

Preschool Education in China

Like most countries the Chinese Government has recognised the importance of early childhood education. They are targeting more Government revenue toward this area to not only encourage expansion and growth within the industry and to cater for more children, but to also raise the standards of quality within the sector.

The China daily had an article on October 17th 2012, about how young children are often pushed to learn far beyond their natural level. The Ministry of Education in China released guidelines in October 2012 in an effort to "curb the growing practice of young children being educated in a way that pushes them beyond what children at their



age should learn". The guidelines are also designed to clarify to some parents what children at different ages should be able to do. Teachers and University Professors are praising the Chinese Ministry for these new guidelines and hope that it will improve people's understandings of children's development.

The Directors of Education within various provinces of China have started to focus on the quality of the programme they are providing children within early childhood. They have decided that to stay ahead educationally they need to look at how they are teaching and what it is that drives educational success beyond the classroom.

They are doing this by looking at educational settings from other countries

to see how they can integrate some of these teaching methods, ideas and pedagogies into their own programmes.

Each province within China is at a different stage of improving their educational systems. Some have visited many countries and have begun to implement some dramatic changes to their teaching approaches. Others are at the beginning of their journey.

The preschools and kindergartens in China cater for a larger number of children compared to early childhood centres in New Zealand. On average, kindergartens and centres in China provide for up to 700 children, but some cater for as many as 1500 children. When catering for so many children the issue of space can become a problem. Many children are in buildings several storeys high. Therefore the indoor-outdoor flow that most early childhood centres in New Zealand have does not exist in China. Outdoor play is restricted to scheduled times for various classes throughout the day.

Wuxi, a city approximately 40 minutes from Shanghai on the fast train, is advanced in some of its teaching practices. I have visited many experimental kindergartens within this city that have a western style influence in some of their teaching methods. There is a more play orientated approach within experimental kindergartens in Wuxi, as opposed to some other provinces. Bilingual classrooms are also becoming popular, but many bilingual teachers don't have teaching qualifications.

Teacher training is of high importance to every province I've visited. It's exciting to be involved with teacher training delegations that are coming to New Zealand to develop more of an understanding of our New Zealand curriculum and various parts of our programme. It has taken almost two years to develop relationships with the various provinces in China. 'Guanxi' [relationships] is extremely important when working with local Chinese.

It's important to note that Chinese do not want to become western. They are happy and comfortable within themselves as a country and within their culture. What they are trying to do for their future generation is to combine the best from the Chinese educational system with the best of western teaching methods.

While having in-depth discussions with Directors from both the Shaanxi province and Wuxi city, both are asking similar questions about our programme and the teaching styles in New Zealand. They would like to know the differences between public and private educational settings and are interested in visiting centres and kindergartens. They want to gain a greater understanding of transition to school and how this is achieved in New Zealand.

One of the main themes the Directors are interested in learning more about is learning dispositions, values, virtues and habits of the mind.

China is an incredible place to not only visit, but to also work in. The people are extremely welcoming and I enjoy learning as much about their teaching programmes as they do about ours. Not only are the people amazing but the history is incredible and the food is delicious!! I would encourage anyone who hasn't visited China to put it on their bucket list.

About the Author

Maria Johnson is the owner/director of three Little School in Wellington, one in St Heliers, Auckland and is in negotiations to set up two large Little Schools in two Chinese cities. Maria is also president of the ECC.

