including intentionally pairing Sarah with a very social child in the dramatic play center
- Using greetings during circle as an opportunity for interactions (e.g., have each child give the child next to them a high five and say "Good morning (child's name)"
- Planning social games for a small group of children and intentionally including Sarah
- Organizing some simple games on the playground (e.g., Duck, Duck, Goose) for all of the children and providing physical and verbal support and prompts to help Sarah participate in the game
- Sitting at the table during meals and facilitating conversations that allowed all children to participate (e.g., *Who brought you to school today? What did you have for breakfast?*)

Some of the planned activities were more targeted and individualized, for example:

- Walking with Sarah to a learning center and helping her engage in

the play by sitting with her and modelling interactions with peers

- Modelling for Sarah how to ask a peer to pass the juice or food during meals and snacks
- Giving Sarah a leadership role (e.g., handing out napkins during snack, choosing a song during circle time)
- Prompting Sarah to respond to a peer's comments and interactions throughout the day

Evidence-based strategies (DEC, 2014)

include:

- ✓ modelling
- ✓ prompting
- ✓ expanding
- ✓ peer support
- ✓ scaffolding

Several months later...

*Maria looked around the classroom, center time was in full swing and ALL of the children were busy and interacting with their friends. Maria smiled as she walked toward the dramatic play center. It had taken several weeks of accompanying Sarah to the dramatic play center and several more weeks of sitting near Sarah and modeling play and interactions for both Sarah and her peers before Sarah was confident enough to enter the center and join the play. Maria and Shuhua had both worked hard to plan support for Sarah into the daily routine and it was finally paying off. Sarah was smiling and handing a baby bottle to one of the other children, she still was not saying a lot, but she was involved, interacting, and enjoying being a part of the play!*

**To Learn More:**

1. Head Start 15-Minute In-Service Suite on Instructional Interactions:  
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/practice/iss-library.html>
2. Peer Interaction, a one-page Practice Guide for Practitioners, provides information on using peers to support development of positive social relationships and skills including a link to a short video demonstration:  
[http://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/decrp/PG\\_Int\\_PeerInteraction\\_print.pdf](http://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/decrp/PG_Int_PeerInteraction_print.pdf)
3. What Works Brief: Building Positive Teacher- Child Relationships  
<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/wwb12.pdf>

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# Planning with UDL: Meeting the Diverse Needs of Children

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## Introduction

Early childhood classrooms are composed of diverse groups of children who are different in their interests, learning styles, abilities, home languages, sociocultural backgrounds, and other areas. In practice, many young children, especially those who have behavioral or socio-emotional challenges, those who come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as those with special needs, are often marginalized and excluded in education (Delpit, 2005; Gilliam, 2008, Ladson-Billings, 2005; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2009).

Based on the principle that “all children should have the opportunity to learn”, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasizes the vision of “Education for All” and identifies inclusive education<sup>1</sup> as “one of the key strategies” to address the needs of students who are often marginalized or excluded in education (2005, p. 29). The Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC, 2014)

recommends that educators consider various aspects (e.g., assessment, environment, instruction, interaction, etc...) of their work to ensure that everyone is included. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has also been advocating for the provision of “developmentally appropriate practice”, which is about creating and fostering learning environments (e.g., cognitive, social, cultural, and physical) that support the development of *all* children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Creating such learning environments starts from the beginning, at the planning stage; lesson planning is “a systematic development of instructional requirements, arrangement, conditions, and materials” (Panasuk & Jeffrey, 2005, p. 215). This article proposes a framework for lesson planning to better meet the diverse needs of learners by removing/reducing possible barriers in the process of learning based on the principles of **universal design for learning** (UDL). The concept of UDL will be discussed along with some examples of how they can be applied to inform teachers’ decision-making in lesson planning.

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<sup>1</sup> The term inclusive education (and inclusive practice) is often defined narrowly and is mainly considered as a recommended practice for children with disabilities. Given that each child’s strengths and needs are unique in terms of one’s development and competence in various areas (e.g., cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, physical, and behavioral aspects), inclusive practice needs to be defined broadly. Inclusive practice in early childhood should refer

to *all* “practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family”, *regardless of ability, language, culture, and backgrounds*, “to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society” (DEC/NAEYC, 2009, p. 2).

## Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

UDL is a useful framework for improving teaching and learning for all learners. It is “a process by which a curriculum (i.e., goals, methods, materials, and assessments) is intentionally and systematically designed from the beginning to address individual differences” (Center for Applied Special Technology [CAST], 2011, p. 9).

### Removing or Reducing Barriers in the Curriculum and in the Classrooms

The understanding that the barriers to learning for individuals reside in the curriculum and the classroom itself, and not in the individuals, is an important underlying assumption of UDL. With this awareness, teachers will naturally focus on the goal of the lesson/curriculum and figure out the best accommodations for individual students by adapting the curriculum (e.g., learning goals, teaching/assessment methods, and materials), building in flexibility and accessibility for all.

In other words, teachers can imbed accommodations into a curriculum that has flexibility within structure, incorporating strategies for individualizing participation by learners with different learning styles. For example, to accommodate children with different learning styles, instead of using printed text as the main mode of a lesson, audiobooks, videos, or digital media can be viable alternatives. Or, if available, children can use a digital book with a customizable interface with options such as text read aloud (for students with reading challenges), a single-switch interface to turn pages (for students with physical challenges), and large buttons that voice their functions (for students with low vision) (Meyer, Rose, and Gordon, 2014).

### Guidelines for UDL

The UDL framework is organized around three broad guiding principles, with a set of

guidelines under each (see [www.cast.org](http://www.cast.org) for more information). According to CAST (2011), these include the provision of:

- a. **Multiple means of engagement** to facilitate purposeful, intrinsically motivated participation by providing options for:
  - Self-regulation
  - Sustaining effort and persistence
  - Generating and sustaining interest – optimizing individual choice and relevance; minimizing threats and distractions
- b. **Multiple means of representation** to give learners various ways for acquiring information and knowledge by providing options for:
  - Comprehension
  - Perception
  - Language, expressions and symbols
- c. **Multiple means for action and expression** to support the development of organizational abilities and overcoming language barriers and/or movement impairments by providing options for:
  - Executive functions (goal-setting, strategy development, monitoring of progress)
  - Expression and communication
  - Physical action

As CAST points out, “the challenge is not to modify or adapt curricula for a special few, but to do so *effectively and from the start*” (CAST, 2011, p. 9).

### Applying UDL Guidelines to Lesson Planning

These UDL guidelines can be applied to individually responsive lesson planning. They are very much in line with the implications for practice of several prominent theories such as the multiple intelligences theory (Gardner, 1993), sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and

ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), each of which provide insights regarding the diversity of factors affecting children’s learning as well as the development and importance of dynamic interaction and networks among the factors. Table 1 presents the relationship between theoretical implications and UDL lesson planning.

Table 1. Theoretical Bases for UDL Planning

Theory	Implications	Examples of typical early childhood classroom practices	Examples of ways to incorporate the principles of UDL:
Ecological Systems Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Ecological environment (a set of nested structures) affects development.</li> <li>➤ The interconnections among the immediate settings (e.g., home, day care, and school) impact development.</li> <li>➤ Paying attention to events happening in the settings and improving home-school-community relations can have positive effects on development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Gather information about home language/cultural beliefs/practices/expressions/symbols through home visits /family questionnaires /parent-teacher conferences to enrich curriculum.</li> <li>➤ Send home information about the curriculum, ideas for home activities as follow-up of school activities.</li> <li>➤ Invite, welcome, and engage families and community partners.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Multiple means of representation: Provide options for language, mathematical expressions, and symbols</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Use children’s home language as well as English in written/oral/visual communication.</li> <li>➤ Use a picture/image/symbol that carries meaning to culturally and linguistically diverse learners.</li> </ul>
Theory of Multiple Intelligences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Human beings have multiple intelligences (e.g., linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic).</li> <li>➤ Each child has a unique blend of the intelligences, with his/her own strengths and constraints.</li> <li>➤ Children think and learn in different ways</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Use a variety of strategies and materials to tap into each child’s interests, strengths, and learning style.</li> <li>➤ Offer choice of learning activities and options for ways to demonstrate knowledge and skills.</li> <li>➤ Use flexible, individualized differentiated curriculum.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Multiple means of engagement: Provide options for recruiting interest</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Provide choices.</li> <li>➤ Minimize distractions.</li> <li>➤ Use varied levels of demands and resources to challenge learners properly.</li> <li>➤ Use self-reflection and self-assessment on evaluating own behaviour/learning and establishing goals.</li> </ul> <p><b>Multiple means of representation: Provide options for sustaining effort and persistence</b></p>

	and thus, teaching needs to be flexible / differentiated.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Use multiple modalities (e.g., provide options for visual, auditory, and sensory experiences).</li> </ul> <p><b>Multiple means for action and expression: Provide options for self-regulation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Provide options for demonstrating knowledge and skills of young children.</li> </ul>
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Table 1. Theoretical Bases for UDL Planning – continued

Theory	Implications	Examples of typical early childhood classroom practices	Examples of ways to incorporate the principles of UDL:
Sociocultural Theory of Human Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Learning is a social process. Young children construct cultural knowledge from both family and the community.</li> <li>➤ Language is used as a mental/cognitive tool. A child's language (private speech) helps regulate one's thoughts and actions.</li> <li>➤ There is a cognitive space between a child's actual development and potential development (zone of proximal development, ZPD).</li> <li>➤ Scaffolding learning requires knowledge of children's current level of understanding and previous learning experience.</li> <li>➤ Higher-order cognitive functions develop within social interactions with peers and more knowledgeable others.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Value cultural beliefs/practices of families/community.</li> <li>➤ Factor in time for guided practice to scaffold learning as well as for independent practice.</li> <li>➤ Create opportunities for social interaction. In English-speaking classroom, do not impose a child from a linguistically minority background to use English only.</li> <li>➤ Use mental/cognitive tools to help children reach a higher level of cognition.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Multiple means of representation: Provide options for comprehension</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Activate background knowledge from home/community/school.</li> <li>➤ Integrate new information with prior knowledge.</li> <li>➤ Scaffold learning through visual aids.</li> </ul> <p><b>Multiple means of representation: Provide options for expression and communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Encourage dual language learners to write in a language that is more comfortable to them (e.g., home language) or to express their learning in multiple media/tools including non-linguistic ways (e.g., creating a 2-D drawing or 3-D construction of an animal).</li> <li>➤ Offer choices for group projects.</li> </ul>

Based on the theoretical understanding of “what” needs to be considered in the teaching and learning process for young children, and “why” those considerations are important, teachers can plan lessons with clear purpose and rationale. The first step in lesson planning is to set the main goal of the lesson. Then teachers need to figure out attainable goals for each child based on the understanding of where each is at. For example, instead of setting a single goal in a lesson for everyone (e.g. learning to count up to 5), consider differentiating the goals for those with both lower and higher abilities to keep them engaged by optimizing interest and minimizing frustration. Differentiating the activity itself is also important. For learners who need to be challenged, provide more opportunities for the application of their knowledge using simple games involving single- or two-digit numbers that they can play with their peers and record the scores. These could include Bingo, Memory, Concentration, Snap, and dice games. For those who need more time and support, instead of asking them to work alone on a paper-and-pencil task, teachers can provide manipulatives and an advanced partner / peer model.

The next step is to consider the kinds of materials and teaching methods that will be most effective for enabling each child in the group to meet the lesson goal. In this step, consider ways to incorporate information about each child’s prior learning experience, learning style, strengths, needs, and background to design multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. These considerations will be instrumental in making decisions for minimizing barriers (e.g. cognitive, linguistic, socio-emotional, and physical) and for increasing children’s access to learning.

High-tech solutions for reducing and removing barriers to learning are typically

used by special educators in inclusive classrooms. However, the high-tech assistive technologies may not be readily available or familiar to early childhood educators in typical preschool classrooms. Nevertheless, those who are not familiar with or do not have access to such high-tech solutions can still benefit from applying the three principles of UDL in their classrooms. Appendix 1 provides an example of ways for incorporating the three principles of UDL into an instructional plan for learning about monarch butterflies.

### Conclusion

The act of lesson planning should be a deliberate process to ensure the vision of education for all. The process of meeting the diverse needs of learners is about the achievement of inclusive practice. For early childhood educators, inclusive practice is developmentally appropriate, responsive practice; it is about respecting diversity as assets, and perceiving learners’ difficulties in learning as opportunities for both teachers and learners to actively seek and employ various teaching approaches and strategies to maximize participation and contribution. Given the diversity of learners in our classrooms today, effective lesson planning involves intentionality in removing barriers to learning at every step of the lesson. Applying the principles of the UDL, teachers can plan for a flexible, accessible, and meaningful lesson for all learners.

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## Appendix 1

### An Example of Ways to Incorporate UDL Principles in a Monarch Butterfly Lesson Plan

Original Plan	UDL Principles	Revisions Incorporating UDL Principles
<p>Begin the lesson with a question about the main content of the lesson: “Today we are going to learn about monarch butterflies. Do you know what monarch butterflies look like?”</p>	<p>Expand the means of engaging the learners</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Begin the lesson with an activity to engage children’s interest - tell a short story about a butterfly that children can relate to using props (e.g., books, puppets, or butterflies in a transparent container).</li> <li>➤ Encourage those with advanced knowledge or prior experience with butterflies to share what they know: “What do you know about monarch butterflies?” and “What questions do you have about the monarch butterfly?” – broadening the question yet keeping focus on the topic.</li> </ul>
<p>Read a book on monarch butterfly from the collection of non-fiction books in the class library.</p>	<p>Increase the ways that information on the monarch butterfly is represented and presented</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Ask children to brainstorm ways for finding more information about the monarch butterfly: “What can we do to find out....” – based on the questions they had previously generated.</li> <li>➤ Prepare a YouTube clip (with caption) on the butterfly – the visual representation of the way it flies and the way it emerges from the cocoon will enable greater understanding of what is read about.</li> <li>➤ Provide a collection of non-fiction as well as fiction books about the monarch butterfly in the class library. Among the collection, also include big books and audiobooks with record player and headsets as well as source for books and/or flashcards in students’ home languages.</li> <li>➤ Make available a poster with info graphics about the monarch butterfly on the wall near the meeting area for easy reference during discussions and free access during centre time.</li> <li>➤ Before the whole group lesson (e.g., during free choice centre time), spend some time with English language learners (ELLs) to read / talk about the book / video clip (pre-teaching) to enable them to follow better during the whole group lesson.</li> </ul>
<p>After the whole group lesson, ask children to draw and write about monarch butterflies.</p>	<p>Include multiple means for learners to express what they know/ have learned</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ After the whole group lesson, children are asked to decide whether they wanted to share what they have learned about the monarch butterfly by drawing and/or writing to make a small book or a poster, OR making a 3-D sculpture or a display (diorama).</li> <li>➤ They can do this during centre time over the course of the next couple of days/weeks, either by themselves or they can invite a friend or two to work with.</li> <li>➤ A variety of reusable materials and adhesives are available for use, along with colouring pencils, crayons, chalks, markers, water colours and poster paint.</li> <li>➤ English language learners have a choice to use their home language in writing; children who cannot write yet can narrate and record their ideas or use an iPad app to scribe.</li> </ul>

## Using Assistive Technology to Support the Participation of Each and Every Child

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How many of you need spectacles to help you see so that you can go about your daily activities? How many of you had to point to pictures to order your meal because no one around spoke your language? These are all examples of assistive technology (AT) and as you can see, it certainly is not a big scary word and probably something that you have been doing everyday either for yourself or someone in your family or the children in your class.

As you see from the above examples, it really does not always need to be something sophisticated or high tech. AT could be anything from specialized equipment like a pair of spectacles to making simple changes to materials in the case of the pictorial menu. In the early childhood context, AT is defined as interventions that involve a range of strategies to promote a child's access to learning opportunities, from making simple changes and adaptations to the environment and materials to helping a child use special equipment. The three essential components of assistive technology are equipment, adaptations, and teaching strategies. Some of the more common equipment include walkers, hearing aids, communication devices, and switches for toys so that children can

activate a toy (See Appendix 1 for more examples of AT equipment).

You may already be making adaptations for your own children or the young children in your class by enlarging the handle of a paintbrush by putting a foam hair roller around it so that they can have a better grip (See Appendix 2 for more examples of adaptations). When AT is used together with intentional teaching, it promotes a child's participation in learning and relationships with their peers and other adults in their lives (CONNECT, n.d.).

As professionals working with young children, you all have a critical role and professional responsibility for ensuring *all* children have access to full participation in school (UNESCO, 2004). Research have shown that AT promotes positive outcomes in multiple domains for children with additional needs (Dunst, Trivette, Hamby, & Simkus, 2013). So how can you begin to intentionally plan and implement the use of assistive technology in your classroom to support children with additional needs?

Let's consider a scenario that some of you might have faced before; use a planning form (CONNECT, 2011) to see how we might approach the challenge:

*It's the new school year and you have a group of 4-year olds, many who are coming to school for the first time. The first week did not go well at all and you felt that there was very little learning going on. Specifically, there is a child named Guohua who hardly speaks, and would scream and throw things in the dress-up area or get upset whenever it was time to transition from one activity to another. His behavior has been really disruptive and you are wondering how you can better support him? Who else do you need to work with in order to help support him? Now let's take a look at a sample plan of strategies that you might try (see Appendix 3).*

In summary, when planning to help a child fully participate in the class, consider the following:

- 1) How can I engage the child's family and other professionals (e.g., therapists, specialists, teachers) in the planning process?
- 2) Does the child need a simple change to the environment, like a change in the room arrangement?
- 3) Can an activity be simplified?
- 4) Can I or the family / other professionals adapt materials or provide equipment?
- 5) Can I or the family / other professionals adapt the schedule or change the instructions?
- 6) Which teaching strategies can I or the family / other professionals use hand-in-hand with the AT?

When implementing your plan, remember to allow yourself time (i.e., at least one week!) to try things out and also try more than one strategy at the start in order to see what works best. Review your plan to see if the goal / learning outcome for the child has been achieved. Give yourself a pat on your back and celebrate the child's success, and make improvements or modifications on what might not have worked as well.

Learn more about AT and other evidence-based practices to support each and every child through CONNECT Modules:  
<http://community.fpg.unc.edu>

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# Examples of Assistive Technology Equipment

The term assistive technology equipment refers to many different types of items such as: self-help devices, special toys and switches, assistive listening devices, augmentative communication devices, and mobility and positioning devices. The assistive technology available to young children is changing and expanding at a rapid pace. The lists on this handout provide examples, but should not be considered to be comprehensive.

**1. Self Help Devices** – devices to assist with self-help skills and functional abilities related to bathing, eating, dressing and other daily routines. Items may include but are not limited to: adaptive feeding utensils, non-slip matting, bath chairs, and weighted vests and blankets.



Angled utensils with built up handles provide several grasping positions and promote greater success in eating.



Cut out cups allow a child to drink without head or neck hyperextension and stimulate the corners of the mouth to facilitate lip closure.

**2. Toys and Switches** – switches and interfaces that can allow a child to activate toys in order to support engagement in developmental learning through play. Items may include but are not limited to: switch adapted toys, single-use switches, or toys adapted with visual, tactile and auditory materials.



The child uses the yellow switch to activate or turn on the toy cat.<sup>i</sup>



The fire engine can be operated by 2 different switches or by the round remote control.

Source:  
<http://community.fpg.unc.edu/>

**3. Assistive Listening Devices** – devices to help with auditory processing. Examples include hearing aids and FM systems.



An FM system allows a teacher to talk into a microphone that transmits sounds directly to the child's hearing aid or headphones. The transmission occurs on a reserved radio spectrum.

**4. Augmentative Communication** – any device, system, or method that improves the ability of a child to communicate effectively. For young children, it is important to include a variety of different augmentative communication strategies such as devices, signing, gestures, and pictures. Equipment may include but are not limited to: picture or object communication boards, symbol systems, and voice output devices.



The child pushes a button on the device to say a pre-recorded word or message. The buttons are labeled with pictures or symbols to signify the recorded message.



Communication boards are often made using software (e.g., Boardmaker®) with a library of picture symbols to create boards of any shape or size to help a child access a wide range of vocabulary. Individual symbols or boards can be placed around a room for access during particular activities, or carried around in a binder to be available at all times.

Source:  
<http://community.fpg.unc.edu/>

## Appendix 1

**5. Mobility and Positioning** – devices to promote and enhance access to and functioning in a child’s natural environments. Items of equipment may include but are not limited to: ankle-foot orthotic braces and splints, adapted special needs car seats, floor mobility and positioning devices, feeder seats, walkers, and standers.



This scooter board allows the child to move in all directions with four switches or a special joystick.<sup>1</sup>



This walker allows children who struggle with balance and mobility to be more independent.

<sup>1</sup>Photos courtesy of: Enabling Devices/Toys for Special Children, 800-832-8697, [www.enablingdevices.com](http://www.enablingdevices.com)  
Note: This handout is adapted from part of the 2010 North Carolina Infant-Toddler Program Manual.

**Source:**  
<http://community.fpg.unc.edu/>

# Examples of Assistive Technology Adaptations

Adaptations for young children often involve modifications of existing toys, learning materials, or other everyday items. These adaptations can serve a wide variety of purposes so that children can participate in all types of learning opportunities. Below are some examples of adaptations for self-help, toys and play areas, communication and literacy, and mobility and positioning.

## 1. Self Help



A zipper pull makes dressing easier for a child. You can buy zipper pulls or make one using a key chain as seen here.

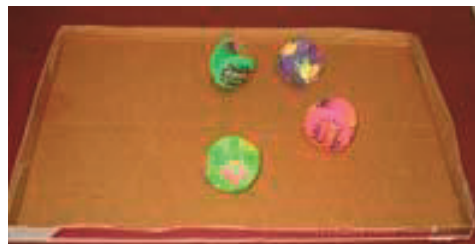


Non slip shelf liner can be used to stabilize objects, such as a plate or bowl during mealtime.



A child can use a bath mitt to more easily participate in bathing. Washing with a bath mitt could be easier than holding onto a wash cloth. Bath mitts can also be used to assist in grasping objects. Secure Velcro to the object and the bath mitts will cling to the Velcro making it easier for the child to pick up the object.<sup>i</sup>

## 2. Toys & Play Areas



Confining toys to a box lid, hula hoop, or planter base keeps the toys within the child's reach and vision.<sup>i,ii</sup>

Source:  
<http://community.fpg.unc.edu/>

## Appendix 2



Knobs on puzzle pieces and foam around a rattle handle extend or build up the toy to allow a child to more easily grab and hold the toy.<sup>ii</sup>

### 3. Communication & Literacy



While many high tech commercially available augmentative communication devices are available, you can make your own low tech system using pictures of your own. Here is a photo of a homemade Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). A child can choose what food he/she wants by pointing to or giving the photo to the care provider.<sup>iii</sup>

Source:  
<http://community.fpg.unc.edu/>

## Handout 5.3



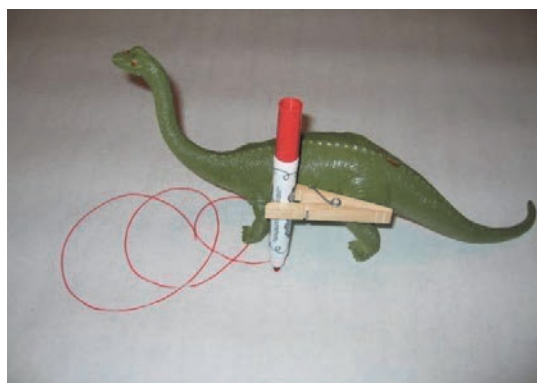
For children who struggle to turn the pages of books, large paper clips, binder clips, small chip clips, or self-adhesive index tabs can be used to give the child something to grasp to independently turn the page. Page fluffers allow for the same independence in reading by adding extra space between the pages. Use pieces of foam, peel and stick furniture protectors, or even just a dab of puff paint.<sup>i</sup>



Some children struggle to engage in reading activities, so providing interesting books is essential. For children with cognitive, motor, or sensory impairments, squishy books filled with a variety of materials can capture their interest and promote literacy. Books can be created with heavy duty zipper storage bags, a squishy filler (e.g., hair gel, lotion, sand, dirt, or packing materials), small toys or letters, and packing tape. Then words can be added by taping on strips of paper or writing on masking tape.<sup>iv</sup>

Source:  
<http://community.fpg.unc.edu/>

## Handout 5.3



Pencils, markers, and crayons can be adapted with balls or even a fun toy with a clothespin attached so the child can more easily grasp and manipulate the pencil.<sup>v</sup>

## 4. Mobility & Positioning



If a child slides in a chair, try using bath decals to add friction and texture to a slippery chair seat. To give a child more support in sitting during floor time activities, create a bucket chair using a 5 gallon plastic pail and a round pillow.<sup>v</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Demchak, M. (2007). *Tips for Home or School, Easy Adaptations for the Home or the Classroom*. Retrieved from Nevada Dual Sensory Impairment Project: <http://www.unr.edu/educ/ndsip/tipsheets/easyadaptationsforhome.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Center for Assistive Technology, University at Buffalo. (2003). *Let's Play! Projects*. Retrieved from <http://letsplay.buffalo.edu/>: <http://letsplay.buffalo.edu/toys/adapting-toys.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Kideas.com. (2006). *Kideas Homemade PEC System*. Retrieved from <http://www.kideas.com/>: [http://www.kideas.com/pdfs/kideas\\_PECs.pdf](http://www.kideas.com/pdfs/kideas_PECs.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Pierce, P., Huston, C. & Franklin, J. (2009). *Fun Books for SHARED Reading*. Retrieved from <http://www.med.unc.edu/ahs/clds/files/early-childhood-resources/therm.funbooksfo.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> *Tech n Tots*. (n.d.). Retrieved from Tech n Tots: <http://tnt.asu.edu/>

Source:  
<http://community.fpg.unc.edu/>

Appendix 3: Planning Form

Child's Name

Tan Guohua

Date

10 January 2016



ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY PLANNING TOOL

Learning or Participation Goal

Guohua will transition smoothly from one activity to another at home and in school and communicate his needs and thoughts.

What is currently happening? Guohua hardly speaks, and would scream and throw things in the dramatic play area or get upset whenever it was time to transition from one activity to another. At home, he does not talk too and uses gestures and noises to communicate.

What would you like to see happen? The parents and I would like Guohua to be able to transition smoothly from one activity to another. The parents would like Guohua to communicate his needs and thoughts.

Ideas for Assistive Technology

1. How can we change the environment?

Set up a quiet corner with pillows and low lights, and place picture boards including schedule throughout the home and in school.

2. What equipment can we provide?

Encourage siblings at home and peers in school to model and use the communication boards with Guohua.

3. How can we change the activity?

The parents and I will provide pictures of some of Guohua's favorite things for use on his communication boards.

4. How can we change the materials?

Communication boards will be created for individual activities and routines for both home and school.

5. How can we change the schedule?

A pictorial schedule will be reviewed with Guohua at the start of each day and before the end of each activity.

6. How can we adapt the instructions?

Step by step pictorial instructions will be placed in the dramatic play area.

Teaching Strategies

How will you support the child in using AT? (e.g., modeling, hand-over-hand assistance) The parents and I will start by using hand-over-hand assistance to take Guohua's finger on the picture board or schedule to help him make a choice or review which activity he is currently in and where he will be heading next. That can fade to a more subtle pointing or to verbal cues as Guohua begins to become more comfortable and skilled in using the communication boards and schedules.

Adapted from: Milbourne, S.A. & Campbell, P.H. (2007). CARA's Kit: Creating adaptations for routines and activities. Philadelphia, PA: Child and Family Studies Research Program, Thomas Jefferson University..

Source:

http://community.fpg.unc.edu/

## Teaching Early Communication and Language Skills to Young Children

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### Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of procedures that have been shown by research to enhance early communication and language development. There is substantial theoretical and empirical research support for the effectiveness of these techniques. However, in this brief paper we will focus on the techniques themselves and how they can be used with young children in a wide variety of settings. These techniques are often referred to as “milieu teaching” procedures (milieu is a French word for environment) because they are designed to be used in the child’s natural environments where they spend much of their waking hours. These techniques are designed to be used by teachers, child care workers, and parents in the course of daily interactions in which communication and language skills are typically learned and used.

Specific milieu teaching techniques are most effective when the child has a high level of attentional engagement. The

quality of a young child’s attention is substantially greater to objects or events of the child’s choosing as opposed to objects or events of the adult’s choosing. Thus to be effective milieu teachers, adults must learn to “follow the child’s attentional lead”. When a child engages an object, event, or person, he signals a topic for conversation and implicitly states what is, for the moment at least, of great interest. If the adult then focuses on the same “topic” (e.g., perhaps a toy car, or a doll), “joint attention” is established. Then a simple discussion can follow as long as the child’s interest is maintained. In the course of this mutual engagement between adult and child, a host of communication and language skills can be “incidentally taught”.

### Environment Arrangement

Environment arrangement is another key component of milieu teaching because it is through the clever employment of this procedure that we can create and maintain a degree of “moderate novelty” in the course of routine interactions and thus

ensure a high level of child attentional engagement. Environmental arrangement is a dynamic concept that is based on a simple notion: young children are more likely to initiate about things they need, want, or find interesting. When they initiate to us about things they need or want, we can then teach them effective communicative ways (e.g. use of verbal requests) to achieve these goals. When they initiate about things they find interesting (e.g., a communication act that is sometimes referred to as “declarative” or “comment”), we can “incidentally” teach them effective ways to communicate these interested. Creating a need for children to “request” is relatively easy. It is only necessary to arrange the environment so that things the child typically needs (e.g., toys, food, the bathroom, his coat, your attention) can only be assessed by initiating for them. These child requests then become ideal teaching opportunities.

Teaching basic conversational skills can be facilitated by activities that naturally support and elicit conversational interchanges. These are easily done in the form of various developmentally appropriate routines and activities such as block play, dress up, water play, “store”, sandbox play, “kitchen”, “farm”, and so on. Activities like these can be varied in countless ways to insure a high degree of “moderate novelty” and attentional engagement necessary for efficient learning. Semi-structured interactive play routines like these provide an opportunity to naturally engage in “intensive naturalistic teaching because a relatively large number of potential teaching episodes can occur in highly salient contexts over a short span of time on a daily basis.

### **The Mand-Model and Incidental Teaching Procedures**

Effective milieu teaching requires the use of two complementary teaching procedures – the mand-model procedure and the incidental teaching procedure. Both techniques can be easily embedded into ongoing child-adult interactions. The procedures follow the same basic steps in prompting and affirming child initiations. The distinction between the two procedures is who (the adult or the child) initiates the milieu teaching episode. In the mand-model, the adult initiates, typically by asking the child a question (e.g. *What’s that?*). In the incidental teaching procedure, the child initiates the interaction either verbally or non-verbally. The adult then elicits the desired teaching target by prompting the child to give a more elaborate response. These two procedures can be used interchangeably. However, with a child who seldom initiates, the mand-model procedure may be used more frequently at first to increase responsiveness and attentiveness to both environmental and verbal cues.

When using the mand-model and incidental teaching procedures the following basic steps are followed.

- 1) The adult or child initiates an interaction. The adult establishes joint attention with the child.
- 2) The adult asks the child a short question intended to elicit the target response (e.g. *What is this?*) If the child responds with a partial response (e.g. “ball”) the adult may ask an elaborative question (e.g. *What kind of ball?*), or may provide a model such as “it’s a big ball” or “it’s a red ball”).
- 3) If the child still does not produce a target response but still appears

receptive and interested, the adult may present another prompt. Otherwise a model for the target response is presented (e.g. “red ball”). The child may or may not vocally imitate this.

An acceptable adult response to end this teaching episode is to functionally consequence the child’s apparent communicative intent. This might include fulfilling the child’s request or continuing participation in an activity or conversation. Verbal praise is only provided to a particularly praiseworthy event, such as the first time a child says a target word correctly or perhaps the first time a child “tries” to say the target word.

#### **The Time Delay Technique Support Procedure**

The effectiveness of the mand-model and incidental teaching procedures can be further enhanced by the complementary use of two simple, straightforward “support procedures”. These procedures can create more teaching opportunities and/or help the child integrate the newly learned skills into their language usage repertoire. These procedures are “time delay” and “systematic commenting”.

Time delay is a simple nonverbal procedure intended to elicit child initiations. It can be used preceding the mand-model and incidental teaching procedures, depending on the child’s response to the delay. The goal of this simple procedure is to establish joint attention with the child as a cue for child initiation. The basic steps of the procedure are as follow:

- 1) The adult moves close to the child (face to face) and looks at him questioningly or expectantly. The

adult may also hold up a toy or object the child may want or have interest in.

- 2) When the child makes eye contact with the adult, the adult maintains her expectant posture for 5 to 15 seconds.
- 3) If the child does not initiate a response to this time delay, the adult may then model an appropriate response. Or the adult may initiate a mand-model episode at this point. If the child does respond to the adult, this initiation may be used to begin an incidental teaching episode.

#### **The Systematic Commenting Support Procedure**

Systematic commenting is an equally simple procedure that provides opportunities for children to spontaneously imitate an adult vocalization in low demand situations. For example, the adult might say “I’m pushing the (toy) car”, and then push the car toward the child. The child might then spontaneously say “push car”. These spontaneous imitations may contribute to learning by providing easy opportunities for the child to use target forms without direct prompts to do so.

Milieu procedures have also been modified to teach “prelinguistic communication” functions such as commenting and requesting well before child is ready to “talk”. Parent imitation of an infant’s vocalizations and gestures is one of the earliest forms of communication between a caregiver and their child, commonly occurring in the first 6 months of life. Following the child’s attentional lead is especially important at this developmental level. Establishing simple

turn-taking routines with a child is one of the very first steps. Vocal turn-taking routines can start with the adult “imitating the child’s vocalizations” in face to face joint attention. This is an easy procedure and over time can lead to both more meaningful vocal initiations by the child and more vocal imitations of the adult as well. Early contingent imitation of children may serve many social functions including increased attentiveness to social interaction, facilitation of turn-taking, and enhancement of the child’s ability to imitate others.

### **Linguistic Mapping Technique**

A powerful prelinguistic technique is the frequent “linguistic mapping” by the adult (i.e., mapping the child’s environment with words). This happens when the child looks at and/or points at something and the adult labels this. For example, when the child reaches for a ball, or a stuffed animal, the adult “labels” that item (e.g., “it’s a ball”). This technique becomes most powerful when the item the child points at or reaches for is out of their reach. Thus in addition to linguistically mapping the item, the adult is responding to the child reach or point and a “request” and rewards it with the object and/or the name of the object or person.

To become an effective “milieu language teacher, it is critical that an adult learn how to follow the child’s attentional lead, create and maintain a communicative “match”, and functionally reinforce the child’s communication attempts even in their most basic form. Recruitment of a child’s attention can be done by clever “environmental arrangement”. For example, have toys that child enjoys placed in sight but beyond the easy reach of the child. This can naturally elicit “requests” from the child. For example, child requests without the child creating joint attention

(looking toward the adult while reaching toward the object), can be created by the adult moving her face into the visual line of the child and the object, and then giving the object to the child in response to eye contact from the child. The key here is to “honor the child’s interests” to the extent you can and use those interests as your teaching platform.

### **Communicative Match Technique**

Creating and maintaining a “communicative match” with the child is another important skill. To create a communication match you must know the child’s present skill levels, which typically requires both interaction with and observation of the child during which you try to determine the leading edge of the child’s competence. Then the goal is to continually challenge the child to move one step beyond their present performance level across many specific skills. For example, if the child is presently producing clear one word utterances, the adult begins to push the child (using the techniques described) to begin producing two word utterances.

Positive reinforcement obviously plays an important role in language development. In this case, reinforcement is not being “praised” by someone, it’s successfully communicating your wants and interests and getting those desires and interests meaningfully responded to by others. So when a child requests a ball, the reinforcer is “getting the ball”. Thus, the use of lots of praise statements like “good talking” is not recommended and may just add unnecessary noise and confusion to the interaction.

For young children learning to communicate is one of their most important jobs! Consequently, they typically “work at this job” during virtually every waking hour they have, seven days a

week, week after week, and month after month. Active, purposeful teaching of language may occupy a small fraction of the time they spend potentially learning to communicate, yet it can be a very important time especially for young children who are struggling to quickly acquire sophisticated language skills that are so important to short term and long term success in our highly competitive world.

The methods, procedures, and techniques described in this paper are

appropriate for use in a wide range of programs and settings. They are consistent with the values, goals, and procedures that are foundational to fully inclusive early childhood education as described by Horn and her colleagues in their universal design based framework for early childhood education. This short article is intended to provide readers with basic information about the milieu teaching approach to early communication and language development. More in-depth information can be found in references provided below.

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## **Programme Development in a Large Organisation: A Relationships-Based Curriculum for Birth to Three**

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### **Introduction**

There is very convincing evidence worldwide that the birth-to-three age group is the most important area of child development and the most critical for young children. Early experiences do matter and relationships we experience as children can have lasting effects on health, social-emotional and cognitive development. Investing in the earliest years can help children to develop into happy, confident adults who can contribute to society. This paper describes the philosophical underpinnings, the aims and overall design of a birth-to-three curriculum that was recently developed by our team for infant and toddler programmes at NTUC First Campus early childhood centres. The curriculum is prepared for multicultural infant and toddler settings where staff members are from a range of cultural backgrounds, have to work together as a team in order to plan for the best interests of children and their families.

### **Philosophy of the Programme**

Our relationships-based programme is premised on the belief that relationships

are influential and provide the basis for young children's positive development and learning. Such a curriculum is one that places emphasis on attachment, that is, the bonding that occurs between child, educator, and family. These relationships place a focus on the child's well-being, learning outcomes, sense of autonomy and independence as well as a 'can do' spirit. A relationships-based curriculum focuses on establishing effective relationships and is anchored on responsive care, respect and deep engagement. This premise transcends all cultures and is relevant to whatever the teaching, however diverse the learning context is. Influenced by Laevers (1994, 2005), our curriculum is founded on these two areas: child well-being and child involvement. Laevers (1994, 2005) defines well-being as feelings of happiness and ease, without emotional tension and having the ability to express feelings in a positive way. Children who experience emotional well-being do not feel threatened, are not unhappy and they develop self-confidence and resilience. Child involvement refers to having every child engaged in meaningful and sustained activities.

## **Aims of the Relationships-Based Curriculum**

The overall aim of the curriculum is to improve the quality of education and care in NTUC First Campus early childhood centres catering for children in the birth-to-three age range. More specifically, we wanted to provide a curriculum that:

- is grounded on sound child development and growth principles
- facilitates the well-being of children
- engages children in meaningful, involved learning
- can be successfully implemented with minimally trained early childhood staff
- can easily be understood by all parents
- encourages parents to partner our staff with greater confidence
- uses the primary caregiving approach in order to build trusting and secure relationships
- uses child observation as the basis for curriculum decision making
- requires teams of staff to work together to improve child outcomes

## **How the Curriculum is Designed**

The curriculum is premised on a 'Plan, Do, and Review' model based on child development literature and a current understanding of early childhood practices. This is in keeping with current views that all curriculum decisions have to be based on individual children's development. The three main areas of development to observe and plan for are:

- a) Psycho-social, b) Physical, and c) Thinking and communicating. Developmental learning outcomes are identified according to individual progress.

## **Role of the Early Childhood Educator**

The early childhood educator needs to work well with team members, as well as be responsive towards children and families, and be respectful of their cultural practices. S/he also needs to be professionally ethical in working with children, families, other professionals and the wider community. A primary goal of the relationships-based curriculum is to increase the effectiveness of early childhood educators by building up their teaching skills and confidence in working with children and parents, as well as to encourage them to view professional development as a reflective and life-long learning endeavour. Educators in their training are helped to apply a basic understanding of curriculum theories, pedagogies in the design and implementation of child-centred, play-based and developmentally appropriate learning in their day-by-day teaching. It is acknowledged that working with this age group is challenging but can be very satisfying. The importance of the educator's teaching role needs to be acknowledged and affirmed by the teaching team and, ultimately, by parents.

The approach taken to train educators for this curriculum is that training needs to be customised to their centre's context and built on their existing skills. There needs to be a cumulative development of skills applied to specific work contexts. The training has to be sequential and followed through on a weekly basis. Educators who work with infants, toddlers and playgroup-aged children need information on how to interact in meaningful ways in order to encourage sustained child involvement that takes children further into deeper learning. The educators must understand that infants and toddlers are able to communicate in many ways even though they cannot express in words how they feel, but often do so by their actions. As

research shows, children are at a critical stage of development and need skilled, specialised care in order to develop optimally. This places a responsibility on educators to observe and interact in a responsive way. Infants are capable of initiating communication in a variety of ways but this is sometimes overlooked by educators.

### **Working with Families**

Educators should understand that children experience a series of horizontal and vertical transitions between home, child care, kindergarten and school. As a result, early childhood education centres and schools require educators to work in partnerships with families of varying cultures and communities to facilitate these transitions for children. Educators will be assisted to work effectively with a diverse range of families and encouraged to support and respect differences in child rearing and family cultural expectations.

The relationships-based curriculum recognises the importance of transitions and that parents are the first and foremost educators of their children. It also recognises that, irrespective of cultural background and socio-economic status, all parents want the best for their children. Strong partnerships with families lead to stronger outcomes in terms of children's growth and development. A prime way of ensuring both the development of attachment in children and confidence in parents is to use the Primary Caregiver Approach which assigns three to four infants to an educator. However, the primary caregiver has two to three other team members who also work with the child. In this way, the infant and parents form lasting relationships with one main educator supported by two to three other educators as well. This approach can also be used with toddlers and playgroup-aged children but the staff-child ratio changes

and more children need to be assigned to staff. In this approach, the primary educator:

- Is responsible for much of the child's care. However as mentioned above, this is not an exclusive arrangement as the primary caregiver needs to work effectively with other team members.
- Continually shares information with the parents. It has been found that parents involved in this system are well satisfied with the increased amount of information shared with them by the educators.
- Observes, records and plans for the child's individual development and deep involvement in learning. Individual observations are summarised and placed in the child's cumulative record, often as a portfolio.
- Sustains one-to-one interactions with the child during routines, interactions and experiences.

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## The Value of Play

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Play has tremendous importance to the well-being of young children. Deciding on their own to move in and out of self-defined interactions with people and things of interest, children strengthen their social, emotional, and cognitive development. It develops executive function of children. I want to share my thinking that underscores my presentations at the Early Childhood Education Conference June 20-21 at SIM University. This article will focus on the value of play through the use of unit blocks, and of explorations of the outside environments of eating places.

Opportunities to play with materials and others has multiple benefits to children. Play contributes to executive function, which involves the ability to reflect on one's own actions and listen to others. Adele Diamond (Professor of Developmental Neuroscience at the University of British Columbia) describes three central characteristics of executive function:

- Self-control is the ability to restrain spontaneity. Children need to reflect on what they are doing, or about to do.
- Working Memory is the ability to maintain attention, to “hold” an idea in order to develop it further.

Working memory is essential to creativity, which is the ability to disassemble and then put together in new ways.

- Cognitive Flexibility is the ability to think “outside the box”.

I believe the use of unit blocks and direct engagements with the people and places of importance to young children are strong contributors to developing executive function. These two forms of play provide opportunities for children to *actively engage* with people and things of the world that involve emotions, sequencing, senses, and being a meaningful member of a group.

### The Use of Unit Blocks



Figure 1: Stan Chu with graduate students

Unit blocks were originally developed by Caroline Pratt at the City and Country School in New York City and described in her book, *I Learn from Children*. The use of unit blocks and other physical materials allow young children to recreate the world of the built environment and help them recreate ways people interact in the world outside the classroom. Children directly explore their physical world of school and home, and collaborate with others to recreate that world.

This literal *doing* with materials and classmates develops executive function. Recreating the world through unstructured use of physical materials require children to focus and exercise discipline. They need to maintain attention on tasks they have decided to create. They develop cognitive flexibility by devising alternative ways to recreate outside realities, such as the multiple ways people move about multiple story structures or between spaces.

### Explorations of Eating Places



Figure 2: Graduate students as investigators

The vitality of Singapore includes its many eating places. Young children experience these different places as they accompany adult family members. Children continually

try to make sense of how these different eating places work: what does it mean to be a customer? How do you know what is being sold? How do you pay? What jobs are similar and different in each place? Schools that prepare and serve to children offer wonderful chances to learn from direct experiences that include interviews with school kitchen workers about where food comes from, how to cook for so many people each school day, and what various jobs are needed before, during, and after a school meal. In addition to cognitive learning, such investigations provide social and emotional understandings between children and adults in their community that all too often remain less recognized.

Children can then recreate different eating places in their classroom. By this focused play of creating a variety of ways people interact through these businesses they've participated in over time, executive function is deepened and broadened. When taking on the role of a customer in a specific kind of eating place, children must exercise self-control by understanding and conforming to specific rules: waiting in line or finding a place to sit; ordering food that is available; knowing when and how to pay. Working memory must be exercised by remembering what has been ordered, being allowed to sit or not; what must be done in order to pay and what to do with trash. Cognitive flexibility is needed by the business owners to advertise and maintain successful operations. How best to advertise? How much to charge? How many employees do I need?

Adele Diamond asked who remembers more about the route being taken in a car, the driver or the passenger. As teachers of young children, I believe *we* develop our teaching skills by *ourselves* doing these forms of play, actively using our physical, emotional, social, and cognitive beings. We then need to discuss ways to translate what we have experienced through play

ourselves, to helping children experience their own play in classrooms.

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## The Importance of Physical Activity for Young Children: Right from the Start

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Dr. Morgan is a physical education specialist with over 25 years of teaching experience ranging from preschool children to university students. She has conducted workshops throughout North and South America for adults who supervise children in physical activity environments. Her passion is to equip teachers to provide fun-filled, high-quality activity programs for children of all ages.

### Introduction

Young children love to move. They learn about the world around them by moving in it and by interacting with other children through play. In reality, play is the “work” of children who are three to six years old. Developmentally, the growth rate of preschoolers decreases by the third and fourth years of life, but their bodies continue to grow and mature. As developmental and physical characteristics change in young children, their ability and readiness to learn also increases, making this a critical period for them to be exposed to a variety of movement experiences.

Juxtaposed with this desire of young children to be constantly in motion is the creeping sedentariness of today’s technology-driven society. Children who are unable to go outside and play when they arrive home from school, due to a lack of adult supervision, concerns regarding safety, or the absence of play spaces, often end up sitting in front of some type of screen (e.g., computer, TV, iPad, phone, etc.) for long periods of time. Hence, instead of exercising large muscle groups and experiencing many forms of physical activity (e.g., climbing, running, swinging, crawling over and through playground equipment, etc.) the only thing that is moving are their fingers as they operate a TV remote, a touch screen, or a game

controller. This sedentary lifestyle contributes to the growing problem of childhood obesity worldwide. Childhood obesity has been identified as an emerging worldwide public health concern, especially in low- and middle-income countries and urban environments. In 2013, more than 42 million children under 5 years of age were estimated to be overweight and the vast majority of these children live in developing countries. By 2025, it is expected that 70 million infants and young children will be overweight or obese and without positive changes in lifestyle habits, obese infants and young children will likely continue to be obese during childhood, adolescence and adulthood and be prime candidates for a host of health and psychological problems such as hypertension, type 2 diabetes, asthma, and poor self-esteem.

### Physical Activity Guidelines for Young Children

What can early childhood educators and staff do to combat the health epidemic of excessive weight gain in the first years of a child’s life? One of the most effective ways to address this serious health challenge is to ensure that young children receive adequate amounts of daily physical activity during the school day. In the United States, the most recent physical guidelines (*Active*

*Start'*) state that children who are one to three years of age should (1) engage in a minimum of 30 minutes of structured physical activity which raises heart rate and breathing levels (i.e., moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, or MVPA) and enhances movement skills and body control, and (2) participate in at least 60 minutes of unstructured physical activity in different physical settings and at freely-chosen levels of exertion. For children three to five years of age, (1) a minimum of 60 minutes of structured MVPA should be accumulated to reinforce and refine locomotor (e.g., running, hopping, skipping) and manipulative (e.g., striking, kicking, catching, throwing) skills, and (2) a minimum of 60 minutes of unstructured physical activity (e.g., free play or recess) should be performed at a self-regulated intensity.

In establishing the appropriate mix of structured and unstructured physical activity for the young child, it is important to emphasize that periods of unstructured physical activity should not be sacrificed to provide time for structured physical activity featuring planned movement sequences led by the teacher. Unstructured play that occurs during recess is also important. In a typical recess period, a variety of activity patterns would be observed. Some children, for instance, would run, play tag, or chase a ball, while others would quietly engage in creative play with toys or other objects. This disparity in physical activity levels is a primary reason why at least half of the daily physical activity time should be planned and directed by the teacher and include aerobic activities of sufficient intensity to enhance heart and lung function. Engaging in structured play sessions will not only produce important health benefits, but will also help preschool children to learn and practice

motor skills and fundamental movement patterns that form the basis for many fitness, lifetime and sport-related activities.

### **Physical Activity and Health in the Young Child**

Preschool-aged children can improve their physical health as a result of participating in daily structured and unstructured physical activity. Physical activity can help young children maintain a healthy body weight, increase muscular strength and joint flexibility, and improve cardiovascular endurance. Until recently, the early childhood population was thought to be exempt from typical lifestyle diseases, but this is no longer the case. Consequently, it is imperative that parents and early-childhood teachers provide regular opportunities for young children to be physically active.

While the physical benefits of daily physical activity listed above are well documented, there is another very important reason for young children to be physically active. Research studying the effects of physical activity on the brain have produced noteworthy results. Specifically, current research has found that exercise (1) increases working, short-term, and long-term memory, (2) decreases distractibility and impulsivity, allowing individuals to maintain focus longer and more easily initiate or delay a response, (3) increases reading comprehension and analysis, (4) improves math skills, and (5) enhances creativity. Investigators have also reported that physical activity improves brain function and optimizes cognitive abilities in children. In one study, the EEG patterns (electrical activity of the brain) of children sitting still were compared with similar patterns of children who had walked for 20 minutes. The results showed greater EEG

activity after exercise indicating that physical activity “turns on” the brain, making it function more effectively.

Current brain research is confirming what many physical education professionals had thought intuitively – vigorous physical activity improves academic performance. In a time where “core” curricular requirements threaten to squeeze out activity time in schools and early childhood centers, the message that daily physical activity is not just a good idea, but is fundamental to success in the learning process needs to be proclaimed for all to hear!

### **Movement Guidelines and Sample Activities**

While the thought of preparing lesson plans may seem overwhelming for early childhood personnel with little or no background in physical education or sports, young children can experience quality teacher-led physical activity experiences if the following basic principles are followed:

#### **Principle 1: Provide frequent opportunities for young children to improve basic locomotor skills**

With younger children, it is important to lay a solid foundation of basic locomotor capability before teaching them more complex motor skills. Most children are comfortable walking and running and can perform these skills automatically. Consequently, the teacher should provide ample practice time to develop other locomotor skills (e.g., hopping, jumping, sliding, galloping, skipping, and leaping) so that children can perform these motions correctly without concentrated effort. Since locomotor skills require the use of major muscle groups, these movements expend large amounts of calories, increase

endurance, strengthen muscles and bones, increase attention span and can positively affect academic performance. Below are some sample activities.



Figure 1. *Home Base Activity*: Children “freeze” (hands on knees, eyes on the teacher) in their home bases while receiving instructions for the next series of locomotor movements.

1. *Home Base Activities*. Provide a “home base” (hula hoop, softball base, cone, etc.) for each child from which they embark to perform designated activities. Once a specific task is completed, the children hurry back to their individual home bases (e.g., “Gallop around the room and leap over five cones before returning to your home base.”).
2. *Secret Mission* (also called “Huddle and Go”). Children gather around the teacher in a tight formation. The teacher then issues a “secret mission” to all the children, which must be accomplished quickly before they return to the huddle (e.g., “When I say ‘GO,’ run and touch two walls, jump in and out of two hula hoops, and hustle back to me as fast as you can.”).

## **Principle 2: Include physical fitness development activities in every lesson**

As more emphasis is devoted to “seat work” and curricular requirements even at the preschool level, young children spend more time sitting and have fewer chances to be physically active. In order for children to meet minimum physical activity guidelines, early childhood centers must provide daily opportunities for students to engage in moderate and vigorous physical activities that elevate heart rate and breathing and strengthen large muscle groups. Activities in which all children are moving, with little or no standing or waiting time, are recommended. Below are some sample activities that increase aerobic fitness and promote muscular development.

1. *Animal Walks*. Most of the common animal walks (e.g., crab walk, bunny hop, bear walk, seal walk, puppy dog walk) develop upper-body strength, since they require the body weight to be partially supported by the arms.



Figure 2. *Animal Walk*: Children develop upper-body strength by performing animal walks such as the crab walk.

2. *Wall-to-Wall or Line-to-Line Runs*. Interval-training runs (a set number of sprints of a given distance or time, separated by short, timed rest periods) or

continuous runs performed at a slower pace can help children improve cardiorespiratory function. Young children who make gradual, systematic increases in the time spent running or distance covered over a period of several months can achieve noticeable gains in aerobic fitness.

## **Principle 3: Develop hand-eye coordination through the use of physical activities that employ sport manipulatives**

Sport manipulatives are objects like balls, hoops, Frisbees, bats, various types of paddles or racquets, and bean bags that can be held, caught, thrown, rolled, or used to strike an object, and are used in combination with fundamental locomotor activities to teach more complex motor skills. Once children are comfortable performing basic locomotor movements that require large muscle activity and can demonstrate that these skills have become nearly automatic, they are ready to start learning fine motor skills, which use smaller muscle groups and require the optical tracking of an object as it leaves the hand or moves toward the body.

Younger children often have difficulty performing intricate motor movements and may become discouraged by their inability to successfully accomplish a given motor task, especially one that requires catching or striking. Therefore, it is essential to begin teaching these movement patterns in their simplest form (e.g., catching very large balls by trapping them against the chest, using a paddle with a large striking area or a large bat to hit a large, lightweight ball) at the preschool level. With practice, the level of expertise displayed by young children practicing a variety of activities using sport manipulatives, can rival that of older children. Exposure to a wide selection of activities requiring hand-eye coordination

and ample quality practice time are key ingredients in ensuring success while playing with sport manipulatives. Below are sample activities that incorporate sport manipulatives.

1. *Beat-the-Clock Bowling*. In this cooperative game, children work together to knock down a line of objects as quickly as possible.



Figure 3. *Beat-the-Clock Bowling*: Students work together to knock down all the “pins” as quickly as possible. The activity helps develop hand-eye coordination.

In preparation for this activity, a line of 20 to 30 “bowling pins” (e.g., two-liter soda bottles partially filled with water) is formed in the center of the playing area and equal numbers of children are stationed behind restraining lines (each marked by chalk, tape, or cones about three meters from the center line of pins) on both sides. An equal number of playground balls are distributed to both groups of children (some children will not begin the game holding a ball). Once a timing device is started, a signal is given to start rolling the balls at the pins. Children may retrieve any ball that crosses the center line of pins and rolls on to their side of the playing area, but they must stand behind their respective restraining lines while releasing the balls toward the pins. After the last pin has been knocked down, the total elapsed time is announced. If time permits, the bottles can be repositioned and children can be allowed several more

chances to knock down the pins in a shorter period of time.

2. *Hot Foot (Beanbag Dodge Ball)*. In a gymnasium or other room with a tile floor or wooden surface, children are divided into two equal groups. This game requires a center-dividing line and two restraining lines set at equal distances (3-4 meters) from the center line. Side boundaries may be necessary, depending on the size of the class and the available play space. An equal number of bean bags are laid out on each side of the center line while children stand on the two restraining lines. Once a signal is given, the children may run forward, grab a bean bag, retreat behind their respective restraining lines, and release the bean bag in such a manner that it slides along the floor. If the moving beanbag touches the foot of a child on the other team, that child must join the team that slid the beanbag. At a given stopping point, the team with the most children is declared the winner.

### Conclusion

Quality physical activities, where all children actively participate and learn a variety of new skills, take forethought and planning. Early childhood teachers and staff with minimal knowledge and experience can learn how to create and implement a variety of physical activities using lessons that incorporate the three basic principles discussed in this article.

Preschool teachers can provide opportunities for children to experience the health benefits and intrinsic joy that come from living an active life by setting aside sufficient class time to engage in daily physical activity. By making physical activity an integral part of the classroom schedule, teachers can help young children

live healthier lives, both now and in the future.

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## They On Playfulness: Neurodevelopmental and Psychological Insights from Creative Therapy

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*“When children play they are working hard trying to  
make sense of their world”  
- Doug Goodkin -*

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### Introduction

Play matters. It's the language of childhood. It's the way that children make sense of their world. Play is also the process through which children learn about how their bodies work and how they can use them to have an impact on the world, whether that is through splashing in the bath or waving at someone who waves back. It's about cause and effect, exploration and identity. Play is also about the basic learning blocks that need to be put in place in early childhood for a successful social, emotional, physical and cognitive journey into adulthood (Bergen 2009). Few teachers would argue that children love to play, and learn through play. What is less appreciated is how and what children learn through play and so explorations into this are timely.

### Neuro-Dramatic Play

This comprises three areas: Rhythmic play, sensory play and dramatic play. Play begins even before the child is born. In utero, she responds to her mother's voice and is learning about sensory experiences

and rhythm that she experiences around her, according to the principles of neuro-dramatic play (Jennings 2010). The rhythm of the heartbeat makes the child feel secure, which is the basis of confidence to be playful.

This carries on after birth as music helps promote organisation, regulation and communication skills for children. Even children who don't speak can often respond and communicate through music long before they develop speech (Zoller 1991). Rhythm, similarly, is one of the three main areas of early play and why children who learn in different ways often respond well to drum work and action songs (Jennings 2010). Imagine the rock-solid drums and bass in a band, which allows the lead guitarist to perform flights of musical creativity; the link between rhythm, music and playfulness is the same.

Sensory play is early play that involves all the senses; sight, touch, movement, hearing and taste as children dance, run, jump, move, slide, splash and put sand in their mouths. They are playfully exploring

their world using their senses. When they cannot build the foundation of play through their senses, their subsequent ability to play—to try new things, to take risks, to be creative—suffers. If their sensory system doesn't develop correctly, that impacts on a child's ability to learn about and understand the world around them (Ayres 1974, Allen 2016).

Such challenges in sensory processing—as seen in children with autism, for example, who may hear sounds in different ways or may be hyper-sensitive to touch—illustrate how important an integrated sensory system is for learning (Baker et al 2008). Through play, children learn how their senses work; some children with special needs need to do such early developmental play more than other children, to build firm foundations for future learning and social interaction.

Finally, dramatic play is the relationship- and interaction-based play that children engage in during the early months—games such as 'peekaboo', for instance. It is the basis of attachment (Bowlby 1969) and where the foundations of social learning are laid down. It is about communication, back and forth engagement and the ability to make social connections, which in turn provide the bedrock of playing games.

### Developing Playfulness

Once these foundations are in place, children go on to develop playfulness through EPR: the stages of Embodiment, Projective and Role Play (Jennings 1999). In Embodiment play, children learn that when they shake a rattle it makes a sound, and when they stop, it stops. They explore cause-and-effect, and they begin to learn that they can have an impact on their world. They learn how their bodies work and what they can do with them, so that by the end of this developmental stage they usually have an 'internal body schema' which is

evident in their ability to follow an action song like 'Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes'.

Projective Play, which is playing with objects, echoes the importance of objects relations as explored by Winnicott (1971). Children start to understand shape and form and begin to play out experiences and to experiment with ideas through objects. They make jigsaws, line up their toys in size, shape and type, and they begin to develop worlds with their toys.

In the Role Play stage, children still use their bodies and may use objects, such as toys and dressing-up clothes, but they're also creating their own ideas, scenarios and stories through their imaginations, and begin to role play which helps social understanding. They may play a fireman or a wicked witch and begin to explore the feelings and experiences of that kind of person, which helps them build intuitive empathetic insights.

These kinds of play extend into art-making, too, and are echoed in the four mark-making stages described by Essame (2016).

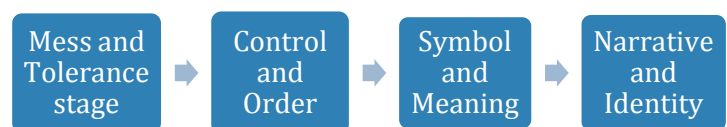


Figure 1: Four mark-making stages in children's art-making (Essame, 2016).

The first Mess and Tolerance stage, is highly sensory. Children show a need to understand cause-and-effect. The child splashes water, makes handprints, or scribbles on any surface that comes to hand. It's explorative, sensory, spontaneous and unpredictable—as any parent will testify. Children then move onto Control and Order, where they begin to create patterns and schemas and to have some intent in their creations. Here, children repeat marks, begin to sort and to create

patterns. Next, they move onto the stage of Symbol and Meaning which is when symbolic language and self-expression begins to develop. Children's drawings begin to have a shape; even if an adult can't always recognise what they are, they have meaning to the children who draw them. This is when you often see pictures of 'tadpole man', where children draw a human figure with a round circle for head



Figure 2: Tadpole Man – An emerging sense of self.

Finally, stage four is Narrative and Identity where there is higher thought, imagination and the child's life metaphors become more apparent (Figure 3). They may choose characters and themes to draw that have particular importance—the superhero, the princess, the pirate or the unicorn, for example. Bodrova (2008) discusses what Vygotsky (1980) identified as 'real play', which in many ways is the higher level of play, from a developmental perspective: play where children create imaginary situations, create roles, and explore and follow a set of rules. Generally, it emerges in children between three and five years of age, and this kind of play feeds into social learning, role play and narrative and identity.

### Relationship-Based Play

Play is the foundation for higher order thinking and learning, so these developmental stages need to be in place

and body, and stick arms and legs. 'Tadpole man' shows that they have an emerging sense of self (Figure 2). This idea of who they—and of who other people are—underpins social play, and is the basis of such essential play skills as understanding rules, turn-taking and empathy.

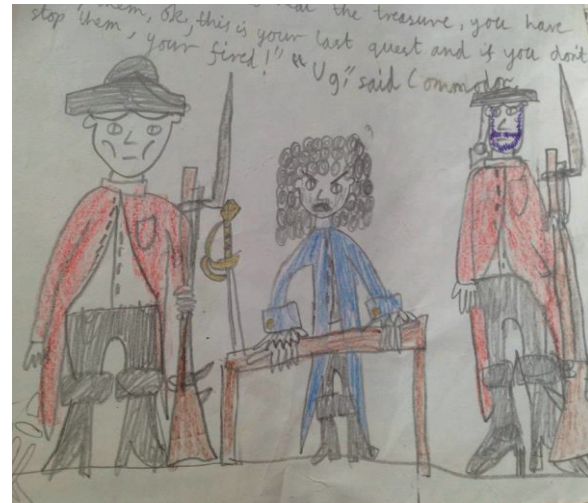


Figure 3: Life metaphors - Narrative and Identity.

for all children to benefit from schooling. Children who have missed out on any stages, such as those who have suffered from childhood trauma, or who need extra time and support to go through these stages such as children with additional needs like Autism Spectrum Disorder, can benefit from revisiting these developmental stages (Essame 2009, Jennings 1995). The foundations for playfulness, and then higher order thinking and learning, can be put in place at any age.

When teachers talk about play in education, they are often referring to higher order thinking and play, which builds on these foundations of playfulness—so much so, that without these developmental stages in place, a child can find it hard to play at all. For teachers and carers working with such children who learn differently, it's helpful to follow and understand these developmental stages, and provide teaching opportunities that use sensory

experience and play that is high in dramatic content. One way to help children who struggle to focus is to give them a physical object, which will link them back to the Projective Play stage, for example.

The importance of positive relationships is increasingly recognised as part of the process of developing healthy minds (Gerhardt 2004, Greenspan 1999). Play therapists create safe spaces where, through positive, affirmative relationships, they help children overcome trauma and

make sense of their worlds in age-appropriate, non-verbal ways. Clinical work with play inspiring children to play out experiences has been shown to promote social and emotional change as well as to facilitate learning (Cozolino 2006, Siegel 2012, Winnicott 1971). So, ultimately, teachers' relationships with their pupils matters in early childhood because it's where they lay the secure, confident foundation of happy, successful learning—and play is the best tool to use as it's the natural language of the child.

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*“Play is the highest development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child’s soul. Children’s play is not mere sport. It is full of meaning and import”*  
- Friedrich Frobel -

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## Notes from a Travelling Playworker

Suzanna Law  
Pop-Up Adventure Play, UK

Suzanna Law graduated with a First-Class Honours Bachelors Degree in Playwork, her second degree after a Bachelors in Chemistry. With over 8 years of experience in the field, she is currently working towards her PhD in Playwork at Leeds Beckett University under Professor Fraser Brown, the world's first Professor of Playwork. Suzanna is the co-founder of Pop-Up Adventure Play, a UK-based charity, to aid in the dissemination of the Playwork approach around the world. At Pop-Up Adventure Play, she leads on project coordination and online communications, and has just completed a successful round-the-world .

Morgan blinked at me when I declared that we were going around the world. Statements of this scale should not surprise her anymore: we had once driven in the smallest yellow car on an 11,000 mile roadtrip across America twice (Leichter-Saxby & Law, 2015). As co-founders of Pop-Up Adventure Play, a small but international charity supporting children's right to play, travelling is part of the job. We want to meet people where they are, suspending our own agenda just as playworkers – our professional title – ought to meet children in their play (Brown, 2008).

Morgan and I both have a passion for playwork, the professional field of play advocacy. It has been studied in the UK for over 25 years, and brings a multidisciplinary approach to the importance of play - play that is “freely chosen, intrinsically motivated and personally directed” (PPSG, 2005). Before the field of study began, playworkers existed as the adult presence within child-directed spaces called adventure playgrounds. These spaces are filled with open-ended materials called loose parts which the children are able to manipulate however they wish.



Figure 1: Plas Madoc (aka “The Land”) Adventure Playground in Wrexham, UK. The first ever playworker, Bertelsen explains his role very well in his reflections (1972, p. 20-21).

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*“The initiative must come from the children the inspiration for play. I cannot, and indeed will not teach the children anything. I am able to give them my support in their creative play and work, and thus help them in developing those talents and abilities which are often supposed at home and at school”*

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As Bertelsen suggests, adventure playgrounds are neither home nor school.

Children are in charge of this space and staff do not direct, teach or control. This may seem alarming at first glance, especially if neither the children nor the adults have experienced this level freedom before, but according to research, accidents on adventure playgrounds are far fewer than conventional playgrounds (Ball, 2002).

As Pop-Up Adventure Play, Morgan and I have been supporting adults in providing opportunities for children to direct their own play. We developed a model called a pop-up adventure playground, which is a

temporary adventure playground designed to bring the community together through play. This model has been delivered effectively in 17 countries by our independent organisers: transforming communities into play spaces for just a few hours, and starting conversations about the importance of play. Through pop-up adventure playgrounds and our bespoke workshops and trainings, Pop-Up Adventure Play is bringing together advocates from all over the world with one goal in mind: to create a world with good quality play opportunities.



Figure 2: A Pop-Up Adventure Playground in North Carolina, USA.

### **Never Under-Estimate the Power of Community**

Reflecting on our trip around the world has been quite the journey itself. Great playwork practice asks each playworker to reflect and seek to improve ourselves in a continual cycle (Jeffrey, 2008). A World Tour offers lots to learn. One of those lessons was about community. Play benefits whole communities, lifting everyone up. But play advocates also need communities of their own.

Meeting folks at the Ithaca Play Symposium (Ithaca Children's Garden, 2015) brought this to light, surrounding us with play advocates working within their

own home communities. We had not realised that we would meet so many of our contacts in one space. I was moved to hear about their projects and inspired to see them support one another. We all need to feel part of a group of people who have the same shared goal. That feeling of connection and belonging, keep us motivated and on course.

### **There's No Shame in Asking for Help**

When we were a fledgling organisation, having completed our first major event, we got an email from Carolina of Bellelli Educación in Costa Rica. She wanted to run her very own pop-up adventure playground, just like we had done, and

asked for our support. No one had asked us this yet, and we had no idea how to answer. But we also did not want to seem unprofessional, so what could we do? We asked for help too, by reaching out to our contacts, gathering our thoughts and making sure we solidified a great first meeting with Carolina.

Six years on, Morgan and I found ourselves side by side in Costa Rica helping to run their 27th pop-up adventure playground as part of our world tour! We were in a beautiful country playing with over 300 people at an event that we developed - it just goes to show that asking for help can benefit everyone.



Figure 3: The Pop-Up Adventure Playground in Costa Rica where over 300 people arrived.

### **There's Always an Opportunity to Start Again**

While every city in Australia that Malarkey Playwork took us to was glorious in its own way, one in particular sticks out to me: Brisbane. In Brisbane, we were able to visit a nursery in Robina, Queensland to lead a workshop for 25 participants who were literally buzzing. It was difficult to gauge until we realised that they were hungry for more playwork theory to use in their daily practice. This whole centre had decided to completely change the way that they worked in favour of the playwork approach.

Now this transition phase is alarming. If you have been making a cup of tea in the

same way every day for years, and then suddenly are told to make that cup of tea in a completely different way, both the tea maker and drinker will have some things to get used to. This was the same for the practice at this nursery. The staff were in shock, the children were suspicious and parents were on the fence about this whole change. New is scary, new is a risk, but once you get through the transition stage, new can be glorious, and I think that those 25 members of staff were starting to reap the benefits of the playwork approach. Simply by taking a step back and watching, by leaving things unplanned and open-ended, and by not intervening at every opportunity, the children were beginning to elaborate their play and have longer, more complex play engagements. When the staff started reflecting on the things that they saw the children doing, they knew that this change was for the good. It is never too late to make a change, especially if that change is in favour of more play.

### **You're Never Too Young to Make a Difference**

For the entirety of my life, I have struggled with people taking me seriously. Maybe growing up as a British Born Chinese girl amplified my youthful looks. Maybe my child-like awe of the world is misunderstood, but either way, I have always been determined that I could make a difference in a world that did not agree simply because I looked young. Stepping into Singapore, the 5th country in our world tour, I suddenly understood how best to stand up to those who look down on me because of my age. The spectacular airport, this beautiful city, the well-cared for citizens and the landscape of this marvellous country reminded me that “young” can also be extraordinary.

We met a lot of folks in Singapore who were worried that their inexperience in playwork would hinder their play advocacy.

This is not true. Something I have learned over the years of being looked down upon both physically and metaphorically is that you get to benefit from the wisdom, or indeed the errors of those before you. While this country maybe young, it is no less magnificent – this is just the same for the early childhood education field. Looking to those who have been in the field for longer, we can reflect on their work and learn. There is much potential in the area of play in Singapore, and I look forward to seeing the progression over the next few years.



Figure 4. A young man plays with a tyre at a Pop-Up Adventure Playground in Singapore.

### There's Always Room for Play

I have family in Hong Kong so upon arrival, I already knew what to expect: an impressively small but busy city. These folks pack as much into their lives as possible while still finding room to enjoy the little things in life, both in terms of space and time. Morgan and I stayed with my family in Hong Kong, where the two of us, four suitcases, a bunk bed and TV lived cosily for a week. I was grateful for the space to ourselves in a city that had so little of it to spare.

The biggest lesson I learned from Hong Kong is that there is always room to play. Even in a city of this size, we found room enough to host two pop-up adventure playgrounds. Even in the tightly packed

daily schedules of people, we found time to play, even if it was just for a few minutes on the road outside the ancestral temple of my village. It was clear that everyone there needed to play, and I am glad that there was an opportunity for it.

Children and adults alike need to be able to decide the intent and content of their own play for just a moment every so often, so that we can re-focus our lives, and readjust our minds. We are a better version of ourselves if we have a few moments of play.



Figure 5: Children immersed in their own play at a Pop-Up Adventure Playground in Hong Kong.

### Don't Take for Granted What You Have

I looked around the room during our last World Tour presentation. I was back in my home country, England and I was a little surprised to see that nothing had changed. Having spent so much time in so many countries talking about the mythical adventure playground, it was beginning to sound like a fantasy. Adventure playgrounds are in fact real, and I was standing in one again! Standing in front of the room full of playworkers, I told them how in every country we visited people had

been looking to the UK for good practice. There was an awkward silence. We have come upon some tough times in the UK playwork sector, but perhaps we have lost something important. In our grumblings we have taken for granted the rich playwork history that we have in the UK, and forget how far we have come to fight for children's right to access good quality play opportunities.

Now that the world tour is over, it is all the more prominent to me that lessons can be learnt or reinforced wherever I go. As a playworker seeing the landscape of play differ from country to country, I know now that I should not take for granted the playwork experience and qualifications that I have under the guidance of supportive mentors. It is so encouraging to see the interest in play growing around the world, and I hope that I can continue to be part of this positive step towards a global movement in children's play.

For more information, please see the below websites:

Pop-Up Adventure Play –  
[www.popupadventureplay.org](http://www.popupadventureplay.org)

Ithaca Children's Garden -  
[www.ithacachildrensgarden.org/](http://www.ithacachildrensgarden.org/)

Bellelli Educación -  
[bellellieducacion.com/](http://bellellieducacion.com/)

Malarkey Playwork -  
<http://www.malarkeyplaywork.com.au/>

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## Beyond the Pre-school Classroom: Utilizing Singapore's Museums to Create Lifelong Learners

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### Introduction

Museum learning for kindergartners may seem far-fetched for most pre-school teachers. There are several tricks of the trade in the museum sector that early childhood educators may find useful when engaging young children in heritage exploration. This paper offers a brief survey of the various strategies pre-school educators can use to initiate and sustain object-based dialogues with young curious minds in the museum and in the pre-school classroom. Thoughtfully-designed cultural encounters also present opportunities for both teachers and children to think, to reflect and to become life-long learners.

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*"It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see."*

*Henry David Thoreau*

### Object-based dialogues

Thoreau, an American philosopher, wants us to value how we respond to what we look at over what we are observing. Similarly, object-based dialogues are really more about the viewer than about the object in view. For this very reason, teachers who had experimented with object-based dialogues and thinking routines have shared that they are able to enter and discover the fertile minds of their children. Many are often

pleasantly surprised at how competent and creative each child is.

THINKING ROUTINES were developed by Harvard's Project Zero (PZ) research on children's learning and thinking ("Thinking Routines", n.d.) They are easy-to-use mini strategies that are repeatedly used in the classroom or in museums to enable children to observe and discover the world around them; they promote sustained dialogues and help children think more critically and deeply. "In museums, students are interacting with and trying to make sense of new objects and experiences and must think to do so" (Ritchhart, 2007, p.139). Such routines coupled with POWERFUL QUESTIONS help us 'read' heritage objects, artworks, paintings and photographs. For pre-schoolers, the National Heritage Board (NHB) recommends the SEE-THINK-WONDER routine as a structured yet dynamic way to initiate object-based dialogues. The routine basically involves asking questions that encourage us to share what we SEE in an object, discuss what we THINK about it and discover what it makes us WONDER about.

Museums are filled with objects; they can serve as stimuli for conversations, even for young learners. As educators, we can choose to hurry our class through the galleries or slow down and investigate just a few objects more intentionally. It is a critical

choice educators have to make. Likewise in class, some teachers have spent up to 45 minutes discovering how different children respond to a single heritage object. These two experiences are what we can call *slow art*. Advocates of Slow Art Day reckoned that when we slow down in a museum, we can see and experience art without an expert (or expertise) (“Why slow?”, n.d.). *Slow art*, when coupled with the SEE-THINK-

WONDER thinking routine creates sustained dialogues. The skills that children and teachers gain in such facilitated encounters with museum objects are transferable not just between the classroom and the museum but also in other learning contexts. Teachers have successfully tested these close-looking skills in cooking lessons or in parks.



Figure 1. A circle time to explore heritage and modern objects in MOE Kindergarten Tampines.

In the context of early learning in museums, the NHB has come to realise in the past three years of experimentation that it is the dialogue that surrounds a museum object that makes it powerful. When we apply object-based dialogue as a strategy in the pre-school classroom, we find that the skills teachers and children acquire during these seemingly unique interactions with museum objects are actually useful in many preschool lessons, even more academic ones such as numeracy and literacy.

### **Museum Skills and Lifelong Learners**

In museums, children can pick up three skills that are essential to building a solid foundation for life-long learning. These skills include 1) self-regulation, 2) learning how to observe as well as think critically and creatively, and 3) communicating ideas.

One of the first skills pre-school children need to acquire in order to have positive learning experiences is self-regulation; it is an ability that can be acquired through regular practice in focus and self-control. Museums require specific etiquette and test the ability to recall gallery rules and behave accordingly. Children can learn to regulate their urge to touch a museum object or run around in a gallery by being involved in the process of preparing themselves for a museum outing. A game of Simon Says helps children recall museum manners. A twist to the game to do the opposite action enables children to refrain from automatic responses to situations such as talking loudly when excited. Challenging children to discuss, design and build a showcase to protect a heritage object in class can become a conversation starter and a space to practise museum behaviour.

Even waiting for your turn to share your observations in your 'museum voice' nurtures self-regulatory skills pre-schoolers need for life. Listening to the teacher and peers in addition to making connections to what everyone contributed in a discussion demands focus and attention.



Figure 2. A child from Bethany Childcare Centre using a viewfinder to focus on what caught his attention in a painting at National Museum Singapore (NMS).

We found that when children practise these self-regulatory skills through games or circle time sharing before a museum visit, they are more likely to display behaviours that are conducive for a quality gallery experience. We also discovered when children use viewfinders to locate details in museum objects that interest them, they became more focused. Besides being a useful tool in galleries, viewfinders have also been used successfully by children and their teachers in parks and in classrooms with posters, photographs and objects. Teachers can facilitate experiences for children to garner the second skill of learning how to observe as well as think critically and creatively about our multicultural heritage. They can use the SEE-THINK-WONDER routine to encourage children to pick out evidence from a cultural object or contextual display to support their opinions.

A contextual display usually feature objects set in scene from the past; a market reconstructed in a gallery or a kitchen

recreated with authentic furniture, porcelain or cooking utensils of a certain era are examples of contextual displays. Teachers who are used to a set of model answers will find questions posed in this thinking routine more open-ended and more discursive. Teachers often concentrate on close-ended THINK questions such as, "Do you think this is used for cooking?" or "Where do you think this could be found?" without first inviting children to observe the object under study. Such questions are commonly used for tuning-in and are intended to lead children to the right answers. Such questions, although directed at children, are actually teacher-centric as they are prompts that will only gather random guesses or quickly conclude a discussion so the teacher can move on to present facts on the object in view.



Figure 3. Teacher and children from Hampton Preschool in a sustained dialogue about a printing press on display at Sun Yet Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall.

Presenting objects in this manner limits the kinds of vocabulary that may be used and heard. The thinking routine, however, puts forth questions as an integral and continuous part of active investigation. Questions can be generated not just from teachers but also from children.

Interactive learning involves a dialogue...in which the child responds to prompts designed to spur thinking; the dialogue builds upon student responses and

teacher elaborations (Reed, Hirsch-Pasek, Golinkoff, 2012, p.86). Even just asking “What do you SEE?” allows the children to show us what they are intrigued by rather than having a docent or teacher show them what is supposedly interesting to a researcher or an adult. The whole learning process becomes investigative and teachers need not worry about possessing vast amounts of cultural knowledge necessary for didactic teaching. Teachers remarked that they enjoyed discovering new things with their young learners. Children who have had a chance to handle an object in class, talk about their discoveries and wonderings quickly build up confidence to use old and new words as their interest is piqued.

Offering questions like “What do you THINK about what you saw?” or “What do the others THINK about that idea?” opens up the multi-directional discussion and encourages children to communicate their thoughts, be it in museums or in classrooms. Teachers find themselves respecting the views of children as valid ideas for further discussions. The point is not to discover only facts about the objects, but also to uncover children’s interests. Children are led to think creatively when asked to develop multiple viewpoints. POWERFUL QUESTIONS such as “What makes you say that?”, “What could have happened?” and “How did these

immigrants feel?” prompt children to think more deeply about what they opined. “What if...?”, “What does it make you WONDER about?” and “I WONDER...?” questions open up the imagination and the chance for perspective taking. When children explore varied perspectives and imagine themselves in other settings, they are also trying out problem-solving skills. Such imaginative dialogues not only develop creativity but also nurture empathy for our pioneers and peoples from other cultures.

The third skill of communicating ideas rests upon a child’s command of the language used as well as the ability to make connections. Teachers can encourage children to represent their learning or observations through a single word, a phrase, a sentence, a story, a craft or a drawing or even through an original, class-made skit or song. These activities build vocabulary and demonstrate how grammar works in authentic settings. Flash cards do not possess the same magic as a heritage objects. Such extension activities also encourage children to think individually, learn collaboratively and reinforce what they have discovered about an object. Besides critical and creative thinking, the abilities to collaborate and communicate are also 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies that will be prized in future workplaces.



Figure 4. Pre-school teachers trying out the SEE-THINK-WONDER thinking routine at a teacher training session in the National Museum of Singapore.

Teachers can also offer opportunities to recall a learning experience; children can respond to an invitation to talk about their most memorable moment in the museum or their favourite object in the gallery. When applied in the classroom setting, children may also be asked to talk about the character they liked most in a story or which plant they found fascinating in a garden walk. The reflective nature of such recall exercises help develop thinking and communication skills as well as nurture active contributors and self-directed learners who are more likely to embrace life-long learning. Many of these 'museum skills' appear as attributes of life-long learners (South Australia. Queensland Studies Authority, 2006). These qualities are also featured in MOE's Framework for 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies (Singapore. Ministry of Education, 2015) and in the Nurturing Early Learners Framework (Singapore. Ministry of Singapore, 2012).

The NHB, through its Singapore's Little Treasures pre-school programme, has been encouraging preschool teachers to use museums as resources and to source for heritage objects for classroom lessons. Many have managed to share heirlooms from their own homes, family photographs and memorabilia from the parents of their preschoolers. Some even invited resource persons such as batik artists or musicians of traditional instruments from the community to enhance heritage learning. Effective teachers are powerful mediators of children's thinking and learning. They design learning environments that stimulate children's curiosity" (Salmon, 2010, p. 27). Besides a stimulating physical environment, the first thing an educator has to establish for object-based dialogues is a safe climate where there is no right or wrong answers and no silly questions. Children need to feel safe before they can test their own theories by looking for clues and talking about evidence they can

observe in the object. They are also more confident to share their imaginative wonderings when they feel psychologically safe. To build an environment conducive for object-based dialogues, teachers can try asking children how they came to that conclusion and invite the whole class for a debate in place of saying "no" or "incorrect" to a child's response. This safe space is an essential ingredient for learning conversations and cross-cultural discoveries.

### **Conclusion**

Object-based conversations can lead us into the minds of children and help us understand how they see the world. Access to museums and objects encourages active learning and prompts language development for thinking and communicating (Manchester, England. Museums Libraries Archives Council, 2008). Practising museum skills in the classroom prior to the field trip prepares children to navigate the learning experience in museums. The museum experience opens up even more possibilities for further experimentation as teachers observe what interests each child as they take turns to 'listen eloquently' to each others' responses to heritage objects that were valued by generations before them.

The museum skills we explored in this paper happily coincides with 21st century competencies every child needs to develop in order to become a confident and concerned citizen. The NHB offers museums and innovative learning strategies as resources to develop children who can think critically and inventively on various communication and collaboration platforms. Object-based learning presents the potential to equip every pre-schooler with the courage to take up the next challenge with an unknown object or situation. It also offers a valuable

opportunity for pre-school practitioners and museums to create life-long learners.

*Note: All photographs are taken as part of NHB's Singapore's Little Treasures Project.*

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## Creating Inclusive Parent Engagement Practices

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### Introduction

Parents are the key influencers in their children's lives and play an integral role in their early formative years (Early Childhood Development Agency, 2014). Preschool leaders and teachers also play a critical role. They are extremely privileged and powerful in making a difference to these young lives. Even though parent-school engagement is widely understood to be an important factor in children's school experience and educational outcomes, there is considerable variation in the ways that preschools manage their relationships with parents. There is also great variation in what parents themselves view as important for engagement with their children's schooling (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014). This article will address the need for building home-school partnerships and suggest ways for preschool educators to engage parents in meaningful school activities.

### Bridging the Home-School Partnership

In cosmopolitan Singapore, preschools serve children from many nationalities. Some parents have language barriers,

different oral and informal interpersonal communication styles, and may be unfamiliar with Singapore's preschool education outcomes. These factors widen the gap of home-school partnerships. For preschool professionals, if half the battle is engaging the children, the other half is engaging parents. However, without trust, it is impossible for parents to feel safe, close or comfortable enough to collaborate with preschools to nurture and support children's holistic development. Hence, it is crucial for preschools to build trusting, inclusive home-school partnerships that enables parents to feel welcomed in school, and that is culturally responsive to their diverse backgrounds. Preschool leaders and teachers need to position parents as 'partners' in the care and education equation for parent engagement to be successful. School leaders should be perceived by parents as welcoming and supportive of their involvement, rather than as inaccessible, dismissive or disinterested in supporting their involvement (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014). In addition, parents should be encouraged to choose the way they want and are able to

interact with the preschool; matching the parents' capabilities to the needs of the preschool creates a win-win and more sustainable, trusting partnership.

As the bridge between the parents and school, preschool leaders must play an active role in creating and promoting inclusive parent engagement practices. They should not consider parental involvement as interference in the affairs of the school but have faith that it is possible to develop strong partnerships with parents. After all, the role of the centre leader is foremost in the development of positive home-school partnership (Velsor & Orozco, 2006).

### **Issues and Challenges**

Preschool leaders face several challenges as they work on forging stronger partnerships with parents. First, *the diverse needs of parents* are often a concern for preschools wishing to develop partnerships with families. This is because parents have different needs – they have different working schedules, parenting style, interests, knowledge, spoken language and priorities. Some parents may be interested in gaining a better understanding of child development across developmental domains, or in having regular communication about strategies for guiding children's behaviours and supporting their learning at home, or in validating their parenting style. Hence, it is unlikely that a one-size-fits-all parent engagement practice will work for the majority of the parents.

Second, *the extent of time and expertise vary across families*. Some may have time to assist teachers in school, to help with the coordination of community resources, or with corporate governance, programme quality and professional development matters, while others do not. In the Singapore context, parents who work long hours cannot find time to render assistance

even though they may have the connections and expertise. On the other hand, leaders in our young early childhood sector are not equipped to strike a balance between parents' ideals with age appropriate care and education if they offer opportunities for the parents to be involved in programme quality and professional development.

Third, as Gestwicki (2004) pointed out, in this current era of diverse family structures, wide-ranging parenting values, cultural beliefs, and varied family circumstances, preschool curricula and pedagogical approaches should be negotiated with families so as to be as inclusive and collaborative as possible.

Fourth, schools need to be creative and learn from the successes and failures of the parent engagement activities that they have organised in order to know how to reach out to the parents of the children enrolled in their preschools. In addition, local institutes providing DECCE-T/L early childhood leadership courses do not currently expound on this the aspect of leadership that focuses on the importance of and ways for creating an inclusive and trusting home-school partnership. A survey of 217 preschool teachers and leaders conducted in March 2016 indicated an overwhelming need for workshops to hone their skills in organising parent engagement activities. 81% of the respondents agreed that they needed help to engage parents in a variety of ways to build home-school partnership (Soo, 2016).

### **Exploring Solutions for Strengthening the Home-School Partnership**

As a member of the local preschool fraternity, I strongly feel that we should explore solutions to create an inclusive, welcoming, trustworthy environment to provide parent engagement activities that can strengthen the home-school partnership. Here are some solutions to

consider. Preschool leaders can leverage on Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Parental Involvement (Epstein, 2004).

- Parenting: Help all families establish home environments to support children as students.
- Communicating: Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress.
- Volunteering: Recruit and organize parent help and support.
- Learning at home: Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.
- Decision making: Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.
- Collaborating with the community: Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

To take on the agent-of-change role in fostering inclusive parent engagement practices, the following are some recommendations for applying Epstein's Types of Parental Involvement Framework:

- a. Pay more attention to the cross cultural differences and language barriers that hinder their involvement; work sincerely to understand their lack of involvement to avoid misinterpreting it as lack of interest or a deficit in their value system.
- b. Have policies in place to inform parents of areas of need to enable parents to be involved alongside teachers. Invite families as participants in school decisions to

develop parent leaders and representatives, and / or empower parents to coordinate resources and services from the community to benefit the stakeholders of the preschool.

- c. Work with teachers to personalise communication and updates through an interpreter. Preschool leaders and teachers ought to respect the parents' culture and language by including them in the everyday life or environment of the preschool.
- d. Guide teachers to share teaching practices and design home kits for parents to discuss, extend or reinforce curriculum-related activities with their children at home and in other out-of-school settings. Parents will also welcome strategies for differentiating guidance and motivation to support children's development of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

In line with this recommendation, the Early Childhood Parenting Landscape Study (2014) highly recommended that preschool leaders improve preschool-home partnerships by delivering workshops with a focus on strategies to share early childhood knowledge and resources with parents through interactive and experiential activities. Such workshops will transform passive parent participants at celebrations and preschool events to active participants who will gain awareness of positive parenting strategies, better communication skills and teaching strategies to support their children's development and learning in preschool and beyond.

- e. Facilitate inclusive parent engagement activities differently by using the language, informal communication and avoiding jargons, home visits, or involvement in the classroom for parents to find them purposeful and meaningful:
- Share the preschool's vision, mission and curriculum
  - Share the goals of education – the appropriate learning outcomes for the respective age groups
  - Include parents in goal setting for their children's learning; this will help develop a sense of ownership of their children's school experiences, and in turn, they will provide a supportive environment for their children at home (Goldring & Sims, 2005)
- f. Create a climate of trust and collaboration between the home and school through effective planning of parent engagement activities and its implementation by involving parents. Preschools can begin to develop trust with new parents by organising a parenting talk on managing specific misbehaviours in young children to help parents who face such challenges. While parents get helpful advice, the preschool leader and teachers will gain support from the parents and the children will likely experience appropriate child guidance. On the other hand, preschool leaders may organise interactive workshops that are co-facilitated by the children and teachers for the parents to gain understanding of the curriculum activities and children's learning experience. With better understanding, parents will be able

to support their children's development and growth and the preschool leader and teachers will likely have more two-way communications. Teachers will be able to tailor activities and guidance to help the children to meet the learning goals and optimise their learning.

Parents may be invited to share traditional food, games or dance during racial harmony celebrations, for example. Both the parents and preschool must develop trusting relationships for the parents to have a sense of belonging to the preschool and confidence to be involved in school-wide or classroom-specific activities. In this regard, parents need to be ensured that their participation is critical for the success of the preschool and their children's education (Gorvine, 2010).

To plan, organise and implement inclusive parent engagement practices, it is key for preschool leaders to identify parents' needs, consider logistics, availability of resources and manpower, and frequency to select an appropriate day of the week and time as well as wide-ranging content and activities that can benefit the majority of the parents. In addition, it is important to take into consideration the ages, unique needs, strengths and learning difficulties of individual children, and the profiles, demographics and interests of the families. To attract sustainable participation, parent engagement activities should be conducted after office hours. In addition, bundling the parent engagement activity with children's performance will further secure a higher attendance.

- g. Connect families to the health services, employment opportunities, along with services and resources in the community to address specific needs (e.g., financial or counselling needs for the family, or the need for referrals or visual / hearing screening) and reduce stressors that have direct impact on children's growth and development.
- h. It will be helpful for the institutes to consider including a module on building trusting home-school partnerships in the course or offer continual professional development courses to better equip preschool leaders with the skillsets to address this crucial responsibility. This additional training will enable preschool leaders to reflect on their professional attitudes, philosophies and practical techniques to enable them to create inclusive parent engagement activities to strengthen parents' support for their children's development and learning.

### **Conclusion**

Parental involvement benefits all children, citizens and non-citizens alike. Inclusive parent engagement ought to be reciprocal, relational, and culturally and linguistically responsive. It should include support, information sharing, embracing each other's strengths, and learning to work together to support the children. Building home-school partnerships require concerted effort and time of both the parents and early childhood professionals. Preschool leaders should step forward to give advice to resolve attitudes or behaviours that get in the way of working in a partnership to sustain effective and inclusive parent engagement practices.

The responsibilities of preschool leaders can be overwhelming. They face many family and parental challenges including promoting parental involvement to support children's learning, communicating with them and having them accept responsibility, promoting their understanding of the importance of getting involved in preschool events, addressing the lack of parental support in instruction and discipline, addressing absenteeism, encouraging parents to work with teachers as a team, providing guidance to them to become better parents, dealing with difficulties in interactions with younger parents or extended family members, to name a few, all of which are exacerbated by excessive paperwork and insufficient classroom-visit time. Nonetheless, the programme quality must be complemented by equity: the inclusion of all children, effective and productive methods of developing each child in the programme, efficiency in carrying out the preschool's activities, and community and parent participation (Soo, 2004).

Inclusive parental engagement practices, one tiny step at a time, will lead to a cohesive and harmonious home-school partnership as well as improve the children's educational outcomes and give them a head-start in lifelong learning. Last but not least, when children see important people in their lives working together, they learn that it's important to build healthy relationships (Soo, 2016).

Finally, providing various parent engagement activities to meet all the needs of parents will meet the Singapore Preschool Quality Rating Scale assessment criteria. Preschool leaders, however, will need to acquire confidence and skills to conduct various activities to equip parents with early childhood knowledge to support the children's learning and development.

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## Effecting Change in Preschool Education in Beijing through Family-Centered Practice and Servant Leadership: The Road Travelled and Lessons Learned by *The Little Oak*

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### Introduction

Through the story of The Little Oak Children's House (The Little Oak), I will share the evolution of the work involved in developing a preschool in response to the need of highly educated urban families in Beijing for progressive and holistic education for their young children. Our vision was to nurture a whole child, physically, intellectually, socio-emotionally, as well as artistically. I argue that for such an innovation to come to life in Beijing back in the early 2000s, a paradigm shift is necessary. For us, the servant leadership approach has proven to be an appropriate one for nurturing a staff eager to learn and willing to serve, and for building a collaborative community with parents for its sustainable development and for continued impact on local Chinese early childhood education policies and practices. Here is our story.

### The Need for Innovation in Preschool Education in China

When I returned to Beijing from graduate studies in the United States in 1998 with my

4-month-old son. I started early in search for a preschool for him, not because I was looking for an infant program to enrol him in, but I was particular about finding a preschool that would offer the fun activities I had experienced abroad.

However, the daily life for children in existing preschools was highly structured and rigid. Some newly emerged private preschools were highly academic so that children wouldn't be "left behind at the starting line". Parent participation was extremely limited everywhere and many prestigious preschools were offering boarding services for very young children. I joined some online parent discussion forums and realized that I wasn't the only one unhappy with the prevailing preschool situation. Many highly educated young parents were yearning for progressive pedagogy and more involvement in their children's school lives. It seems to me that the single-child policy, the emergence of stay-at-home parents, the anxiety living in a fast-changing society, the propagation of the importance of early learning by the emerging market, Internet and increasing

access to information from abroad, as well as young parents' new identity forming after decades of subordination of personal emotions to the socialist political ideals, all contributed to the new needs of educated young parents (Wang, 2003).

Out of desperation, I started The Little Oak in 2001 with an interested partner, aiming to introduce new pedagogies from the west so young children would prosper as a whole child, physically, intellectually, socio-emotionally, as well as artistically. It is the first licensed family-based preschool in Beijing. Over the course of the next two years, the school had grown from an enrolment of 6 to over 30. Half of the parents joined us as shareholders with five of them also joining the staff to support our efforts in surviving the SARS outbreak and the move to our current location to accommodate the fast-expanding enrolment.

Today, the Little Oak has grown into one of the most sought-after preschools in Beijing. It offers several programmes serving 200 families on daily basis in its preschool, more than 200 families each week in its toddler centre. It also engaged around 100 children and 60 parents weekly in its performing arts programme which was set up with a mission to continue our Orff music education and to build a music-making community.

Based mainly on the Montessori Method, our curriculum is enriched by activities in read-aloud, socio-emotional development, scientific explorations, Orff music education, creative arts and crafts relating to rhythmic Chinese seasonal changes, and English learning. At that time, there were many other preschools setting up Montessori classrooms and offering English and/or Orff classes as extra-fee "electives". However, The Little Oak adopted these new pedagogies on a school-wide basis because we believe that it takes the whole community to make real changes happen.

In addition, we began to move towards a paradigm shift in our approach to the home-school relationship, adopting many intuitive changes which we later found in the professional early childhood education literature as "family-centered practice". According to McBride (1999), family-centered practice "is based on beliefs and values that (a) acknowledge the importance of family system on child development; (b) respect families as decision-makers for their children and themselves and (c) support families in their role of raising and educating their children" (p. 62).

### **The Prevailing Preschool Scene in Metropolitan Beijing**

In the early 2000s, the main issues being raised on the online parenting discussion forums revolved around complaints about preschool teachers with many stories of:

- teachers grabbing crying children from their parents' arms during the first days of school and whole classes of new children crying in school while parents and grandparents wait in tears outside
- preschools sending boarding children to hospitals after accidents without notifying their parents for a whole week

Early childhood educators were described by parents as not caring for the children's welfare, hostile to parents, and totally ignorant of the new ideas and pedagogies being practiced around the world.

On the other hand, early childhood educators were feeling that it was getting more and more difficult to deal with parents. In line with what Tobin (2009) had found in his study of preschools in China, preschool teachers and administrators feel that parents had become:

- more demanding in asking the teachers to tend to their individual

child's needs

- more educated and eloquent in defending their own positions and assertive with their rights as consumers
- increasingly aggressive with blaming teachers for children's injuries

Preschool educators used to be able to claim authority and power over the parents as having more knowledge in early learning and more experiences in early care before this era. That was

no longer the case in the early 2000s, especially in metropolitan areas like Beijing where parents were often more highly educated (at least a 4-year degree if not beyond) than the preschool teachers (oftentimes 3-year college degrees or less). Many are well-read in early learning, and often cited articles on overseas early learning practice in their complaints.

In reflecting on the perspectives of both stakeholders in the preschool setting, we found that there was a mismatch in the assumptions about the roles and responsibilities of preschools and families. First, the educators were still holding on to a traditional model of preschool. While parents work full-time in their revolutionary cause, the preschools would become the primary caregiver with the knowledge and experience necessary to raise a reasonable child. It was believed that parents, without such knowledge and experience, could only spoil the child. Therefore, it was the responsibility of the educators to educate the parents and compensate for what they saw as the tendency of parents to spoil their children.

However, by this time, parents' views were changing. They were starting to claim their right as the primary decision-maker of their children's care and education and they began severely challenging the practices in the preschools. As China opened up, new ideas came in and parenting books abound in the market. As a whole, young educated

parents recognized the significance of the early years in child development, and they became more committed than previous generations, to parenting and participating in their children's development. They also believed that it was their right to know more about the daily school life of their children. However, these parents had little knowledge of the structural limitations faced by preschools who were facing challenges such as low adult-child ratio, the tedious working days, and the lack of training in communicating with adults.

### **A Paradigm Shift: Re-Conceptualizing the Home-School Relationship**

As the founders and parents of The Little Oak, we were in a good position to put both sides' complaints into perspective and formulate solutions. First of all, we decided to make a structural change, registering it as a not-for-profit school. With no pressure for making profits for the shareholders, we could concentrate our resources on children and teachers, and significantly increase the ratio of classroom teacher to child. Secondly, we realized that in order to make a great school, the educators and parents should be able to understand and support each other in order to work as partners in the children's education. As educators, we would and should take the initiative in leading by serving. To accomplish this mission, we took on a two-pronged approach through family-centered practice and servant leadership. What we had worked so hard to put in place back then was nothing new by today's standards. However, in hind sight, they were giant, revolutionary steps taken in the context of the prevailing practices in China at that time.

*Towards family-centered practice.* Once we had increased our staff strength, we started to adopt family-centered practices to acknowledge the needs of the families, particularly with easing the preschool

transition for children. We introduced a “gradual entry” system, moving away from the common belief that young children’s entry into preschools should be done in an abrupt way so school activities could start quickly, a practice that had brought severe anxieties both on children as well as the whole family. A gradual entry process would not only make it easier for young children to transition from home to school, but also give the family confidence that their concerns are recognized and addressed by the school. In this way, we could start a partnership with trust from the very beginning.

We began with inviting parents to accompany their children for the first days in school, and along the years, we continued to improve the system. Currently, it involves the following:

- (1) Family preparation: New parents receiving offers for enrolment will first attend a meeting where major school policies are explained in detail. In the meeting they learn that we encourage vigorous outdoor play, so they can expect dirty clothes and scrapes now and then. They learn how much and which academic content will be introduced at each age group and how disputes among children are handled. If parents decide that this is what they want, they can proceed to register.

New parents will then attend another parent workshop to learn about ways to handle separation anxiety. Suggestions for the first days of school with ample examples are shared so the parents will understand what to expect, what to avoid, how to accompany a child in the classroom, when to leave, and how to comfort an upset child at home. The primary care giver of each child will also meet with the

classroom head teacher prior to the first day of school (see #2 below).

- (2) Teacher preparation: In the enrollment process for each child, the primary caregiver will come to school for a one-on-one meeting with the classroom head teacher to share information about the child - his/her favorite toys and books, strategies to cope with anxiety, etc... This information will be used by the classroom teachers upon the child’s enrolment.
- (3) Child preparation: Young children will see videos of their classroom teachers doing fun activities and know their names. Parents are also encouraged to share books and stories of daily lives in preschools. Since we have mixed-age classrooms, we encourage current parents to welcome the new families and start play dates so the new children enter the classrooms already knowing some familiar faces.
- (4) Entry into the classroom: Entry of each new child is spaced out so there will be only one or two new children coming into a classroom each week. We recommend that a family member remain in the classroom for one or two days when the child is exploring the new environment and getting to know the teachers and his/her classmates. We also recommend that the whole family stay calm and firm, not showing anxiety in front of the child in transition.
- (5) Communication and support: In the first several weeks, the classroom head teacher will have daily conversations with the new parents, sharing their children’s information at school and listening

to the situation at home. After the transition is more or less successfully implemented, the communications reduce to written notes at least twice a week. If the separation anxiety is very severe, the school director, deputy directors, admission director as well as the nurses will observe and provide support to the new parents.

This gradual entry system had worked so well that we were interviewed by the China Early Childhood Education Newsweek. The article published in September 2001 resulted in a change in view about the “abrupt entry” practice – it is no longer deemed as the only right way.

Another family-centered practice that we had formalized and implemented concerned the formulation of procedures for notifying families of:

- emergency injuries so that the parents will be able to make the medical decisions
- communicable diseases when information of incidence is gathered and shared immediately with the parents while respecting the privacy of the families involved
- procedures for outdoor play and last minute changes in field trip plans due to unforeseen circumstances (e.g., bad-weather, smog, etc...)

These procedures came into being after discussions with parent representatives serving on our Parent Representative Committee – something we had also instituted to invite parent involvement. When both sides understand the other party’s concerns and challenges, oftentimes it is easy to come up with much better solutions than those that schools could develop alone.

*Adopting servant leadership.* According to Keith and Hancock (2015), family-centered practice calls for a new type of leadership: servant leadership, which would empower both the professionals and the families they serve. Servant leadership was described by Greenleaf (2002) in the following way: “The servant-leader is servant first.... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.... The best test is this: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (p.27).

From the very beginning, we realized that to ensure the success of our educational endeavours, we need a work force that is eager to learn and willing to serve; able to show authentic self and vulnerabilities; and, have empathy and integrity. These qualities are necessary for bringing family-centered practice to life and for enabling the building of a solid partnership between educators and parents. Only when we take the lead to transform ourselves would we be able to transform the model of education and help others transform themselves and the community. For our school, we began by working hard to nurture the eagerness to learn and the willingness to serve in our staff. We also worked hard to help them develop a sense of security in being who they are and to be open to learning from mistakes as these form the critical foundation for the capacity and skills for building a trusting, collaborative relationship with parents and the community at large.

#### (1) Eagerness to learn

For almost all our teachers, this was their first job after graduation from teacher-training programmes. We provided abundant professional development opportunities for them: new teacher orientation training on our educational philosophy as well as basic weekly on-the-

job training and discussions of current needs. We also provided intensive summer training for new projects, and in-service (bringing in trainers training) and external training in other cities and/or countries. Other professional development activities include weekend cultural enrichment programmes and overseas school visits. The director and deputy directors participate in all trainings serving as role models of life-long learners.

All the efforts that we have put into professional development as well as compensation and benefits led to relatively low teacher turnover rates. Among the teachers who have left our school, many were hired as directors by schools in their own hometowns. Others have opened up their own schools.

## (2) Willingness to serve

During the first year of The Little Oak, many visitors expressed their amazement when they saw me, the school founder with a Yale Ph.D., working with young children in the classrooms, on the playground, and helping out in the bathroom. During a media interview I was asked if I was wasting my many years of education. I thought about the question and replied that I think education is the way to freedom, including freedom to choose how to live my life. I enjoy working with young children. My years of education will not prevent me from doing what I enjoy. Instead, it empowers me to do whatever I choose.

In an environment where service was regarded as menial and reserved for the uneducated, we decided to promote the “willing to serve” attitude by modelling it as school leaders. The higher the position one occupies, the more responsibilities one enjoys. During regular school days as well as whole school events and outings, the school leaders will always arrive early and stay late to supervise the whole process. They are also the ones who work the last days before major holidays so the junior staff can travel

home early. Whenever there is a challenging situation, the school leaders will take the responsibility to deal with it. For example, when injury happens, it is the director’s responsibility to notify the parents and accompany the child to the emergency room. There she will meet and apologize to the parents, support them with medication decisions and help with implementation. School leaders, thus, model humility, commitment, and willingness to serve.

## (3) Authentic self and vulnerability

According to McBride, family-centered practice requires that early educators be not only good at communicating with children, but also able to communicate well with adults (McBride, 1999). Communication is a very important training that we provide to our staff. Good communication requires an authentic self and showing vulnerability, which are among the important characteristics of servant leadership (Keith & Hancock, 2015).

We teach our teachers to never hesitate to admit to children when they cannot answer certain questions or when they made a mistake, but to search for answers or for a better way *together* with the children. But at first it was not as easy to do so because some teachers believed that it is important to defend their professional image with parents. For example, when a grandparent asked a teacher if the indoor temperature was too low during naptime because of her granddaughter’s comment at home about being cold, the young teacher’s immediate response was, “It’s impossible!”

Through workshops and role-playing on communication skills, the teachers learned to reframe such parental inquiries, not as accusations against their professional judgment, but as important exchange of information between partners sharing a common goal in doing what is best for children. They started to eliminate

“communication stoppers” such as “it’s impossible” from their conversations with parents. Now they would invite communication, “Thank you for sharing the information. Could you tell me more about it?” Below are a few pictures of some of our team building and professional development activities.



Weekly music training sessions for teachers



Weekend cultural program



Staff bicycling on the city wall of the ancient city of Xi'an of one of our group vacations for team building

While self-defence seems to mute criticism for a while, it often exacerbates suspicion and brings distrust in the future. An authentic self, on the other hand, invites trust, collaboration and mutual understanding. Our staff found that trainings on communication skills not only helpful in their careers, but also very useful in improving their own family relationships. At Little Oak, we work hard to build a culture of learning from failure. Our school leaders often share with younger staff their own failures and what lessons they have learned. For example, our teachers all know that I dislocated a young girl’s arm in our first year and learned never to grab a young child by the arm. Whenever there is a mistake, there is a lesson to learn. We can never stop failing, but as long as we learn from our missteps, we are assured that we are constantly improving.

#### (4) Community-building with parents as partners in children’s education

In the traditional model of home-school relationship, where parents are viewed as picky clients and untrained volunteers, the eagerness of the parents to participate in the life of the school could bring great anxieties and challenges to the educators. The worry was that their work as teachers would be judged by the parents. Another concern was that parent volunteers could be difficult to manage as parents are the clients. These are solid concerns. Yet, in a family-centered model, when we see our mission as providing the best practices to support the children’s development, and when we will view parents as significant partners in this cause, these concerns can be solved in productive ways.

From the new lens with which they see parents, our teachers no longer worry that parents and visitors may not see the classroom run smoothly when they come by. The not-so-smooth moments (e.g., of children arguing over a toy or child simply having difficult day) can become

opportunities to share with the parents how we solve problems. Many parents described how touched they are by the teachers' love, patience and professionalism toward children, especially during the many less-than-smooth moments throughout the day. Over the years, the word-of-mouth of this appreciation has been our best marketing strategy.

Families at The Little Oak have abundant opportunities to participate in their children's school life. Year round family activities include mountain climbing with

grandparents on the Double Ninth Festival, Thanksgiving food-making and sharing, children's book character costume parade, year-end charity performance, lantern festival, flea market with alumni association, spring outdoor family sport games, Children's Day resort overnight stay, etc... We also hold bi-weekly Reading Club activities for parents sharing books related to child development. It is also a forum where parents and staff could share their own experiences. Between 25 and 60 parents attend these bi-weekly meetings.



Parents sharing at a Reading Club meeting

Our parents are involved in lots of fun activities in our school. Every Friday evening more than 60 current and past parents come to school for choir, drumming, dancing, and drama. Together with our children and alumni, they perform in nursing homes or orphanages. They also stage charity performances to fundraise for children in orphanages to defray the cost of medical treatment. Below is a picture of one of these performances by fathers from the Parents Choir group.



Fathers performing in the Parents Choir

Parents can volunteer in different ways. They can volunteer as parent representatives to participate in many important decision-making processes concerning school policies, and facilitate communications. Every Wednesday morning a group of parent volunteers host school tours for potential families. They can also work as chaperons and photographers on school fieldtrips.

When parent volunteers work together, they sometimes have different perspectives and interests, and they tend to look to school leaders for coordination. This dependency has placed added burden on the shoulders of the busy school leaders. However, because we don't view parent volunteers only as free labour, but see them as valuable partners and potential community leaders, the extra time and energy spent working with them has paid off in the long run. After all, we believe that a learning community full of positive energy will help our children grow into great citizens as well as happy individuals. Thus, the school leaders devoted a lot of time

working closely with the parent leaders to set up rules and procedures, communicate and resolve conflicts, and learn how to work together in an environment with little power hierarchy.

We have been very successful in working with parent leadership in The Little Oak Alumni Association. When the children graduated from The Little Oak, they and their parents can join the Alumni Association to continue two traditions of The Little Oak community: music-making and community service. The Board of the Alumni Association, consisting of the most active parent leaders, work together with the school to manage these activities. They manage parents' performing arts groups; organize volunteer activities for the alumni and their parents - annual trips to Special Education School for Children with Disabilities, weekly English Lessons for migrant children; helping out with construction and other building maintenance work in the preschools for migrant children, etc... Below are a few more examples.



The Parent Drumming Group performing with the families from the Toddler Center and the Alumni Association at the opening of the Annual School Flea Market



Parents and alumni teaching English to migrant children



Parents volunteering in a preschool for migrant children

Learning volunteer management and governance practices from the U.S., we developed Parent Volunteer Regulations as well as Alumni Association Bylaws to delineate roles, responsibilities, and succession procedures. Those who are committed to the welfare of the whole community will go through established pipelines to assume important leadership roles. In this way, servant leadership becomes pervasive and sustainable in the whole community.

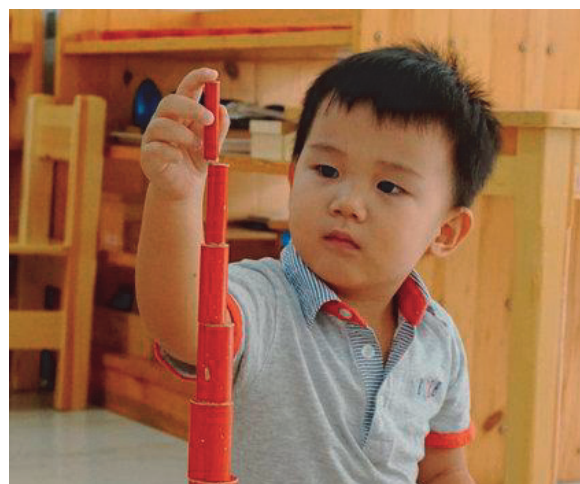
To build trust with the parents and serve all the children without bias, our school requires that no staff accept personal gifts

from current families. In the same vein, parent volunteers will work with all the children, and if that upsets his/her own child, the parent can ask to be placed in another classroom. In a culture where volunteering is not a very popular practice yet, our parent volunteers at first did meet fellow parents' suspicion that they had hidden personal agenda. But with support from our school they proceeded with discipline, empathy and integrity, and gradually a new culture has been established. A senior parent volunteer described leadership as "willing to work more, to take challenges, and to share blames."

Servant leadership grows out of The Little Oak community. When our children graduate and move on to elementary schools, their parents often go to serve as volunteers and leaders in those schools. They organize reading clubs, parent choirs, and fieldtrips; they help with communication between the schools and parents; they publish newsletters; they even lead other parents through school leadership crisis. Several elementary school leaders visited The Little Oak to express their appreciation because our alumni parents told them that The Little Oak was their inspiration for servant leadership. In an era when there is a high degree of dissatisfaction with the educational system and educators, our parents choose to lead by serving and *be* the change they want to see.

### The Journey Forward

Fifteen years ago, as a progressive preschool, The Little Oak saw the need for transformation and decided to adopt family-centered practice. To achieve that goal, the culture of servant leadership was established to help us build a work force that is eager to learn, ready to serve, and devoted to the school's mission. Servant leadership was instrumental in enabling us to earn parents' trust. In the process, those being served become freer from anxiety and began to assume servant leadership on their own. Here's a little glimpse into the school life of our children today.



Along the years, we faced many challenges – some that came our way, uninvited, and others that we have chosen to take on. One of our biggest but most meaningful challenges over the years, concerns bringing quality preschool education to more children, especially the disadvantaged rural children. To achieve greater social impact, in 2011, The Little Oak partnered with the philanthropic world to start The Thousand Trees Equal Education Partners. In China, children in the rural areas generally have very limited public and private resources especially in the preschools where the teacher-child ratio is very poor, classrooms are bare, with no books and toys, and with teachers who are poorly trained. The Thousand Trees brings quality preschool curriculum that can be used in rural classrooms and training for teachers in these high need areas. Currently, it is serving more than 130,000 rural children all over China. As we continue to reach out to more children, we will take on the next challenge of promoting family-centered practice and servant leadership to empower parents and educators there.

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