

## APPLYING PERSON CENTERED PLANNING TO AN INCLUSIVE ECCD IN BHUTAN

<sup>a</sup>Namita Jacob

<sup>b</sup>Yangree

<sup>a</sup>*Perkins International, AsiaPacific*

<sup>b</sup>*Hejo ECCD Centre, Bhutan*

<sup>a</sup>*namita.jacob@perkins.org*

<sup>b</sup>*hecddc@gmail.com*

### ABSTRACT

A good Early Childhood Care and Development [ECCD] center serves as an effective bridge, between home and school, helping young children step gently into learning and widening their experiences of the world. The ECCD offers a safe and nurturing environment for all children while at the same time challenging them to develop independence and the tools of exploration. Perkins International developed an adapted version of the Person Centered Planning process at Hejo ECCD to help each family to share their child, and their dreams as well as their fears with the ECCD staff so the whole team could develop a map together for the year ahead. This powerful and positive process was first developed to support children with disabilities and delays and their families, but was quickly extended by the Director to cover all children in the center. The presentation describes the process and the ways in which it has served the children, the families, the facilitators and the management in their journey together.

**Keywords:** inclusion, ECCD, family support, transition planning

### 1. Introduction

Person centred planning was initially developed as a way to reflect on the quality and direction of the lives of adults with developmental disabilities. The process is one of reflection, both by the individual and by those who care about them and are involved in their lives. The discussions are not led by the impairment but focus on identifying the various abilities, aspirations and concerns of the individual. The key areas discussed include exploring the nature of the person' life now and how they would like their life to change. From this "dream" the team works together to draft a plan toward that desired future (Mount, 2000, Falvey, Pierpoint, & Rosenbaum, 1994).

Several different approaches and models of planning can be followed to enable identification of the core issues for individuals and guide plan development and implementation. All approaches share the same goal in that they are working to help create a plan that responds to the abilities and interests of the individual, valuing their life and their goals.

## 2. Person Centered Planning in Bhutan

Perkins International works toward a world where every child learns and thrives as a valued member of a family, school, and community. The work in Bhutan focuses on helping develop quality education and positive outcomes for people with complex disabilities. While as a nation, Bhutan is committed to inclusion, it is also just developing in-country expertise and systems to provide these services. Perkins International is working closely with the government, organizations, schools and families to develop evidence-based effective systems to support children and their families.

As a strategy, Perkins International focuses on enabling transitions and it is in this context that the person centered planning process was first introduced. When a child is born with an impairment, the focus of families and professionals tends to be strongly on “fixing the problem”. The result is often that the person’s life becomes atypical. Their days are spent differently from other children their age. People around them hold different expectations for them and what would be normal - sending a child to school for example, may simply not seem possible or important. Therefore, although the educational system is free and open to all students, children with complex disabilities may not join, or when they join may not be able to receive meaningful services. Two important transitions that are often delayed or that happen with little preparation or clarity of thought were identified as the focus of this work.

Leaving school - children with complex disabilities who were in school, often had no plan for what they would do after school and therefore their school programs lacked a clear focus.

Leaving Home - children with disabilities often started ECCD or school later than their peers. They often entered without adequate preparation and parents had poor clarity on their goals. Often delays were only identified by the ECCD facilitators and without a way to talk about this topic with families or clarity on what they could actually do for the child as they lacked special skills, the chance to make a difference, was left unused.

Practical workshops were conducted with professionals serving these age groups and several professionals and organizations adopted this process.

### 2.1 Person Centered Planning at Hejo ECCD

Hejo ECCD was already serving a few children with concerning delays. They were the first ECCD that took up this approach in an effort to reach out to these families. They understood that although they had no special expertise in disability, providing children and families with access to typical activities and environments was a very important and positive contribution in their lives.

Drawing deeply on the strategies of the MAPS process (Forest & Lusthaus, 1990), we ask families to reflect on their earliest memories of their child and then draw their major memories until the present. The act of drawing makes parents relax and the conversation to flow more naturally. Partners fill out little details and so many things they value, celebrate and worry about become visible. This process helps the ECCD facilitators understand each parent’s perspective and enriches their understanding of what may be helpful and valued by the family.

The next set of maps are to help make the child's life visible - not just to the facilitators but often, for the families, it is a chance to stop and consider the range and variety of their child's experience. We ask them to draw their child's current life across three areas over the last month or two - Places where their child spends time, Play and Relationships. We ask them to draw - What exactly does the child do? With whom? How often? Does your child enjoy this? And so on. The drawings reveal much about parent perspective and priorities and the children - their nature, their preferences, as well as about the quality of experiences of their life thus far.

The final map is about dreams. We ask parents to put the present aside and to look 5 years down the road. What would they like to see? What is the hope for the child across the same three areas - Play, Places and Relationships? We also ask about their fears - Bullying? Loneliness? Voicing their dreams and fears is hard for many families who may never have thought so far ahead. Yet, this step allows us to focus on desired goals and to set plans that lead toward this reality.

While the first plans were made with families of children with disabilities, it was quickly extended to all the families of the children at the center.

### **3. Valued Outcomes**

ECCD Director Yangree explains that there were many reasons she began asking all parents to go through the process with the team from Hejo, but the biggest one was that EVERYONE benefits - child, family, facilitators and organization.

A bond with families: the process itself led to a deeper bond with families, creating a strong and positive base which helped all future interactions.

Meaningful planning: based on the maps, the team could anticipate and customize the child's experience at the center, even before the child began, From materials and activities, to goals and strategies, the team was already armed to give the child a comfortable transition from home and also plan thoughtfully for the transition from the center to school.

Coordination between home and center: consistency is an important strategy when trying to enable change or learning and having shared goals meant better commitment to consistency across all the adults at home and center. Facilitators were able to more easily focus on each child's goals, as the visual maps made it easy to recall as they work with children.

Creating a community of support: parents bonded over shared dreams and supported each other naturally. Parent support and education that was started for parents of children with disabilities was naturally extended to all. Similarly strategies, materials and activities first thought of for children with disabilities, were simply integrated into daily routines of the center as the staff realized that many children benefited.

Making the child visible: perhaps the most important outcome was that all the adults learned to step back and really see the child, making it easier to have conversations about delays or difficulties that are otherwise so challenging.

## 4. Conclusion

The process is repeated annually for every child and revisited as new goals or concerns arise. Every year, as children transition successfully into school, parents and facilitators reflect on all they learned and were able to do because of the process of dreaming and planning together. The process continues to yield positive outcomes for children and families and guides the development and implementation of inclusive practices at the ECCD center.

We conclude with excerpts from a letter to Hejo ECCD center from a parent:

*'When we first started to make the map, I thought this was easy, I am the mom, I know my kid but it turned out, when we really needed to pinpoint and put it down, I really needed to think and really re-look at my assumption of what I knew. These maps really made me check my facts and correct my assumption about my own kid and about what I wanted for him.....These years of doing the map have paid off, I not only understand my son better but also when he is about to start his formal schooling both he and I are ready. When the time for decision making came it was not hard to choose the school. It helped me and my husband choose a school based on values that we wanted to see in him.'*

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