Play and Resilience
A China-Africa Collaboration Project for Building a Peaceful and Sustainable Future

Rationale
During the first years of life, the brain has the potential to develop at an astounding pace that is never repeated. Children’s early experiences literally shape their brain architecture and influence a broad range of skills, attitudes and learning capacities. That’s why early childhood care and education, provided in a nurturing and safe environment, sets the foundation for children’s future well-being and productivity, particularly for disadvantaged children.

However, more children than ever are forced to live through natural disasters, socio-economic inequities, conflict or acts of terrorism today. While humanitarian response and risk reduction is essential, resilience development offers a promising way to help children and families bounce back – not only from emergencies but also from serious life challenges – and thrive on. Early childhood is an important window of time for building resilience by developing positive attitudes, competencies and skills, such as self-regulation, empathy, confidence and responsibility.

Project Goal and Objectives
Goal: To enhance young children’s resilience and potential to contribute to a peaceful and sustainable future

Specific objectives:
1) Awareness: To raise awareness among parents, families and communities as well as policy makers about the importance of early childhood care and education and the value of play in building children’s resilience;
2) Tools development: To develop and disseminate practical and adaptable materials and tools to improve the quality of childcare and learning environment and processes;
3) Capacity development: To train preschool and nursery administrators, teachers and caregivers in developing and implementing effective curriculum on resilience building through play;
4) Relationship: To foster sustainable collaborative relationships for children among families, preschools and communities to continue this work beyond the project.

7 Crucial C’s of Resilience
What is emerging from ‘resilience research’ is that resilience results from a dynamic interaction between the individual’s biology and social environment. The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is the presence of a strong, stable and supportive relationship with at least one adult.

In this project, we aim to help young children build ‘7 Crucial C’s of resilience’ proposed by Ginsburg and Jablow (2015).

The Value of Play
Ginsburg and Jablow call play as ‘childhood’s inborn tool to build resilience’. Play, particularly free and explorative play, allows children to try out new and diverse strategies to solve problems and to promote both physical and emotional flexibility through trial and error. The more children play, the more competent they become in controlling over themselves and their environment. This way, children gain a sense of control with an accompanying sense of achievement and confidence; they also exercise imagination and creativity, connect and negotiate with others, and experience and learn to manage a range of emotions (Play Wales, 2015).

In many parts of the world, children are not allowed to play freely due to different reasons ranging from inadequate environment and facilities to children’s highly scheduled ‘free’ time crammed with activities such as homework, sports, music, tutoring, etc. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds face particular obstacles that impede their right to play, and their parents may not have the knowledge, time and resources to engage their children in appropriate and stimulating play.
China

Context
With the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, China’s left-behind children in rural areas and migrant children in cities emerged as a major social concern. According to the Research Report on Left-Behind Children and Migrant Children in Urban and Rural Areas of China published by All China Women’s Federation, there are more than 61 million left-behind children in rural China, accounting for 22% of the total number of children in China. Among them, the number of preschool-age children (0 to 5 years of age) reached over 23 million. Another 9.8 million preschool-age children are found in cities where their parents work and they move frequently between different places – they are called ‘migrant children’.

Many risk factors such as neglect and inappropriate parenting, poverty or low socioeconomic status, and lack of access to public early childhood education challenge these children’s personal safety and physical and psychological health. In recent years, personal safety incidents and suicides among left-behind children have attracted the attention of the Chinese government. A government document, Opinion on Strengthening the Care and Protection Work for Rural Left-behind Children has been issued by the State Council in 2016, which proposes to establish a social system for nurturing this group of children.

Focus on resilience provides an interactive conceptual framework for this social system, both by reducing the risk factors and by enhancing children’s confidence, connection and control through play.

Target groups
The city of Hechi in Guangxi province, which has a high proportion of left-behind children aged 2 to 6 years who rose above the poverty line, is selected for the project. The project will involve some 120 to 160 left-behind children in four counties, two of which have central kindergartens and the other two have village kindergartens or play groups. One of the four counties will be populated mainly with ethnic minority groups.

We also chose an area which is highly populated by migrant workers in Pudong New Area in Shanghai. The project will involve about 150 to 200 children enrolled in one private kindergarten and one public kindergarten attended by a large number of migrant children.

The target groups also include the parents, kindergarten teachers, social workers and local educational authorities.

Specific objectives
The present project aims at helping children who are experiencing significant stress or adversity, lift their capacity of confidence, connection and control through play in early years; attracting more attention to children’s socio-emotional development among the guardians, educators, governmental and non-governmental organizations; and providing suggestions for establishing effective public care service system.

Good practice
All China Woman’s Federation and the China Children and Teenager’s Foundation collaborated to promote the ‘Children’s Happy Home’ charity project. The project establishes Children’s Happen Home Centres in towns and villages in rural China and provides left-behind children with services in education, life, caring, safety protection, psychological counselling, recreation and so on, to improve their home and social environment. For instance, in 2015, different levels of All China Woman’s Federation in Guangxi Autonomous Region recruited nearly 11,000 university student volunteers to work in 1,904 Children’s Happy Home Centres. They served 105,625 children and ensured their safety during summer holidays. The volunteers played, made handicrafts, sang and danced with the left-behind children and introduced important information on self-protection to children. These valuable experiences also gave the university students the opportunities to improve themselves.

Implementation agency
OMEP Chinese National Committee

Contact: Professor Jing Zhou, Executive President (jzhou@spe.ecnu.edu.cn), Dr Guo Liangjing (ljguo_nj@live.cn) and Dr Zhang Li (lizhang@pie.ecnu.edu.cn)
Africa

Context
In rural Africa, many parents and families are not aware of the importance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for their children’s development and lifelong learning. Sending their young children to ECCE centres is thus not an option. Even when they are aware of the benefits of ECCE, the prevailing economic hardships give them few options but leaving their young children with relatives or other adults in the communities. Building resilience in young children in these communities is important so that they can overcome the negative effects of poverty, conflicts, displacement, calamity, etc. happening in their surroundings.

On the other hand, the acute shortage of qualified ECCE teachers in schools particularly in rural areas and large classes particularly in urban areas—coupled with poor learning environment and materials—are the main challenges to the quality of ECCE. Strengthening the quality of ECCE teacher preparation is a vital step in promoting quality ECCE; and so are the synergies between schools and teacher education colleges in the development of competent ECCE teachers.

Target groups
The target groups for this project are the preschool teachers and school administrators, Ministry officials and policy makers responsible for ECCE as well as ECCE centres (children, teachers and caregivers, and the managers) and families in 10 selected communities in Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe that have a number of deprived, disadvantaged and vulnerable children of 0 to 8 years of age.

In Zimbabwe, Gokwe District in Midlands Province, Buhera District in Manicaland Province and Tsholosho District in Matebelel North Province are selected. According to the MoPSE Draft Statistical Report (2015), only 29% of the country’s children aged between 36-59 months are attending ECCE programmes. Many children in rural and poor communities do not have access to ECCE facilities and severe cases have been reported in these selected provinces. Typically, there is a high pupil-to-teacher ratio in ECCE centres and preschools (the highest recorded in Manicaland at 103:1) and only 35% of ECCE teachers in the country are qualified (MoPSE Draft Statistical Report, 2015). Teachers (both qualified and paraprofessionals) often lack expertise to teach children with diverse learning needs.

In South Africa, the Vhembe District in Limpopo Province has been selected for the project. Limpopo Province is composed of 5 district municipalities: Capricorn, Greater Sekhukhune, Mopani, Vhembe and Waterberg. This province is predominantly rural and has inherited former apartheid homelands. In this province, 76% young children live in poverty: a higher level than other provinces, Eastern Cape (75%), KwaZulu-Natal (67%) and Western Cape and Gauteng (35%), according to the National Integrated Policy for Early Childhood Development 2015.

Vhembe is situated in the northern part of Limpopo Province, sharing borders with Zimbabwe in the north, Mozambique through Kruger National Park in the east and Botswana in the north west. Its population of approximately 1.4 million (Stats SA Community survey 2016) is the highest in all districts of the province. It also has the second highest proportion of child-headed households (1.7%) after Mopani (1.8%) and the second highest proportion of female-headed households (52.6%) after Greater Sekhukhune (52.9%).

In Nigeria, Numun and Guyuk in North East and Onicha and Ohaozara in South East are selected and some of the selected areas have a large number of internally displaced people. For example, 1.7 million people are displaced in North East of Nigeria, 56% of whom are children below age 6, as a result of the Boko Haram insurgency as well as herdsman and community clashes (UNICEF, 2017). Moreover, in the North East Nigeria, 3 million children have lost access to learning, more than 2.7 million are in conflict-affected areas and over 20,000 are unaccompanied and separated from their families (Global Report on IDPS). Most families are also struggling with poverty as a result of the economy recession in the country. These conditions yield negative impact on children’s psychosocial and emotional development, particularly those from rural and conflict-affected areas.

Specific objective
The main objective of this project is to complement existing efforts by government and non-government players in the region to help selected communities currently underserved with quality ECCE services by building their human resource capacity and supporting materials production. Given the context of the children in the deprived communities, the learning modules will be targeted towards building their resilience so that they can recover quickly from negative effects of misfortunes inflicted by poverty, conflicts, displacement, calamity and the like, happening around the children in their communities.

The project will ensure knowledge and awareness building among parents, caregivers, child-minders and ECCE practitioners regarding the right to play and the importance of recreation and cultural activities as well as their impact on young children’s learning and development.

Good practice
In Ethiopia, UNESCO IICBA and the Addis Development Vision, an NGO based in Addis Ababa, supported the development of learning materials for young children and by local artisans, which are culturally relevant and using local materials.

Implementation agency
UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa (ROSA), UNESCO National Office in Abuja and International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (IICBA)

Contact: Dr Patience Awopegba, Program Specialist, UNESCO ROSA
Expected Results of the Project

Impact: Young children in disadvantaged communities of rural China and sub-Saharan Africa are developing attitudes, competencies and skills relevant to resilience

Outcomes (behavioural changes)

i) Parents and families, teachers and care givers as well as policy makers increased awareness and understanding to protect, care and educate their young children, particularly, the value of play on improving children’s resilience

ii) Parents, families, teachers and care givers have increased capacity to facilitate young children’s resilience building through play

iii) Sustainable collaborative relationships for children among families, preschools, communities, local government and non-governmental agencies

Outputs (concrete deliverables)

- Multimedia Play and Resilience resource materials
- Parent/family guidebook on effective parenting practices, with focus on play and resilience
- Teacher training module on play and resilience (e.g. teacher training curriculum, pedagogical guide, resource materials)
- Teacher trainers, teachers, volunteers, school administrators, parents and families trained
- A policy brief
- A web portal on Play and Resilience

Strategy – Building the child’s inner strengths and outside support

Resilience research also points to the importance of building both the child’s inner strengths (e.g. self-control, thinking skills, confidence, positive outlook, responsibility and participation) and outside support (e.g. caring relationships, positive role models in families and communities, family and community resources). Therefore, the project will encompass three levels and focus not only on children but also on the agents in their immediate and broader environment:

- The Child: building ‘7 Crucial Cs’ of resilience through play
- Micro level (the child’s immediate environment): family and community outreach; early childhood teacher capacity development
- Macro level: policy-level advocacy

Activities

1. Development of project frameworks (Guidance note and M&E framework)
2. Planning for project implementation in rural China and sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe) with OMEP-China and UNESCO Regional Office for South Africa
3. Field implementation

   a) Development of multimedia play materials and tools: compilation and documentation of existing good practices and resource materials; development of multimedia resource materials and demonstration play materials

   b) Policy-level advocacy: preparation and dissemination of a policy brief

   c) Family and community outreach: community consultations and needs assessment; identification of available resources in and outside the communities; development of parent/family guidebook on effective parenting practices with focus on play and resilience; community-based parent/family workshops on play and resilience

   d) Teacher capacity development: development of a teacher training module; training of teacher trainers; in-service teacher training

   e) Organization of play activities with children with ongoing support for parents and families through family visits and observation and mentoring of trained teachers/volunteers

4. Dissemination and China-Africa exchange of project experiences: Play and Resilience Symposia at the 2017 and 2018 OMEP World Conferences; Development of a web portal for the Play and Resilience project

5. Monitoring and Evaluation

Project Duration (second phase)

January 2017 to June 2019 (2.5 years)

Project Management

The Play and Resilience World Project was launched in 2016 by the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP). The second phase of this project is implemented by OMEP China and UNESCO in Africa with funding and overall management support by the Victoria Charitable Trust Fund.

Project management team

- Maggie Koong, EdD, Project Director (mkoong@victoria.edu.hk)
- Mami Umayahara, EdD, Principal Project Manager (mami@victoria.edu.hk)