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Dora Chen, Assistant Professor of Family Studies,
College of Health and Human Services and Leslie
Couse, Associate Professor of Education, College of
Liberal Arts, both travel to China

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Dora Chen and Leslie Couse

Dora Chen, Assistant Professor of Family Studies - College of Health and Human Services

Leslie Couse, Associate Professor of Education - College of Liberal Arts

Professors Dora Chen and Leslie Couse traveled to China with three undergraduates from the Departments of Family Studies and Psychology for a month-long visit to Chinese preschools to explore cross-cultural influences on the teaching and learning process.



On the Great Wall of China from left to right: Corey Landsman, Katrina Junkins, Kristen LaBua, Dora Chen, Leslie Couse.

At the core of the guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) is the importance of providing an environment in which children feel safe and secure and have ownership of their learning experiences. Two of the ongoing issues concern its cultural relevance (does it apply to classrooms serving children from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds?) and implementation (what can it and should it look like in actual practice?). This trip was part of a larger research effort to explore how notions of developmentally appropriate practice may be salient across different cultures and the development of a classroom observation instrument to facilitate teacher training for the implementation of the principles of DAP.

The majority of the available early childhood classroom observation tools are predicated on examining best practice from the perspective of the teacher, or deliverer of instruction. However, the teacher is only one critical element of a classroom environment; the children comprise the other. Assessing the effectiveness of DAP in classrooms must include consideration of its impact on children. This involves taking a bottoms-up perspective (Katz, 1995) of looking at program quality from the standpoint of the experience of children. This means that teacher training should focus on helping teachers consider the what's and how's of

teaching in relation to the children they are teaching. Thus, teachers must be able to observe and understand children from diverse backgrounds and cultures, including those who do not speak English. Learning to "read" the children is a critical first step in effective teaching of young children. This is especially important in our increasingly diverse nation where classrooms are made up of children from ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse backgrounds.

On this trip, we collected data in six classrooms across three preschools in Beijing and visited an international school and three other preschools in Hohhot (Inner Mongolia), all serving children from various socioeconomic backgrounds. We observed children in their naturalistic classroom settings and interviewed teachers. From the classroom observations, we asked ourselves: How can we tell when Chinese children are feeling safe, taking ownership of their learning experience, and are in the process of developing conceptual understanding? Can we read Chinese children in the same ways that we read children in our preschools? From our teacher interviews, we asked: How do you know when children are feeling safe, taking ownership of their learning and developing conceptual understanding?

The opportunity to observe children has enabled us to begin the process of learning to read Chinese children in their own cultural setting. Although for most of us, the language barrier posed a great challenge in the beginning, it has forced us to learn to tune in to children's non-verbal expressions and behaviors, yet to be conscious about jumping to conclusions. Another interesting observation that came through was that watching Chinese children was not all that different from watching preschoolers in our own UNH Child Study and Development Center (CSDC). The opportunity to talk with teachers has enabled us to confirm and disconfirm our prior conceptions of notions of DAP. Based on her classroom observations and the teacher interview discussions, Katrina Junkins, a student researcher, began revisiting her thinking about engagement, using this to clarify her thinking about the notions of safety, I, and conceptual understanding. These reflections provide critical insights into ways we could fine tune the draft of our observation instrument.

Thanks to the support of the CIE and the Family Studies and Education Departments, this trip has provided an invaluable opportunity for institutional-level collaboration by allowing us, two faculty from two different colleges at UNH (CHHS and Liberal Arts) to work together in our shared discipline, seeking to enhance our knowledge about the teaching and learning process by deepening our knowledge of how culture influences approaches to teaching and learning for young children. It has also supported the efforts for continuing cross-cultural collaboration between preschool educators in China and the US initiated by Dora Chen two years ago.

In spite of the tight weekly school visit schedules, we were able to make time on the weekends for several experiences of a lifetime. These included an unforgettable climb on the Great Wall of China, tasting scorpions in Beijing, a most interesting camel ride in the Gobi Desert in Inner Mongolia, and an all too short two-day glimpse into the markedly westernized city of Shanghai, the Water Village – also known as the Venice of China, and the silk factory and private gardens in Suzhou.





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