

PHILIPPINES : GROWING-UP LEARNING CENTER, AN ETHNOGRAPHIC  
STUDY OF AN EARLY CHILDHOOD INSTITUTION

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**ABSTRACT** In line with the cross-cultural studies of Tobin, Wu and Davidson (1989), this ethnographic study aimed to present a comprehensive picture of an early childhood institution in the Philippines, known as the Growing-Up Learning Center. The Method of study involved total immersion at the Center by the researcher for a period of three weeks which involved observation and active participation in the classrooms. Primary data, interviews with teachers and administrators, and a video recording of important cultural aspects of the institution were important elements of the research design. A critical analysis of the Center in terms of its philosophy and objective, structural composition, curriculum, facilities and emphasis on teaching basic skills to children was made.

It was concluded that, as with findings on preschools in China, Japan and the United states, preschools such as the Growing-Up Learning Center in Baguio City, Philippines offers an alternative mode of caring for children, a radical departure from traditional practices of being raised in an extended family setting. In centers such as this one, self-reliance, language skills, socialization and citizenship training are taught and encouraged as childrens' development unfold.

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## Introduction

On top of a hill in Baguio City, famous summer capital of the Philippines, is

a beautiful mansion which has been transformed into an ideal preschool for children aged four to six years, known as the Growing-Up Learning Center.

The aim of this ethnographic, cultural study was to gain a comprehensive picture of this Philippine early childhood institution with a view of contributing to the cross-cultural studies of Tobin, Wu and Davidson (1989) on preschools in China, Japan, and the United States. The holistic orientation to this research which required creating a picture of the social whole (Fetterman, 1989) was ideal because Growing-Up Learning Center was a newly established school, running for five years, with a manageable, steady enrolment pattern of about 45 to 50 children annually, and situated in a tightly enclosed one hectare compound.

The method in this study comprised total immersion at the Center, including observation and active participation, over a period of three weeks, totaling

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thirteen school days during the period of July and August 1992. All primary data kept at the Center since its establishment in 1987 were examined and studied. The directors, consultants, librarians, teachers and interns, were interviewed, and in line with the cultural tradition of Tobin, Wu and Davidson (1989), video shots were taken on the environment around the school, classes of Nursery, Kinder One and Kinder Two, physical facilities, and all regular daily activities vital to the life and maintenance of the school such as: consultant visitation, arrival of parents or maids with the children, the canteen providing soup, recess time and group play at playground.

Growing-Up Learning Center was founded on February 14, 1987 by an energetic Filipino couple, Elizabeth and Michael Bulaquena, who "Felt that we were responding to a critical need born out by the shortage of honest-to-goodness pre-school centers in Baguio" (Bulaquena, 1992). At that time, the preschool movement in the Philippines was becoming popular in almost all

parts of the country (Drummond, 1988), following similar trends in China, Japan and the United States, where the preschool is viewed as a radical departure from traditional modes of caring for young children. It was in their acquisition of a former estate, where they saw the vision of a potentially outstanding campus setting with extensive playground facilities surrounded by big shady pine trees towering above lush tropical bushes - truly a child's dream.

Like many other institutions in the Philippines, the Growing-Up Learning Center is privately owned by a family. It is therefore a user-pay institution with fees approximately totalling 4099.00 pesos per year per child (about NZ \$315, 1992), as indicated by the 1992 Schedule of Fees. The Center has been authorized by the Philippine Department of Education, Culture and Sports (Kagawaran ng Edukasyon, Kultura, at Isports, 1989) to operate, to employ such innovative education methods which are not normatively found in formal education. It needs to be made clear that Philippine preschools are not considered a part of the mainstream educational ladder. But the Department sets standards for preschools in accordance with the Universal Declaration of the Right of the Child and the Constitution of the Philippines. Furthermore, it is by this same token that preschools are allowed to be experimental in their approach and deviate from formal conventional methods in education.

The philosophy of Growing-Up Learning Center reflects a basic progressive education concept which connects education with human development (Spodek, 1980:9), the idea of development being the main aim of education. In addition, Friedrich Froebel's kindergarten theory (Froebel, 1896; Ransbury, 1991), of unifying man or woman with god and nature, has at a deeper level molded this challenging philosophy which the Center claims to adhere to:

"We believe in a child-centered approach to preschool education that allows the child's potentials to unfold at his/her own pace in all aspects of his/her development - physical, mental, emotional and spiritual" (Growing-Up Learning Center, 1992:1).

In this philosophy of a Philippine preschool, note how these five aspects of child development correspond closely to the concept of promotion and maintenance of Maori mental health, or Te Taha Hinengaro: (1) physical, or Te Taha Tinana, (2) social, or Te Taha Whanau, (3) mental and emotional, or Te Taha Hinengaro, and spiritual, or Te Taha Wairua (The Mason Report, 1988:227). This observation suggests similarities in values between Philippine and Maori culture. Based on this philosophy, the objective of the Center is to provide a learning environment that focuses on the child and responds to his/her needs and development.

### Social-Organisational Structure

The social-organisational activities of the school centers around the middle of the old mansion where an open plan administrative office links directly with the consultant's working space, canteen, Library and Discovery Room (Figure 1). Of the two directors, one is in charge of administration and supervision, the other, on curriculum program and development, There is always one director readily available on site. A paid consultant comes twice a week to monitor the quality of teaching and development of the Center. She also services other preschools in Baguio City and therefore is able to make comparisons between these institutions. Because of this pivotal role, the consultant is a powerful and influential person in the preschool community, often a catalyst to changes in the schools. A second consultant from the Baguio Central University liases with the Center, Department of Education, Culture and Sports, and the University College of Education, for its Internship Placement Programme.

Each class of Nursery, Kinder One, Kinder Two, has one full time teacher with two interns from the Baguio Central University College of Education. A teacher of Mandarin spends 20 minutes in each class everyday. There are two librarians who also function as teacher aides, a canteen lady and a caretaker who maintains the grounds and buildings of the school.

There is an active Parent Teachers' Association, with parents coming

from  
the local vicinity, and a city association of preschool education which  
meets  
fortnightly to exchange ideas and organise activities in cooperation with  
the City  
Council.

In analysing the social-organisational structure of this school, at  
micro level,  
it is an open plan set-up which allows for regular interaction between  
pupils,  
parents and teachers, and at macro level, it is semi-open (Silver, 1983:55)  
through its links with the Baguio Central University, Department of  
Education  
Culture and Sports, PTA, and the local association of preschools. Inside  
each  
class of course is a closer teacher-pupil, pupil-pupil relationship which,  
particularly at Nursery, allows parents or caretakers to enter and cater to  
the  
needs of their child. This practice is on the whole allowed but closely  
guarded  
by the teacher so as not to disrupt the culture of the classroom.

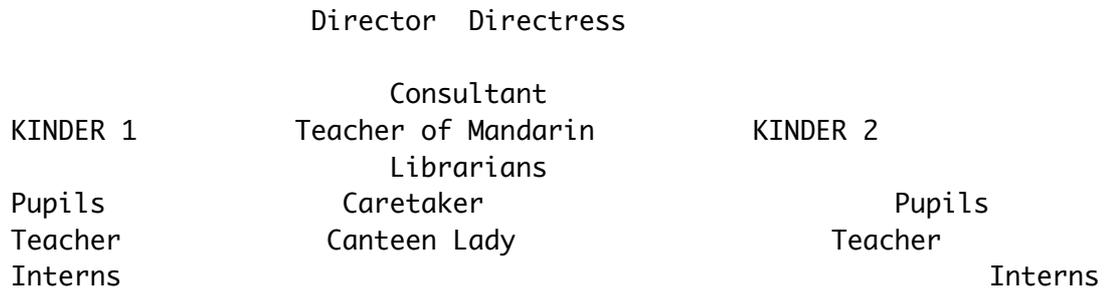
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FIGURE 1. SOCIAL-ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF GROWING-UP  
LEARNING CENTER

University Consultant\_\_\_\_\_Department of Education,  
Culture and Sports

NURSERY

Pupils  
Teacher  
Interns



PTA----- Association of  
 Preschool Education  
 Baguio City

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The role of the consultant at the Center involves both content and process consultation (Schmuk and Runkel, 1985: 457-458). She gives information, advise and guidance to teachers, interns and the directors at the Center, and at the same time focuses on interpersonal interactions dealing with communication, group tensions, leadership, problem solving, processes which are necessarily involved in attaining the explicit educational objectives of the school. More specifically, she regularly checks on the teachers' weekly lesson plans and formally evaluates their teaching, both on a consultative basis. She makes comparisons with other preschools in the City and informs the directors of

directions and decisions these other schools make in their educational programmes.

### Curriculum and Instruction

The Center is open from 7 to 12 o'clock every morning Monday to Friday, with children arriving, accompanied by a parent, grandparent, maid or driver. The Philippine Flag Ceremony starts at 8 am with everyone singing the national anthem, Pambansang Awit: "Bayang magiliw, Perlas ng silanganan, Alab ng Puso, Sa dibdib moy buhay...", translated : Land of the morning, Child of the sun returning, With fervour burning, Thee do our souls adore...". This is followed by an oath of allegiance to the Philippines, then opening physical exercises accompanied by taped music. Leadership training of the child starts here, where, each child from the three classes take their turn in going up the stage to demonstrate as the rest of the group members follow their actions.

At 8:20 am, to the beat of a drum, each class withdraws, walking in single file formation, to their own classrooms. When the class settles down, they start with prayers, then for 60 minutes between 8:20 and 9:20, there is a concentrated instruction and learning session in reading and number readiness, at Nursery for example, starting with "ABC" then counting "1,2,3". The bell rings at 9.20 signalling the beginning of a 30 minute recess period followed by 15 minutes of rest or play. Children eat, sleep, go to the Library, or play during this 40 minute period. Finally between 10 to 11 am, there is more instruction in language development, writing readiness, music and arts. The teacher of Mandarin teaches in each of these classrooms for 20 minutes daily.

This is the usual schedule of Nursery, Kinder One and Two everyday from Monday to Thursday. Friday is designated as a free day where classes are less structured and pupils are allowed to engage more in free play, but the teacher is still expected to plan the activities of this day, sometimes in collaboration with other teachers.

A teacher's day starts at 7 to 11 am, and when the children leave, she spends the time from 11 until noon rearranging and cleaning the classroom,

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then meeting with the consultant, other teachers and the Director or Directress.

In analysis, the first formal activity of the day, which is the Flag Ceremony, and oath of allegiance, is the first learning area designated in the curriculum, followed by opening physical exercises, then prayers. All teachers' lesson plans focus on character building and Christian formation. This is not surprising because the Philippines is a predominantly 85 % Christian Catholic country.

Basic language development, of reading, writing and phonics; maths and music appreciation comprise the core curriculum. The medium of instruction is English, but because the children come from multicultural ethnic backgrounds, speaking in the vernacular is allowed in classrooms. There are about two main dialects spoken by the children: Ilokano and Pilipino, which is also the national language. So one could hear a child talk this way to a teacher, in Pilipino: "Teacher Nicole, kinurot ako ni Carl", meaning "Teacher Nicole, Carl pinched me"; or in Ilocano, "Teacher, nalipatan na manen dayjay lapis na", meaning "Teacher she forgot her pencil again". Although the vernacular is not discouraged, English is always emphasized, apart from the special class in Mandarin, the basic Chinese language, which is a special feature of this school, a rather quaint insertion into the curriculum because there are no pupils at this Center whose first language is Chinese.

Inherent in the curriculum of Growing-Up Learning Center is their sociocultural approach to the development of the young Philippine child's mind.

In line with Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky's ideas (Wertsch, 1990:18), all teachers at the Center, firstly probe into the pupils' origins and monitor their

transitions

to understand aspects of their mental functioning; and they discuss this openly

among themselves and with the consultant and directors. Secondly, there is great emphasis on development of social relations among the children, whose social networks are observed and studied, then influenced directly by the teacher who considers this part and parcel of her job. And thirdly, the emphasis

on language and maths as cultural tools and signs is accompanied by sophisticated step-by-step methods of acquiring simple to complex language systems with their age and cognitive level in mind. There is enough concrete

evidence of this sociocultural approach to the development of the young Philippine child's mind through: the specific objectives at the Center which

clearly state these; through poster displays of their teaching and learning activities where pupils produce handwritten works; through their active verbalizing, and their open socialization in the classroom and throughout the school.

### Special Features

Growing-Up Learning Center has unique features which give it a special identity among the other preschools in Baguio City. They include the extensive outdoor playground, Discovery Room, and the Library, all of which are designed

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to develop the integrated concept of work and play through coordination of skills, repetition and exploration. Preschool children need to be stimulated in

their development of physical, social, language and cognitive skills (Allen & Hart, 1984:18-21).

The Center has one of the biggest playgrounds in the city, with swing, a rocket ship, seesaw, climbing ramps, slide, merry-go-round, even a basketball and badminton court. This facility is well-used before the Flab Ceremony and after class while the children wait for their parent or relative to collect them.

This playground offers opportunities for developing the child's physical skills such as in large motion activities involving control of arms, legs, trunk,

eye-  
hand coordination and balance; and in finer motor activities that call for  
the  
control of hands, feet and fingers.

On Fridays, the whole school engages in group activities such as  
"pulling  
the rope", demonstrating that already, even as early as at Nursery level,  
advanced cooperative play (Papalia, 1991), is inculcated among the  
children.  
Some Nursery children could not cope and broke into tears, followed by  
their  
mothers calming them down. In terms of their development, they were still  
in  
earlier stages of onlooker, solitary or parallel play.

There is another unique feature of the Center, the Discovery Room for  
children to engage in free play, which is equipped with a sandbox, pails,  
spades,  
tractors, dolls, blocks, miniature household appliances, dollhouse, clay,  
molds,  
educational toys. The Discovery Room is often utilised by a teacher who  
decides  
the children are becoming restless and need to engage in some form of free  
play. In a discovery learning period (Allen and Hart, 1984), children are  
given the  
opportunity to choose the activities made available to them in the room.  
They  
decide on their choice of play material; in other words, they have the  
freedom  
to choose. A boy for instance, chose to play with a model ironing board and  
flat  
iron. Some children chose to share and cooperate, exploring the reactions  
of  
others, trying out ways of interacting and adapting to their own reasoning,  
as  
in the case of solving a puzzle together. There was a "buy and sell store"  
with  
the children of Kinder Two haggling over the price of a can of milk. The  
level of  
language use, particularly with children interacting at the Discovery Room  
was  
high, and even children engaged in parallel play were talking "past each  
other".

In the Discovery Room, these principles of play rooted in Dewey, Lewin  
and  
Piaget (Wassermann, 1992) apply: (1) Play allows for inventive risks to be  
taken  
- as in the case of children molding clay into figures; (2) There is no

fear in failure because there is no failure. Everyone simply plays freely and have a good time with no one commenting on their performance as good or poor, in contrast to the normal classroom situation where workbooks are graded; (3) Play builds their autonomy. Many children were playing by themselves, succeeding in solving individual puzzles; and (4) Play gives the hands and minds something to do. The children of Kinder Two observed, were actively playing with clay dough, shaping it in their hands, openly talking aloud at times, and interacting with one or two other children in the room.

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A third special feature is that of the Library which contains a circular table with low chairs surrounded by books which are classified according to reading ability and age range. Two librarians maintain the library which is well-used during recess time. Teachers also take their classes to visit the Library as a group.

An added special feature at the Center is that of classrooms having an internal arrangement of appropriate language and maths posters surrounding the room where at the corner are cubicles for the children's bags, and an adjacent toilet which is so necessary, and well used. The arrangement of the desks and chairs is usually in traditional style of teacher in front with rows of tables and chairs facing her. But the furniture is flexible and movable to allow for change of formation such as a circular arrangement for some activities. There was also a puppet box for a puppet show for the whole school on a free day.

Canteen arrangements also allowed for children to obtain whatever food or drink they wanted, this being later charged to the parents.

When taken together, all these special features at the Center create a challenging environment for the young children who at this stage in their

life

have a great need for play space, and an exciting encounter with their surroundings. With the school's attitude of "Learning is fun!", it lives up to John

Dewey's educational ideals of linking up work and play with recreative leisure,

for health and lasting habits of the mind (Dewey, 1938). This preschool extends

its provision through these special facilities and the team's attitude to each

child's learning situation.

## Conclusion

The Growing-Up Learning Center is performing the function of caring for

young preschool children in a community setting, and as with other preschools

in the city, departs from the more closed setting of children being raised in their

homes by full-time mothers, aunts, grandmothers, brothers and sisters. For similar reasons found in China, Japan and the United States by Tobin, Wu, and

Davidson (1989), in the Philippines, the social changes of increased emphasis

on self-reliance, thus weaning the child from "Mum" at an earlier age; importance of socialization because of increasing nuclear families; and increase

in women going to work, even leaving for jobs overseas, has created the need

for these preschool institutions. The problem of separation of mother and child,

for say, children as young as 3 and 1/2 years, as in the case of the youngest

children at the Center who are twins, is common at Nursery, but not so at Kinder One and Two.

In addition, because of the stiff academic competition to pass grade school

entrance tests in selective Philippine schools, parents are anxious for their

children to have a headstart (Quisenberry, et al., 1991:193), over other children

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in cognitive skills of language and maths as well as social skills,

leadership and  
character development.

The observation of the gender of all teachers and interns at the Center being women, reinforces the Philippine tradition of women continuing to care for the young, who in this school comprised 10 boys, 6 girls for Nursery; 6 boys, 11 girls for Kinder One; and 8 boys and 5 girls for Kinder Two, and almost equal number of boys and girls totally enrolled at the school (24 boys, 22 girls).

It is heartening to see an institution such as the Growing-Up Learning Center keep up its quality control through its consultative team work, " to make it one of the best if not the best in the city," as Elizabeth Bulaquena, the Directress puts it. This Center, amid tall pine trees on the hill has certainly proved an old mansion can still perform new wonders for young Filipinos from multilinguistic-cultural backgrounds.

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