

From Shanghai to Gill: How teaching models of education can span continents



Barbara Yue, at right, gives Betsy Evans a sandscape from Shanghai during a visit to the Giving Tree School in Gill. FOR THE RECORDER/AALIANNA MARIETTA

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Barbara Yue traveled more than 7,000 miles from Shanghai to visit the Giving Tree School in Gill.

After a 13-hour flight this spring, she and her colleague, a principal in Shanghai, met the Giving Tree School's founder Betsy Evans. Both Evans and Yue teach educators the pillars of High Scope, an organization of researchers, educators and other professionals committed to growing active learning in early childhood education. Eight years ago, Yue turned from teaching children to training teachers across China on High Scope's approach. During her own training, she studied Evans' ideas.

After teaching for 15 years at the Giving Tree School, Evans started spreading High Scope's message to educators around the world. Her training has taken her to 49 states and seven countries in the 36 years since, and brought her together with Yue.

“When we do active learning, the children have the wheel they’re holding; they can choose which direction we’re going to go,” Yue said. “We have so many roads, so many directions, so many pathways around. Why should we just focus on one?”

High Scope students make choices the second they step into the classroom through the “Plan to Review” system. First, the students share their plans for the school day in a unique activity. At the Giving Tree School, children ages 2 to 5 place bear figurines where they want to play for the day, write their ideas on index cards and grab the number of cubes to represent the number of activities on their agenda, to name a few methods.

“It channels the physical need to express,” Evans explained.

When the day comes to a close, the kids gather in small groups and recap their days together like a dinner table conversation, according to Evans.

In between planning and reviewing, the children play all day, the heart of Evans’ and Yue’s shared approach. No lessons, no “sit still,” no raising hands — just play.

But this play has a purpose. As the children create art, play pretend and explore the outdoors, they grow their vocabularies and negotiating skills. When a conflict flares between students, High Scope-trained teachers follow the problem-solving steps Evans created with her colleagues. First, the teacher approaches with a calm demeanor and names the child’s feelings. Then, the educator asks, “What’s the problem?” After the students answer, the teacher repeats their stories back and finally says, “What can we do to solve this problem?” The kids then brainstorm a solution.



Giving Tree School founder Betsy Evans smiles with Barbara Yue, who is holding a poster of the six problem-solving steps Evans created with her colleagues. FOR THE RECORDER/AALIANNA MARIETTA

“It’s about agency,” Evans explained. She stressed the importance of the teacher silencing personal judgment or laughter during the final step, even when students suggest particularly unexpected solutions, like driving to the store to buy another doll instead of sharing.

Evans and Yue also discussed “small group time,” a block of the day when teachers hand out materials aimed to inspire creativity and imagination.

In Shanghai, teachers Yue trained help children create traditional ink paintings and homemade Play-Doh. With sticky hands, the toddlers experiment with the flour-to-water ratio, feeling its changing texture and temperature.

“It’s very sensory,” Yue said. “They’re learning how to explore.”

Outdoor play is another core value that connects Evans' and Yue's classrooms. Evans believes kids must learn outdoors for a "philosophical" reason.

"Children need to learn how to be stewards of the land," she said. "If we want them to take care of our planet, they need to know how things grow — how they grow, why they grow, how to respect it, how to plant it, how to feed it and nurture it."

According to Evans, learning sneaks into the outdoor fun when children pick fruits, vegetables and beans from the Giving Tree School's garden beds, or run around or jump through the playground.

"Whenever something is moving or changing, that's science," Evans said. "We don't have to give them lectures about that, they just start internalizing it every day and they're actively participating in it."

Warwick resident Kaila Marti Woodson, whose 3-year-old daughter Novalise Woodson Marti attends the Giving Tree School, said she and her wife trust the school because of its philosophy.

"They don't push academics," she said. "We want them to be able to play as long as they can."

Unlike the children at the Giving Tree School, Yue grew up with "sit still" lessons, but said this is not the norm in China. She challenged the stereotype of Chinese "directive" schools with students following orders in uniform.

"The directive way of teaching is worldwide," Yue said. "It's not about the Global North or the Global South. I would say it's people's different perspectives and different knowledge about teaching and learning."



Warwick resident Kaila Marti Woodson pushes her daughter, 3-year-old Novalise, on the swing in the Giving Tree School's Outdoor Classroom in Gill. FOR THE RECORDER/AALIANNA MARIETTA