

Aloha OEP!

It is with such sadness that we bid aloha to the Elder/Kids Play Club of the Ohana English Preschool (OEP) in Minato-ku, Yokohama. The program closed its doors in March 2009. Through the vision and financial support of Mr. Asakawa, founder of Nomura Financial, the intergenerational program thrived for four years.

The American volunteers returned to Hawai'i, after their three month commitment to teach English to preschoolers, with incredible enthusiasm and a lifetime of fond memories. They formed a support network that gathered to "talk story", oriented the next set of volunteers, and enjoyed lunches together in places like the Arcadia dining room, Honolulu Academy of Arts, and in each others' homes.

Below is an article that was published in the *Journal of Intergenerational Studies*. It is written from the perspective of my colleague, Mr. Kato, and covers his early experiences with the creation of the program in Japan. His persistence in creating the right model was instrumental in the success of the program. MSM

A New Business Model of Intergenerational Program: "Elder/Kids Play Club"

Hiroyasu KATO
Board Member, Ohana English Preschool

Background of Elder/Kids Play Club

In the beginning, applicants for OEP (*Ohana* English Preschool), a private early childhood education site which was planning an English conversation course with native speaker instructors, consisted only of those who come from African and Asian countries. Recruiting native speaker instructors was extremely difficult. The Director of HIN (Hawaii Intergenerational Network), Dr. Mae Mendelson, suggested recruiting retired American senior volunteers from Hawaii. With expectations that senior volunteers would have a sense of responsibility, patience and warmth in teaching to children, the program started with two trained elder teachers dispatched every three months. This intergenerational-exchange-conscious program was denominated "Elder/Kids Play Club"; it was not labeled an "intergenerational program" because this term even when translated is rather difficult to understand for Japanese people.



Elder teachers' visit to Japan and the launch of the program

OEP (Ohana English Preschool) was a little worried about the elder teachers, because there is a norm in Japan that successful instructors in English language are usually younger native speakers. And OEP was not sure if the elder teachers can enjoy their time with Japanese children for 8 hours a day. Will the elder teachers be accustomed to Japanese life, climate and food? Moreover, will Japanese parents and children accept that elder teachers change every three months? Even if yes, will Japanese parents sign up for such a program? No one was sure enough if the project would succeed.

Meanwhile the first group of elder teachers, "Ms. Betty" and "Ms. Rose" arrived in Japan. In a bulletin "Elder/Kids Play News No.2", Ms. Betty (73 years old) said "My dream of visiting Japan came true after long years. The faraway country, Japan. I have dreamed of going there". Such comments indicated that at first they

came to Japan because they were particularly interested in the country itself. In the meantime, it was doubtful if the program would work because only two Japanese regular member children applied for the program at that time. Over time, a few more children joined the program.

The first group of elder teachers, Ms. Betty and Ms. Rose expressed their sentiments at the end of the program of three months; "We shed buckets of tears for leaving Japan after three months program. The children's cheerfulness and vitality are unforgettable for us." It turns out that personal exchange with children brought Betty and Rose unexpected human bonds and happiness. After that their experience as senior teachers was featured on TV in Hawaii, and more than 40 seniors inquired of HIN for working as the elder teachers in Japan.

The program encountered a challenge after the first round of American volunteers left for home. The Japanese coordinator resigned and some regular members of parents and children left the early childhood education center left. Everyone realized how important the presence of the Japanese coordinator was so there was some concern about the future of the intergenerational program.

The new curriculum for the Elder/Kids Play Club

Fortunately for the intergenerational program, there were new curriculum changes at OEP. The center adapted the Creative Curriculum for Family Child Care, and this contributed to richer intergenerational exchanges and an easier program to run.



When the first group from Hawaii came to Japan, Elder/Kids Play Club activities fit into a two hour and a four hour structured curriculum that was implemented with a mixed-age group consisting of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. The elder teachers felt very uncomfortable with the OEP's structured curriculum.

OEP staff and administrators determined that the curriculum should be based on child developmental principles. With this in mind, they decided to use the Creative Curriculum for Family Child Care (Dodge and Colka, 1991).

When the second group of senior volunteers arrived for the Elder/Kids Play Club, they encountered a different classroom arrangement. There were 6 interest areas: toys, blocks, dramatic play, arts and craft, books and music and movement. Children had many opportunities to make choices, come up with ideas, experiment and take responsibility for their work (a parent's guide to preschool/Diane Dodge and Joanna Phinney)

The daily schedule was planned as follows:

- 9:00 Arrival & Work Time
- 9:30 Opening Circle
 - *Music & Movement such as Baby Face, Baby's Hokey Pokey, Five Little Monkeys (Kimbo Educational)
 - *Brain Games (Jackie Silberg)
 - *Story Time (Scholastics)
- 10:30 Outdoor
- 12:00 Lunch & Rest
- 13:30 Work Time
- 14:00 Story Time
- 14:30 Arts & Craft
- 15:30 Music & Movement
- 16:30 Closing Circle
- 17:00 Going Home

This schedule went well. The children behaved more independently. The highlight was “Fitness Breaks” inserted every two hours. Since OEP had no playground, the fitness breaks program fulfilled a physical education function. The children and elder teachers loved it.

A central feature of the program is that the continual conversations between the elder volunteers and the children. This was seen as the key for developing children’s English language development. “Reading Right from the Start” (Diane Dodge and Toni Bicart) was a helpful resource for giving the elder teachers ideas about how they could reach out to the children. The book provided many ideas for how to talk with infants, toddlers and preschoolers, how to sing with children and how to read with children.

Accomplishments and the future of the program

During the time in which the second group of elder volunteers were involved in the program, it had shown various signs of progress. In the local community, Elder/Kids Play Club got so recognized by word of mouth that many parents and children applied for the program. Some parents noticed that their children’s English conversation ability was certainly improved.

(A mother said): “In the beginning, my child was confused in unaccustomed surroundings, but now he talks to teachers voluntarily. The first phrase the child memorized was “Help me please”. Recently my child, 3 years old, learned to go to the bathroom alone but still needed some help. One day my child said to me “*Haa mee pees*” in the bathroom but I couldn’t understand what is said. Afterwards, I guessed she was saying “Hold me please”, so every time it was said, I hugged my child. But at a certain moment I understood that my child wanted to say “Help me please”. Something similar happened a couple of times. I actually mean her real English pronunciation was very different from Japanese one that I thought (snip)”.

The Elder/Kids Play Club works on an American-style approach to child-care insofar as it adopted the “Creative Curriculum,” one of America’s most renowned child education methods. The elder teachers take charge of language education and Japanese coordinators are responsible for the children’s safety, teaching them how to use the bathroom and their overall (emotional, social, cognitive and physical) development. For the elder teachers, such a precise distribution of roles in the curriculum seemed very clear to understand what to do.

The elder teachers really enjoy interacting with children every day. The experiences in the program provide elder teachers not only with a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment but also with an emotional impression from developing a strong human bond with the children. They also develop a bond with the other volunteers. In Hawaii, the former elder teachers have organized an alumni association (HUI=a group of people working together with common interest). The activities of the association help ex-elder teachers to maintain positive memories of Japan in their heart and to expand their social networks. The reputation of the program has been spread by the reunion and more senior citizens have applied to be elder teachers in Japan.



One of the main factors of the success of the program is that Japanese coordinators have made progress in their coordination skills and have developed confidence. The success of the program owes very much to their coordinating ability.

We hope that “Elder/Kids Play Club” will be duplicated as one of the intergenerational exchange business models in Japan. For the future, OEP also expects to promote the project to train Japanese seniors with English language skill as early childhood teachers as another component of the Elder/Kids Play Club.

References

Dodge, D. and Colka, L.J. (1991). *Creative Curriculum for Family Child Care*. Washington, D.C.: Teaching Strategies, Inc.

Dodge, D. and Phinney, J. (Year 2002). *A parent's guide to preschool*. Washington, D.C.: Teaching Strategies, Inc.