



Dr. Chen Xuefeng is an early childhood development specialist.

International Involvement in Early Childhood Development in China

By staff reporter ZHOU LIN

EARLY childhood is a significant period of life and of particular social importance," United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) China's early childhood development specialist Dr. Chen Xuefeng recently observed. "It is vital that parents and teachers monitor children's growth, listen to what they have to say and respect their ideas."

As one of China's leading authorities on early childhood development, Chen Xuefeng's expertise is in high demand. She is at the forefront of UNICEF's efforts to formulate a national plan to provide early childhood development services throughout China.

Avoid Inherited Poverty

Children develop most rapidly, both physically and mentally, from birth to the age of eight years old. This period is

hence vital for shaping characters, nurturing potential and promoting progress.

"Until recently, attention has polarized on education. But it is now ac-

knowledge that the importance of early childhood development supersedes even that of fundamental education. Children should be inured to the concept of study before entering primary school. Whether or not a child is equipped to learn determines his or her future level of academic achievement. Pre-school preparations include stimulation of their cognitive functions, controlling emotions and learning social skills," Chen said.

Recipient in the year 2000 of the Nobel memorial prize, Professor James J. Heckman is a specialist in the economics of human development. His statistical analyses on the cost benefits and returns of investment in early childhood education show that for every dollar invested, specifically for education of children aged between zero and six, a return of US \$17 can be expected in the future. Taken as a whole, research conclusions are that the accomplishment of children's rights is the responsibility not only of parents, but of society as a whole. Nations of the world have since

embarked on early childhood development and education programs.

As one of the three overseas branches of the United Nations, UNICEF China is charged with helping the Chinese government guarantee children's rights, including those to life, development, and protection, as stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

UNICEF and the Chinese government have a long history of working together. "From the very start, UNICEF provided children with emergency relief services. The development of national power and society gradually helped this cooperation evolve towards bringing in advanced international experience, collaboration on policy research and development, talents cultivation and innovation of ideas," Chen said.

In the early 1980s, UNICEF entered into partnership with China's Ministry of Education. In the years since, it has made significant contributions towards promotion, in cycles, of children's rights, with one cycle spanning a decade.

Hands on

Dr. Chen Xuefeng defines UNICEF's function as "Hands on."

"UNICEF focuses on cooperation with China's central and local governments. On one hand, we can apply and adapt certain international experience to the Chinese situation; on the other, as our work takes place at the very front line, we rely on government policy support for trial projects in local areas. These are vital in assessing whether or not our program is suitable to Chinese circumstances," Dr. Chen said.

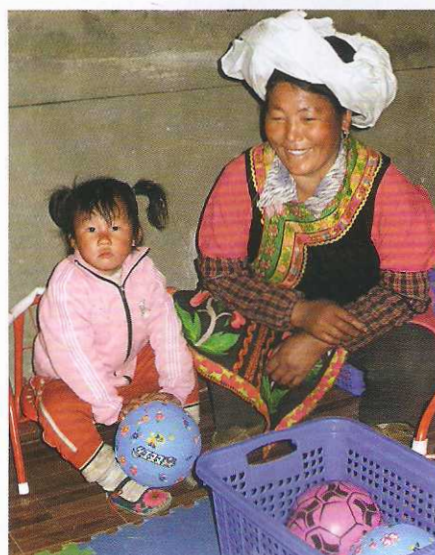
Until 2010, UNICEF had made many pre-policy endeavors, including overseas research with the Chinese central government, taking part in global conferences, making investigations and policy analyses, and providing advice on policy improvement.

During the planned economy period, early childhood education was generally regarded as a guaranteed aspect of public services. Most enterprises and institutes, therefore, had their own kindergartens. Since the reform of state-owned enterprises, however, most, other than government-sponsored kindergar-

tens, have either closed down or become privately owned. Statistics show that the kindergarten enrollment rate dropped to 33 percent around the year 2000. Consequently hardly any children in rural areas had the opportunity to go through early childhood education.

In 2003 the Announcement on the Reform and Development Guidance of Early Childhood Education was issued by the Chinese government. UNICEF and the Chinese government then began to jointly promote the "Tianjin Development Mode," which encouraged coop-

Children are not family private property. And realizing their rights is not solely a parental responsibility.



More efforts are needed to expand pre-school education in China's rural areas.

eration among government, community, and society. The successful experience in Tianjin was one of community services for childhood development and the formation of children's informal activity groups. The leading principle was to encourage all types of social groups to establish kindergartens. The situation in rural areas, however, has not changed.

Children there seldom have the opportunity to attend kindergarten.

To remedy this state of affairs, UNICEF has proposed its own development objective. "We plan to run 30 pilot projects in counties around China for each development cycle. Local governments in rural areas are advised to provide early childhood development and education services using their own resources. Kindergartens for children aged from three to six years old are to be set up, along with facilities for children aged between zero and three years old. We will recruit volunteers, and provide technical support and services to tutor parents," Chen said.

In 2010, UNICEF initiated the "Investors to be Responsible for Operation" mode, as stipulated in the Several Opinions on the Current Development of Pre-school Education by the State Council (later known as Ten National Provisions). It clearly states that the government should shoulder the bulk of responsibility for establishing public kindergartens. Also that the public school and education system in rural areas should guarantee that the quality of teaching staff for early education is higher than that in private institutions. "This mode has become the basis of early childhood development in rural areas whereby both the government and the community are involved, in a bid to blaze a way for low-cost and wide-ranging early childhood education," Chen said. The "low-cost" concept emphasizes maximum use of local resources to achieve optimum education. On the premise of guaranteed health and safety, kindergartens in rural areas are thus accessible to all, rather than a luxury.

In late 2010, Chen Xuefeng's dream came true when China's State Council announced its campaign to make early childhood development universal by 2020 for children up to the age of six, and would allocate special fund over five years.

Unite for Children

Liang Jialie is a retired government worker, now living in Nagong Village of Pingguo County in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. "After retiring, it

seemed to me that the best way to spend my time would be to help the children in my village gain school readiness skills," Liang said.

"The early childhood development pilot project, based on services in communities and families, is a vital development mode created by UNICEF. It aims at training parents and volunteers to make them specialists in early childhood development."

Liang Jialie attended an early childhood development training session in his village. Initially just curious about the content, it soon impressed upon him the importance of early childhood development. He understood that the absence of quality pre-school education can hinder children's readiness for school and hence their long-term development. This prompted Liang to come to more training sessions.

Liang is now the playgroup leader in his village. He instructs a dozen children in school readiness activities. He reads them stories, teaches them songs and shows them the basics of math with available materials like grains of corn. The training also gave him the idea of role-playing games, such as one that shows children how to follow traffic rules at street intersections.

Parents in Mr. Liang's village respect him as the "child expert," and often go to him for advice. "I'm proud of my volunteer work as a playgroup leader," Liang said. "Helping the children in my village expect a better future is both fulfilling and gratifying," Liang added,

"The pilot project is not the sole domain of UNICEF. The government and community are also involved. Nowadays, the human-oriented concept is welcomed in communities. We are just one of many testing our cooperation potential."

New Challenges

The Pre-school Education Publicity Month runs from mid-May to mid-June every year. UNICEF hopes that parents and all other participants maintain their expectations of early childhood development. Rather than just learning reading, writing and arithmetic, UNICEF emphasizes the need for children to take part in



Liang Jialie and the parents of children in the village meet to give them pre-school training.

more games and so develop their interests and talents.

"Education for children between the ages of zero and three is far more difficult than for those aged between three and six. There are specific institutions supervised by the Ministry of Education that are responsible for the latter, the only problems being those of quantity and quality. As education for children aged between zero and three is virgin territory, there is no mechanism for who takes the lead in the undertaking. We are still formulating this new mode. Currently, parents pay their children's fees, the community contributes the premises, UNICEF subsidizes volunteer expenses, and the government provides training and quality supervision," Chen said.

Introducing policies also means changing ideas. Chinese people have long treated children's education as their families' specific responsibility. Yet globally it is regarded as a public matter. Government, rather than parental responsibility, is the crux of the issue.

"Children are not family private property. And realizing their rights is not

solely a parental responsibility. It calls for a united effort by society as a whole. We need to change our views in this respect," Chen said.

Changing ideas is the first step; the policy system also needs to be improved. UNICEF has launched a new "10 square meters of Love" campaign. It encourages young mothers to bring their babies to their workplace, where public breastfeeding rooms are available. But most enterprises are averse to such new ideas, because they do not regard it as their obligation. There have also been various reasons for such problems in China. Sometimes they stem from parents' opinions on the matter. At others, it is because society does not provide parents with a suitable environment.

"We are now going all out to pinpoint a responsible body. The government must first fulfill its responsibility in providing public services, including legislation that obligates enterprises to guarantee the rights of breastfeeding mothers. This is a systematic project that we cannot expect to achieve in the short term," Chen said.

"To achieve early childhood development in China, UNICEF still has a long way to go," Chen Xuefeng concluded. ■