Scaling up: Professional development to serve young children in Chinese welfare institutions

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Scaling Up...

Professional Development to Serve Young Children in Chinese Welfare Institutions

Carolyn Pope Edwards, Janice N. Cotton, Wen Zhao, and Jerònia Muntaner-Gelabert

In 1998 a group of American adoptive parents led by Jenny Bowen created Half the Sky Foundation (HTS) to provide nurturing care and education for children living in Chinese orphanages (known as children’s welfare institutions). Jenny, a former screenwriter and film director, and her husband Richard wanted to ensure that the children still waiting in Chinese orphanages wouldn’t be forgotten. The foundation, founded upon a solid base of American volunteers and supporters, has developed into a successful, multinational non-governmental organization. HTS has grown to include five major programs (Infant Nurture, Little Sisters Preschool, Youth Services, Family Village, and China Care) spread over 47 sites, and has served more than thirty-five thousand children in orphanages, from birth to adulthood. The name Half the Sky comes from a Chinese saying that women hold up half the sky—95 percent of the healthy infants abandoned in China are girls. The infant and preschool programs exemplify close and caring relationships and collaborative teaching inspired in part by Reggio Emilia (Cotton et al. 2007; Evans 2003; Zhao 2003; Zhao & Edwards 2009).

In 2005 the Chinese government invited HTS to provide national guidance for orphan care, declaring that nurture and loving attention are as important to young children’s welfare as food, shelter, and medical care. This declaration committed China to major changes in their systems of care. Since 2007 HTS has worked in partnership with China’s Ministry of Civil Affairs to provide professional development to staff at hundreds of institutions across the country. The government’s long-term plan is for the institutions to become community centers that will serve orphans, children with disabilities and serious illnesses, and children of migrant workers, families living in poverty, and single parent households. By opening institution doors to the community, the government will also address the problem of children in orphanages growing up in isolation.

How to begin?

As senior program directors and field supervisors, we at HTS asked ourselves, how can we empower children’s welfare institution staff to

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provide nurture, enrichment, and education for all young children in state care? Creating an infrastructure for providing professional development was the first step.

The HTS training infrastructure for early childhood includes international experts and a cadre of skilled Chinese teacher trainers, who together create a network of HTS teacher trainers (program directors and field supervisors for Infant Nurture and Little Sisters). In addition, Blue Sky model training centers—soon to number 31, one for each province of China—operate HTS Infant Nurture and Little Sisters Preschools and serve as the provincial bases for training and professional development. Locally hired infant nannies, preschool teachers, and on-site mentors staff these model centers; some become mentors and models within their provinces.

Building model training centers

HTS first seeks the commitment of an institution’s staff to serve as leaders and mentors. Then HTS provides a comprehensive initial training program that prepares staff to implement and model loving, stimulating, and developmentally appropriate programming for young children.

While the training courses for Infant Nurture and Little Sisters have some differences in approach and content (see Cotton et al. 2007), in both cases preparation covers five areas of study:

- young children’s growth and development
- responsive care, nurture, and education
- developmentally appropriate programming
- observation and documentation
- inclusion of children with special needs

Training sessions. In large and small groups, trainees discuss what they learn, solve problems they may face, explore topics of interest, and develop habits of reflection. They
work with children, experiencing the immediate effects of responsive nurture as children in a matter of days go from being withdrawn, dull, and shut down to being hopeful, curious, and engaged.

**Training materials.** Materials developed by Cotton, Zhao, and Muntaner-Gelabert, with support from the HTS Advisory Board, and published in Chinese and English versions, guide the training sessions. The Trainer Guide suggests a format for presenting and facilitating the training content and activities. The Trainee Workbook provides content on child development and developmentally appropriate practices; activity and reflection sheets for individuals and small or large groups; and resources for further learning. Visual materials include slides and videotapes.

**Ongoing support.** In the first months after training, HTS teacher trainers visit the model centers on a regular basis to facilitate team problem solving, model appropriate practices, and coach new teachers as needed. Little Sisters teachers record their reflections about their teaching experiences in weekly journals, and HTS teacher trainers give them personal written feedback.

**Surmounting the great geographic distances**

Because model centers are widely separated geographically, face-to-face contact between HTS teacher trainers and model centers is not always available. HTS continuously seeks creative ways to overcome this challenge.

Online meetings between different groups have proven effective. Preschool teachers from across China meet online weekly with HTS Little Sisters teacher trainers. They discuss topics of interest or need, brainstorm problems, exchange ideas and experiences, and celebrate successes. Infant Nurture on-site mentors meet online in their separate regional groupings, each joined by their individual HTS field supervisor, to share experiences, resolve questions, offer encouragement, and plan next steps in their work with nannies and children.

A website for all preschool teachers under the HTS umbrella, developed and maintained by HTS teacher trainers, contains teaching updates from each institution, entries from reflective teacher journals, and comments and feedback from trainers.

**Working with model center staff**

HTS teacher trainers often visit the model centers to mentor staff and provide training on specific topics—for example, actively involving a child who is visually impaired in classroom activities. The teacher trainers also engage small teams of veteran staff at model centers in mentoring their new staff, for example, developing a comprehensive planning document for supporting a new teacher. In the process, the veterans tend to become more reflective and sensitive in their own practice.

After one year of successful operation, provincial model centers can serve as a training institution for others in the province. Staff from other institutions come to the model center for training sessions led by HTS and model center staff. The training sessions cover the same content as was presented to model center staff, with modifications to address an institution’s particular needs and available resources. Staff from the model center eventually take over the roles of primary mentors, with HTS support.

**Conclusion**

Half the Sky has completed several training sessions at provincial model centers. The long-term process of providing professional development
opportunities to staff at all the planned model centers and hundreds of surrounding institutions is just beginning. As we learn together and explore how to better address the needs of staff and children, we too are growing professionally. It is an exciting journey that will yield important benefits for thousands of teachers and children.

References


Creating a National Professional Development Platform

Here are key lessons we learned in our journey that may generalize to other countries and contexts. To create a national professional development platform for early educators in children’s welfare institutions, it is essential to

* Get the support and cooperation of key government officials and institution administrators.
* Make professional development opportunities readily accessible, either through geographic location or technology
* Support staff at all levels in their professional growth, and make professional development a continuous process
* Make sure staff are willing and able to quickly adapt to meet new needs when they encounter roadblocks
* Provide professional development opportunities for administrators as well as teachers.