

HighScope Takes Root in China



by Adam Robson

“*Bo-lu-o*,” says Rene Chen, holding up a make-believe object as she offers an elementary lesson in Chinese pronunciation. Ms. Chen is relating how concepts like “play-based” and “active learning” are often “lost in translation” when speaking to Chinese parents and teachers. “What’s in your brain when I say *boluo*? What does a *boluo* taste like? What does it smell like?” she asks me. She sits back, tilting her head and winking at me. “Nothing, right?”

A moment passes with me fumbling over the word, mistakenly pronouncing it *poluo*, *poluo*, and wondering when she’s going to tell me what it is I’m repeating. She smiles. “But what if it’s right there, this *boluo*, this pineapple?” she asks, emphasizing this last word. I return her smile now that I can relax a bit. “See?” she says. “You can taste it, smell it.”

Chen, the director of the China North HighScope Teacher Education Center, takes a moment and then motions with her hands. “That’s how we do it. When we say *active learning*,



In 2012, HighScope partnered with the Ameson Foundation and the American China Education Institute to promote cultural exchange and educational cooperation.

that’s it — no response. But when they *see* it...” Here, she trails off with a warm smile, her hands dancing like children busy at play in a Chinese kindergarten.

Active learning has flourished in the US for over 40 years, but only recently has there been widespread interest in applying it in China. It’s still an abstraction, this *boluo*, and as Chen and her colleagues in the HighScope Chinese teacher education centers are confirming, active learning is a concept best experienced through the process of active learning itself.

How to grow a pineapple

Now, you might think growing a pineapple bush is simple. Cut the crown from a ripe fruit and stick it in the ground — it’s that easy. It will adapt to

almost any soil, doesn’t need much water, and doesn’t even have a strong preference for sun or shade. But as any careful gardener knows, the vitality of any crop depends foremost on local conditions.

So goes active learning in China. Too young to produce fruit just yet, its success will be a product of local conditions and how it’s cared for. In other words, the survival of active learning in Chinese kindergartens depends on how HighScope responds to one question: Can the HighScope Curriculum adapt to the climate of China?

Cheryl Polk, HighScope President, knows that it can. She recently paid a visit to five kindergartens (classes of 4- and 5-year-olds, roughly equivalent to American preschools) in four cities in China, in addition to organizing two training sessions for early childhood educators, administrators, and researchers. “Wherever we are in the world — whether it’s in the US, or China, or Ireland, or Mexico — wherever we are, culture matters. And if we want to be multicultural, then we have to not only

accept but embrace local cultures. And that's about being very good citizens and listening to these local cultures.”

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Listen she did on her two-week tour of South China, and Polk found that the people she spoke with had a lot to say. She heard about the successes and the

The North China Center works to demonstrate the benefits of active learning to parents and teachers who are accustomed to traditional preschool education.

struggles of adapting the HighScope approach to the Chinese context — how much has already been accomplished, but also how much work lies ahead, and the formidable challenges educators and families face in a China that has spent the last 30 years slowly incorporating Western ideas into its brand of early childhood education.

The Ministry of Education's commitment to this transformation was made clear in 2012 with the release of the *Guidebook of Learning and Development for 3 to 6*, calling for specific reform and development goals over the next decade. “These guidelines significantly upped the ante on pre-primary education, calling for learning targets and a systematic assessment to track progress, as well as the budget to provide resources for kindergartens where they are needed most, particularly in rural areas,” said Polk.

She was also pleased to report the reaction of her audience at two lectures she gave for researchers and educators

in Nanjing and Changchun. “I'm very supportive of the idea of co-creating, and the people I talked to were very enthusiastic about increasing opportunities for HighScope training, and for working with the government to develop facilities and a curriculum that's right for China.”

Sean Zhang, director of the China South Teacher Education Center, has been doing just that, spending the past two years studying how to adapt the HighScope Curriculum to Chinese culture. The soil is certainly fertile, with the government promoting child-centered, progressive early education in place of the centuries-old tradition of teacher-directed instruction. This trend toward more progressive education is welcomed in China, perhaps in spite of its Western origin, because reformers like Zhang, instead of using a heavy-handed, didactic approach, are demonstrating *how* active learning works.

At the forefront of educational reform, Zhang is creating “a high-profile presence for HighScope in China.” That



kind of approach is definitely needed, says Polk, who endorses the expansion of HighScope's partnership with a wide representation of master teachers, principals, researchers, and government officials. She stresses, though, that educational reform is open-ended, and there are many avenues to pursue. "We have to figure out a way to have a consistent, ongoing relationship," she says. "It can't be the standard PCC [Preschool Curriculum Course], TOT [Training of Teachers], once-a-week routine. It can't just be the [HighScope] International Conference. It has to be something that provides more continuity."

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Can it grow?

Continuity, as Polk sees it, is an opportunity to support and grow a concept like play-based learning, which, although it lacks a historical precedent in Chinese preschools, seems to have gained cultural acceptance in the present. "China is distancing itself from its 'Made in China' past," says Chen. Instead, it's cultivating a new mentality and a new future "based on the idea of 'Created in China.'" It is striving to replicate the results enjoyed by high-quality early childhood education elsewhere — the lifelong learning, the return on investment, the creative children who become creative adults — but is still struggling with the question of *how* to achieve those results.



President Cheryl Polk visited kindergartens in southern China in late September, 2014, in addition to organizing training sessions for early childhood educators.

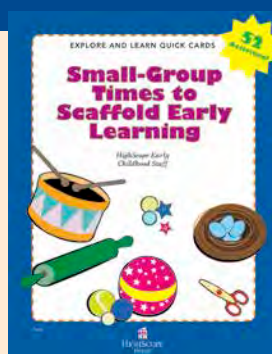
To help answer that question, HighScope partnered with the Ameson Foundation and the American China Education Institute (ACEI) in April of 2012. Authorized to establish the China South Teacher Education Center, the Ameson Foundation is "very conscious of the need to adapt the program in ways that take into account Chinese culture," says Deborah Stipek, Dean of Stanford University's School of Education and current Ameson board member. ACEI performs a similar function in northern China. "HighScope is not at all a rigid program," says Stipek. "There is a lot of room for any teacher to adapt it to the needs of her students."

That kind of adaptation was the theme of the training Polk attended, along with over 100 educators and researchers, in Nanjing. The workshop was concluded with a call to action for

Chinese educators: adopt and adapt. First, the Chinese educational community must adopt, or learn and deeply understand, HighScope. Then it must adapt the practice to Chinese culture and regional communities.

Polk, for her part, doesn't expect to transplant the HighScope approach wholesale in China. "It's a process, not an event," she says. Just as in the US, HighScope is an approach, and when a school or individual adopts that approach — even if the particulars are less familiar to HighScope practitioners in the West — that, says Polk, is a victory.

"It's not going to be 100% everywhere we go," she says. "We have to ask ourselves: What are the ingredients of HighScope? Plan-do-review? Active learning?" She pauses, as if considering all of the elements that make up High-



Looking for ideas for your small-group time?

The activities in the *Small-Group Times to Scaffold Early Learning* quick card set include step-by-step instructions and a chart to help recognize and support preschoolers' learning of specific concepts and skills at early, middle, and later developmental levels. See page 33 for details.

Scope as we in the West know it. “And then we have to ask ourselves: How does it look, say, in China? We start small and we ask ourselves: Can it grow?”

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Starting from seed

One of the biggest challenges is the size of the average Chinese kindergarten class. Small class size would seem to be fundamental to the HighScope approach, and it certainly is in US preschools, with teacher/student ratios envied by the Chinese. Of course, it’s not that the Chinese don’t understand the advantage of small class sizes; with the population of children under the age of six numbering over 100 million, the

reality is that emulating this particular element of the HighScope approach is impossible. Chinese parents routinely line up overnight to get kindergarten application forms, and school attendance by children under the age of three is discouraged in an effort to make the most of limited resources.

“We have 40 kids in a classroom,” says Chen. “If we want to gain support from the Chinese government, we need to work with them to customize HighScope to a curriculum that fits a Chinese kindergarten.”

Polk agrees. “We need to speak more about these challenges,” she says. “Because these are real families and real teachers, and they’re facing real challenges.” With far more kindergartners than its infrastructure can possibly serve, the Ministry of Education has pledged to develop more facilities in the coming decade, especially in poorer, rural areas. Until then, teachers and students make do — they divide the class into two groups for some parts of the daily routine as a partial solution to the challenge of making active learning work for a group of 40 children.

“What does HighScope have to say about that?” asks Polk. “These are the kinds of conversations we need to be having. And we need to acknowledge these challenges they’re facing instead of saying, ‘That’s not HighScope, that’s not HighScope.’”

Many ways to grow a pineapple

Polk emphasizes that she wants to celebrate the successes, and use those successes as a way to confront the many challenges facing the active learning model in Chinese kindergartens. When she visited the brand new Bao Lun Kindergarten in Chengzhou, administered by HighScope South, Polk saw children initiating their own activities, with timely teacher intervention and scaffolding. She saw a daily routine and an intentional environment. Most of all, she saw an opportunity to collaborate with local parents, teachers, and policy makers to localize the HighScope Curriculum so that Bao Lun can serve as a model for other kindergartens in the region. Bao Lun, says Polk, is an exemplary Chinese kindergarten in which educators “asked about HighScope, learned about HighScope, and modeled their program on the HighScope approach — and it’s truly a marvel to see!”

This is one of the approaches being used at the South China Center, where Zhang is identifying and selecting exemplary HighScope kindergartens in various Chinese territories. “The model Highscope kindergartens also serve as observation and practice centers for HighScope Training of Teachers, and get high appraisal and support from provincial and municipal education authorities,” says Zhang.

Chen, too, is a strong proponent of creating demonstration kindergartens in China. “Chinese parents don’t yet know HighScope,” she says. “First, we have to win over the kindergarten. The kindergarten has to educate the parents. Once the kindergarten is on board, then we can do that. That’s how parents get to know HighScope.”

Zhang confesses that his approach at the South China Center differs from

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Interest in HighScope’s active learning approach was sparked in part by the release of preschool education reform guidelines by the Ministry of Education in 2012.



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Chen's because of the strong commitment already being made in cities like Shanghai, where local officials have embraced the HighScope approach and have cooperated actively with the South Center to reform the preschool

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curriculum and promote HighScope through seminars and work with kindergarten directors. "We recently conducted two seminars, attended by over 250 kindergarten directors and local

education officials who showed great enthusiasm for HighScope," said Zhang. "Working with directors of kindergartens has always proved to be efficient, while governmental support is vital due to China's big government structure."

Whether working with government officials and experts to influence early education policy, or transforming the mindset of Chinese parents with HighScope demonstration schools, the lesson is that educational change happens slowly, and there are many varieties of pineapple. Most important, says Chen, is the intrinsic motivation for change. That goes for government officials as well as pupils, parents as well as teachers. "We conduct many workshops with teachers," she says. "We show them hands-on activities. We give the parents active learning opportunities. We want them to know that HighScope is a better way."

She wants, she emphasizes, to show them the *boluo*. ■

**Adam Robson is an editor for
HighScope Press.**

The HighScope Curriculum has proven to be very adaptable to the educational reform and culture of China.

