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# Play Summit 2018

*A novel initiative that sheds light on the importance of 'learning through play' for children*

Play Summit 2018.

The crowd stepped onto a colourful platform of the BRAC Centre for Development Management (BCDM), Savar, Dhaka. They were there for the two-day-long event, from March 12 to March 13, 2018, which consisted of multiple sessions moderated and coordinated by the passionate team at BRAC Institute of Educational Development BRAC University (BIED), dedicated to promoting the idea of teaching children through play.

BIED along with ANJI Child Education Research Centre hosted the Play Summit 2018, with Tung Wah College as a supporting partner.

The ice-breaking session was conducted by Anisa Huq (BIED), ANJI Child Education Research Centre and Dr Doris Cheng (Tung Wah College), in a fun-filled session taking the audience through an imaginary journey of the Sundarbans whilst explaining the concept of “learning through play”.

As the sessions began, Cassie Lauenders, the moderator of the session “Children as Resources”, shared that children are the birthplace of creativity and imagination who represent the nation's progress towards an innovative future. But alas, their reflexes and instincts are often buried in a system where they are forced to oblige with adult mandated structures impeding their development. With this in mind, Cheng Xeuqin (ANJI) undertook a novel initiative aimed at triggering children's deepest curiosities and designing every step of the child's growth. Her idea was to provide children a play model

which would achieve this purpose. The idea was manufacturing low cost play structures out of recycled materials.

The teachers of ANJI worked day and night to construct the perfect play model which would deliver the intended reactions of the children. They finally decided on memories—something which the children would never forget and which would prepare them to grab the opportunities that lie ahead. The idea is this: the assessment of learning is obtained from the assessment of joy which in turn is extracted from the experience.

The other thing teachers kept in mind was to not involve themselves as the children try to make sense out of the play structures. Of course, there were doubts about whether it is right to give the children a huge amount of space and power or whether the children could even figure out how to play with these models on their own. However, the children, it seemed, were already very capable of creating their own games availing then given structures. The large amount of positive feedback only went to show that the unconventional idea was a success. The children absolutely loved it and their extraordinary ability shocked the teachers. Self-recognition, self-love, meaningful facial expressions, and effective communication skills were some of the results of this initiative.

And finally, ANJI based the idea on the foundation of “love” through true play. Believing in children's ability to think for themselves and their senses paid off. The concept proved to be a success and was ready to expand.



Circle time in BIED's Play Lab

In Bangladesh, the BIED Play Labs or Khelar Jogot focuses on 0-3 years and 3-5 years age groups of children whereas in Uganda and Tanzania the focus is on the age group 3-5 years old. This play-based curriculum was founded on five bases: playfulness, culture and heritage, child-led play, flexibility and innovation.

Rafiath Rashid Mithila (BRAC International), Ferdousi Khanom and Sakila Yesmin (BIED) joined by Dr Doris Cheng and Irene Lai (Principal of Child Care Centre, Hong Kong), Suraiya Haque (Phulki) and Mitul Dutta (BIED) spoke about the philosophy behind the model and the factors that lie behind the abovementioned bases. The model focused on including the stakeholders—that is, the parents, society and the children themselves. With children at the centre, the belief is that they can chart their own paths forward. Furthermore, play leaders acting as facilitators of play within the Play Labs and within the wider community, act as a motivational toolkit and helps to change the normative mindset of the parents.

The child-friendly materials are placed both indoors and outdoors, leaving the children with their own choice of space and material. The materials are planned and designed by both the parents and play leaders, keeping the child's interest at the core. Monthly parents' meeting along with inclusion of the parents in the play lab are highly encouraged which, help erase their concerns and doubts and build communication among the community and parents.



Play is a time of joy in the outdoors at ANJI Play in China.

Suraiya Khanom and Mitul Dutta explained the constraints they faced during the primary level of the model implementation. The division of age and the allocation of space in urban areas proved to be great obstacles. Resources were scarce and they had to rely on existing materials. Children were provided with basic play material and they started to play with them. It helped with their creativity and imagination—the play leaders had to improvise from then onwards. The common question, “When will the children learn?” was a constant drawback in light of parents' basic mindset. The answer given was, “Sometimes children get so happy while they are playing that they are unaware that they are being taught as well.”

The session following, called “Play Material” moderated by Syed Sazia Zaman (BIED), was the most engaging session amongst all the others. The session consisted of a display of the culturally adapted play materials from all the three countries: Bangladesh, Uganda, and Tanzania. Apart from that, there were materials on the table and the audience was divided into small groups, with their free will to make anything out of those materials. Paper binoculars, birds, plastic bottle telephones, etc., were produced by the audience and they finally learnt the concept of instinctive creativity when no direction is delegated. They further realised that children do not need expensive materials to play with. Basically, what they get their hands on is a toy.

The materials are being standardised through time and are usually purchased or recycled by the local community. Children play according to their level of potential. They adjust according to their own needs and difficulties and that is what makes the play model meaningful.

“Play Spaces,” the first session on the second and last day of the event, was moderated by Dr Bo Stjerne Thomsen, along with speakers Kabir Khandokar, Amir Ebn Sharif (BRAC University Architecture Team), Dilruba Begum (BIED), Cheng Xueqin (Anji Child Education Research), and Dr Hui-Chun Lee (Taiwan).

Kabir Khandokar briefed the audience on the activities of the play labs in Bangladesh. He believes that the physical environment promotes social interaction. However, spaces should be appropriated for both the people and children. Dhaka's low-income settlements caused issues when it came to constructing play spaces according to the children's interests. An example of this is when the children wanted to see flowers in the slums they reside in, he made them a garden recycled out of garbage materials. The garden is their play space now and the kids learnt about seeds and plantation by themselves. He stressed in resource constraint settings the need for improvisation and out-of-the-box ideas is great. Amir Ebn Sharif further explained how they focused on keeping the project eco-friendly, climate cautious, child-friendly and cost-effective.



In the Fragile Setting session, the changes and further adjustments according to the need of the situations, were presented by Dr. Nishat Fatima Rahman (BIED) and Sadaf Huq (BIED). Here, BRAC's work with the Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN) in Cox's Bazar was brought to light. BRAC began to work with the children who were exposed to displacement and violence. The camps did not have much outdoor space, so the play spaces were constructed indoors. The decorations were made from recycled materials, keeping in mind the cultural traits of the FDMN.

The children had endured traumatic experiences and for them to be involved in the play labs was an impossible scenario a few months ago. So, BRAC had to design a community based on mental health model. The team implemented different approaches such as art, storytelling, music, etc., along with play sessions, to gauge the mental health condition of the children. Eventually, thanks to the excellent planning and regular psychological feedback, the children started to respond and participate in the activities. It is still an ongoing process to initiate social-emotional development of these children.

Following the fragile setting facing BRAC in Cox's Bazar, a panel discussion with Mithila, Tabu Francis Drachi (BRAC International), Syeda Fareha Islam (BIED) experienced in setting up Play Labs in Liberia, Uganda and Tanzania alongside Government representatives from the three countries was conducted. They shared stories of working in different fragile settings- such as with refugees and civil war victims in Tanzania and Liberia and severely distraught environments such as that in Karamoja, Uganda. The three countries collectively agreed that this project and model require constant research. Since they work in different environments, incorporating the culture and heritage is mandatory and something that all organisations should religiously follow.

The last session, moderated by Cassie Landers, engaged the audience in yet another activity where they had to agree, disagree or suggest modifications to her nine core principles, concerning the different components, of learning through play. She believes in constantly developing the components of this idea that a child led education based on playfulness is the way forward. Thus, the modifications were taken into consideration and feedback happily shared to incorporate the larger audience's ideas.

Play Summit 2018 made people think. It successfully made the audience take notice and concede that a new dimension of education exists—one which has the potential to change the next generation of global platform engagement. Thanks to interactive sessions and knowledgeable speakers, the audience got a glimpse into the manifold challenges related to child development which is not a singular problem but a universal one. Further concepts, ideas and modifications were discussed and promised to be initiated to equip our children with the skills and values needed for the future.

