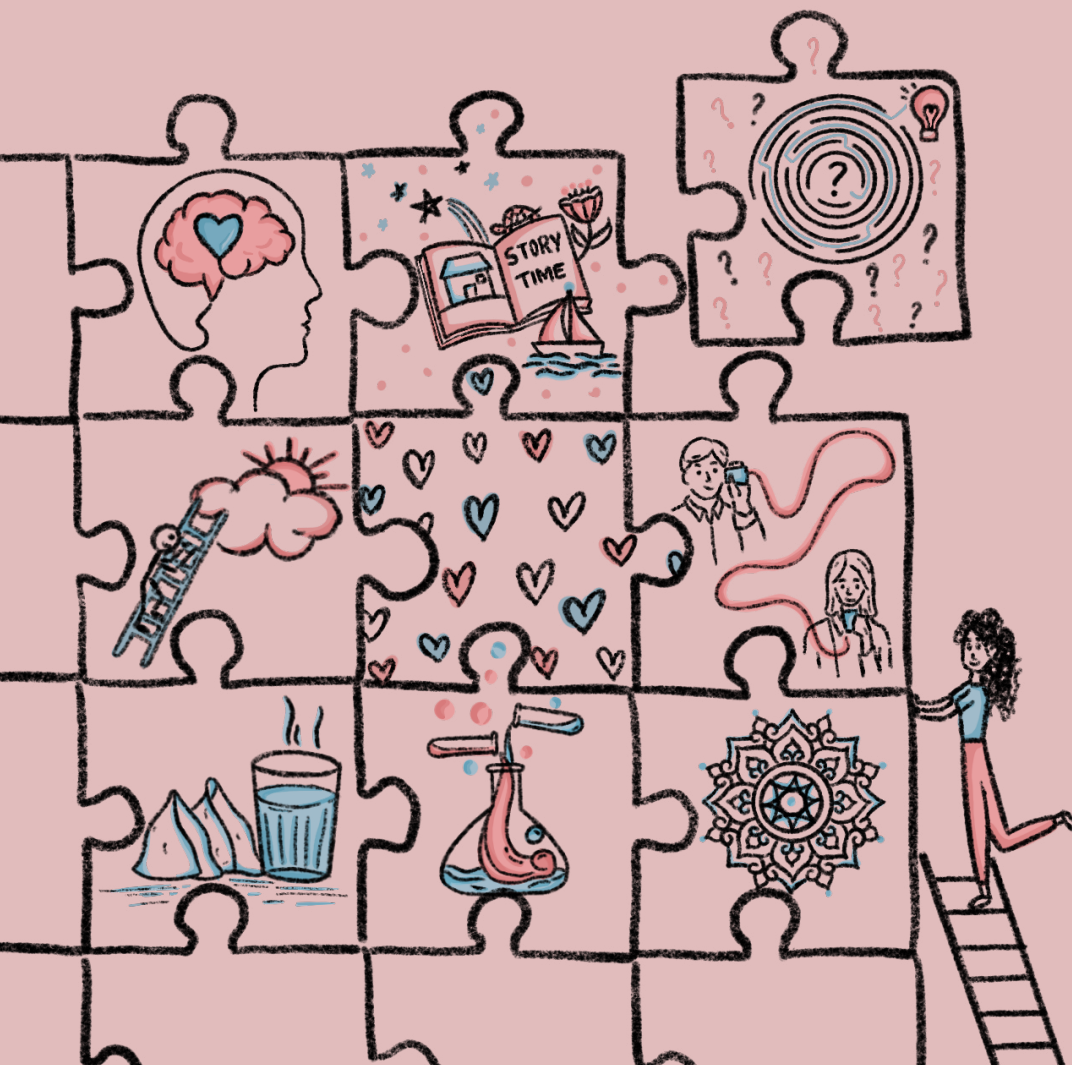


Addressing Challenges Faced by Early Childhood Educators: Insights from Papagoya's Learning Environment

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In collaboration with Papagoya Education.



Introduction

“Teaching has become de-professionalized in recent years. It’s not the profession it used to be, where people came in and had a lot of leeway to use their professional judgment to do what they felt was best for kids.”

(Christopher, 2022)

In my experiences as an early childhood educator over the last 7 years, there have been frequent encounters with people who simplify and minimize the teaching profession. Comments like, “Oh, you play with kids. Sounds like fun,” or “Oh, that’s it? Must be easy”, provoked frustration. These comments not only overlooked but also undermined the numerous challenges that educators face. While some challenges are universal and common across educational settings for both young and older children, others are unique to the individual and the organization they work in. Challenges can either be enduring or evolving. Some of the

challenges that educators face are, dealing with structure and rigidity in curriculum; physical and mental burnout; availability of teacher learning materials; relevant training, and conversing with parents. These indirectly affect the workplace and the relationships with children. Despite all of this, the fundamental reward of teaching hasn’t changed. As an educator, there has been a personal motivation to the difference that can be made in a child’s life.

“Even though the past two years have been exhausting,” says Conklin, “what refreshes me is being with my students.” (Christopher, 2022).

For certain challenges, there are solutions that early childhood environments and individual educators provide because of the love of educating children. These solutions are for either short-term, solvable issues or long-term, dynamic solutions.

The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness among people who are not kept abreast of the challenges; the extent and the work it takes to make an early childhood educator. As with all professions, this paper will make a case for teaching and address certain highs and lows. The paper will take five challenges that are supported by research as well as Papagoya’s perceptions of challenges, coping mechanisms employed, and the organizational support they (the educators) receive. To collect data for these five challenges and solutions, research was conducted through discussions with the founder and fellow educators. These discussions are verbatim statements from conversations with fellow educators and the founder at Papagoya. These statements aim to capture and present their perspectives on the challenges faced and potential solutions within the learning environment. This primary research was complemented by secondary research to gather additional data on challenges and potential solutions.

Challenge I: Flexible and Adaptation Challenges within a Rigid Structure

A teacher shows up to class with materials prepped. Today, they will learn about halves and quarters (fractions). The lesson has been reviewed and approved. The bell rings and the children show up. ‘Halves’ and ‘Quarters’ are written on the board. The teacher starts to explain the meaning of



these two concepts through diagrams. As the lesson progresses, comments start. ‘This is boring.’ ‘Change it.’ ‘Why do we need to learn about this?’ ‘I wish we could have more time to play outside.’ The teacher panics. This lesson was pre-approved and ready to be shared with the children. ‘I got all the materials needed. What can I do if the children find it boring? It’s difficult to change the lesson suddenly. I will just tell them that they will lose their playtime if they continue to make a noise.’ Unsure of what to do, the teacher says “You just have to learn.” They continue to say it’s boring. ‘Change it.’ The teacher panics but is resolute. The classroom erupts into chaos until they are silenced by the loss of playtime.

Take the same scenario but this time the teacher responds differently. The teacher asks the children how to make it less boring. The teacher notes down their suggestions and changes the class. They make halves and quarters out of objects in the classroom. Or the teacher immediately thinks of a game and changes the lesson plan on the spot. They get wooden blocks to make different shapes and then identify halves and quarters within a time frame (as a quick game) There is a different atmosphere surrounding the classroom now. Both, the teacher and children have become participants in change.

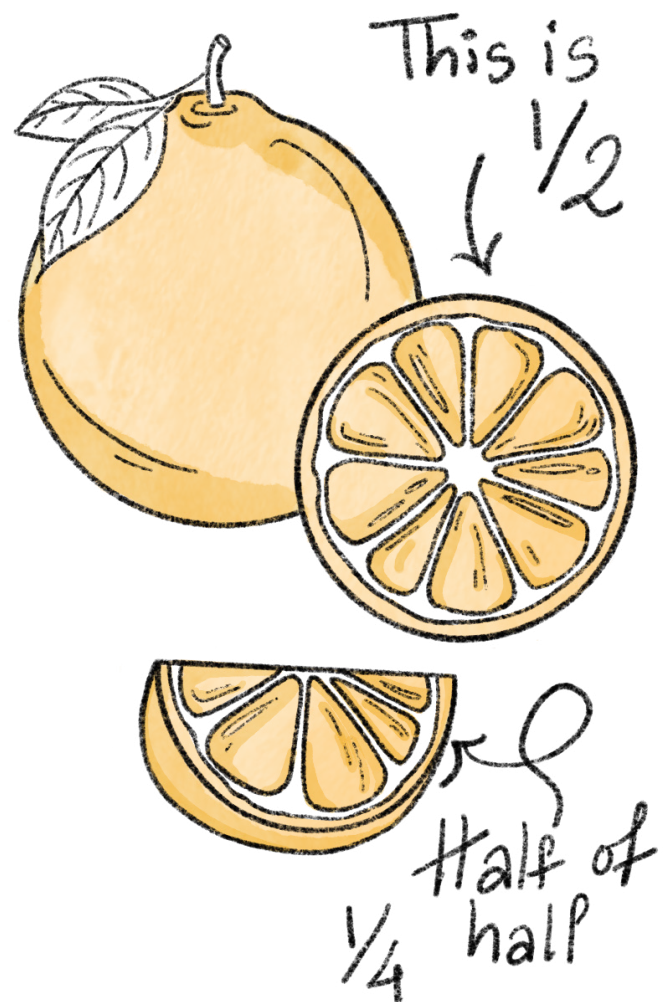
This anecdote is based on my initial experiences as an educator at Papagoya. Most of the time, I was the panicky teacher who did not know what to do because the children claimed it was boring. I wondered if there was room for a sudden solution in such a situation.

Research shows that teachers accustomed to rigid curricula and strict structures (Martlew et al., 2011) find it challenging as there is no room for flexibility. Educators who wish to be playful and joyful in the classroom are sometimes uncertain about what kind of approach they can use to engage children in learning. (Smith, 2015) They found it hard to create lessons on the fly or were frustrated when there was a sudden policy change (or in schedule) One common challenge was that educators found it hard to commit to creating flexible learning arrangements. This made the difference between those who wanted to stay and those who were committed to being early childhood educators (Burstein, 2020)

Solution I: Advocating/Propagating/Supporting Flexibility in Educational Environments

‘Exploring Flexible Working Practice in Schools’, a report published by the United Kingdom’s Department of Education mentioned reasons for teachers requesting flexible working opportunities. This reflected the perceived benefits, namely improved work/life balance and being able to meet family/care responsibilities. Benefits to schools have been found to include the employment of a more diverse range of skills and experience, reduction in absenteeism, increased productivity, potential reduction in staff turnover, and valuable support for succession and retirement planning. These appear to be particularly notable where small team-based approaches have been adopted. These include co-designing timetables and rotas, and regular collaborative reviews of flexible working schedules. (Department for Education & Research, 2019)

Being flexible is important for educators to navigate change. In an interview with Larry Feralzzo, Sheila Wilson mentioned that the ability to be flexible is important because rigidity can create stress and can likely



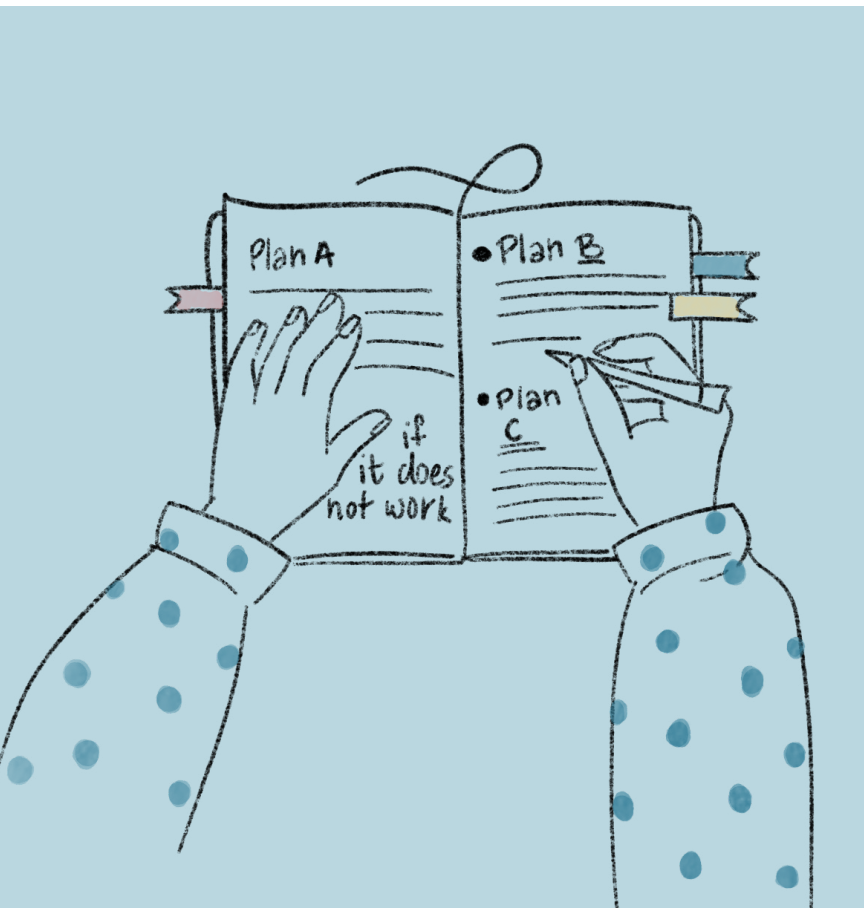
impact your health, your passion for the work, and your relationships with colleagues. (Ferlazzo, 2023)

Papagoya's educational environment advocates for flexibility and adaptability in the structure and curriculum. This is supported by the organization wherein they inform educators in the space to always think on their feet; be open to change and make learning playful for children. Curriculum goals are reviewed frequently and educators are often asked if they remain true to the goal of teaching children: remaining playful and joyful. To be flexible, educators on their own must be open to change. They must be open to this notion. For this to happen, constant challenges are always posed to educators, present and future, to be open to constant growth so that the educators can be the best they can be. In a conversation with a fellow educator, they shared their views on how this growth has benefitted them.

"Papagoya, I think, constantly helped me grow. They kept challenging me. Whenever I felt like ok, I should look for something else, they would give me a new role and boost my confidence. And I align with their philosophy. It's one of the best education a child could get at this age and Papagoya enables the Playmaker to be that educator who can deliver the best."

The support provided by the organization is vital wherein they support consistent conversation and open dialogue, with support from the head of the organization. In an exchange with a fellow educator, they communicated that "(our founder) helps you out if you are ready to have an open conversation, even in your worse circumstances." In this particular learning environment, the organization has also created a team of Leads for the educators. Fellow educators have a chance to relay any information, get their questions answered, and share any troubling concerns that they might have. These conversations result in constant check-ins with other educators to see if they can meet deadlines. The organization's support also gives educators a chance to band together and meet as a group twice a day. They gather every morning and evening in huddles.

Fellow educators at Papagoya gather every morning and evening to spend time together in our huddles. These huddles consist of Playmakers, who represent the age group that they are in charge of. In the morning, they meet in a big circle to go through the general flow of the day. During this time, if there are any changes in the schedule, it is shared. (For example, "I'm wondering if we can switch the bathroom run with the reading time today. Would that work?") After that, they break into smaller huddles (each huddle corresponds to the specific age group for which the educators are responsible) and go through specific lesson plans and activities that are to be done during that day. At this time, educators here, share if they are menstruating, if they have had a tough morning, or if they need some help navigating a certain lesson plan/activity. As a team, there is a certain motivation to stay flexible and adjust to any situation. For instance, it has rained the entire night and the outdoors is not suitable for the activity that was planned the previous day. In their morning huddle, they quickly check in as a team and discuss that particular activity and how it can be adapted for the children to participate inside the space. The team constantly bands together and adapts on the fly. They constantly challenge themselves to be aware of sudden changes and adapt when an activity/lesson isn't working at that particular moment. Fellow educators are ready to step in and help one another when required/needed. This also helps educators reflect on what they can learn from one another if they remain open to change. In a discussion with a fellow educator, they shared they "talk to other Playmakers and (I) try to gain more insight...





their feedback and their experience on how they solve it.”

In the evening, the educators here gather again in their smaller huddles (particular to their age groups). During this time, they discuss the highs and lows of skill building; activities; executing lesson plans; minor changes made by them in the schedule; playtime and moods of the children. After these smaller huddles, they gather in a bigger circle to talk about any relevant or current issue that poses a problem and requires a solution. For instance, there were days when educators would discuss a particular activity and why it didn't work out with their group of children. This discussion would involve what went well, why the activity didn't work out for their group, and the possibility of trying the same activity for an older age group. (Citing age as a relevant factor.) Often, stories are exchanged between the school and kindergarten that highlight the successes that were a result of adapting and being flexible in this learning environment.

Apart from the provision of morning and evening huddles, the organization meets with the team during the year to reflect on suggestions and changes to be made to the existing calendar. The previous calendar is evaluated and the new one places importance on planning and scheduling time. This happens because of the check-ins and conversations during morning and evening huddles; conversations with the Leads and meetings with the founder. The organization takes this feedback and inputs it into the calendar. An example of this was to allow for more planning time to meet deadlines. This also resulted in the creation of a sustainable and working timetable with more planning time. Structured deadlines were implemented for planning goals to be met

(concerning lesson plans, materials required, relevant activities to be conducted, and child observations) This continues to be a practice that is followed by the organization at the end of every academic year.

Along with changes in the schedule, educators in this learning environment are also given a chance to voice any relevant or needed changes to the curriculum. This increases their sense of personal independence and control. Creating a conducive and positive environment takes time and effort. It starts with recognizing that each individual is different and has a different story to tell. It is also fueled by the need to recognize that each educator has a voice and can be heard. In Papagoya, several chances exist for educators to share their insights and experience a sense of being heard. This allows for control over what thoughts they have on the schedule, curriculum changes, and how to be flexible in this learning environment. Educators feel a sense of control and ownership in this space. In conversation with an educator, they expressed a similar sentiment.

“We built this space together. There is a sense of ownership over kids' processes and the space itself. It comes more naturally to be on top of things.”

The challenge of being flexible and adaptive in a rigid curriculum structure and daily schedule calls for this solution. In Papagoya, the support provided by the organization is crucial wherein they support and recognize that each educator has something to share; their feedback is vital and they also provide space for constant growth through change. The organization challenges educators to ace change and grow to be more open, which leads to educators being more open to flexibility and adaptability to function within this learning environment.

Challenge II: Mental Health and Burnout

According to a 2022 poll, nearly half of all preschool teachers admitted to experiencing high levels of stress and burnout. (Asasher, 2022) According to a study done by the Childcare Education Institute, since early 2020, 8.4% of the workforce that pertains to taking care of children left their professions. This led to staff shortages that even affected those teachers who stayed during the pandemic. (Asasher, 2022)

Playing and teaching children all day and being an educator can produce a variety of concerns: being constantly aware of the child; playing inside and outside with the child; having constant eyes on what they do; their moods and emotions; whether they nap or not; what kind of food will they eat; if they will drink water; their interest in the activity planned, etc. In a conversation with a Papagoya educator, they revealed that “Children under 3: there is a lot more stress. You have to watch them more consistently.” Along with this, Papagoya educators are also a part of different conflicts that occur on and off the field. A Papagoya educator shared that “Conflict resolution (between children) is hard. I can’t figure it out... Approach towards conflict resolution and the balance between being too soft or too harsh is hard.” Educators in this environment have to often play the judge, jury, and executor. This is hard and it becomes quite taxing.

Along with these challenges, educators here have their challenges. They can be dealing with a personal struggle; female educators may be on their period; a sudden sickness or various moods that are brought on when interacting with children. Impending deadlines, finishing lesson plans, and a lot of schedule changes can lead to burnout. In a conversation with a Papagoya educator, they shared the challenge of facing a lot of changes in the schedule. This leads to a result wherein “we sometimes bite off more than we can chew”.

Solution II: An environment that has the organizational support of prioritizing educator well-being and mental health



Research shows that workplace environment was one of the biggest driving factors in the well-being of early childhood educators. (Kwon et al., 2021) There is evidence that having more resources, positive co-worker relationships, and supportive administration lessens ECE stress and burnout. (Zinsser et al., 2015)

To create a positive and supportive environment, this organization prioritizes mental health, comfort, and educator well-being. A conversation with the founder of Papagoya revealed that food was an instant source of comfort (especially when feeling tired) Food influences the production of neurotransmitters (our body’s chemical messengers that are

constantly carrying messages from the gut to the brain) (Sawhney, 2021) At Papagoya, each educator is provided with four meals that are taken care of. Along with the children, they have the morning snack, lunch, and evening snack. Additionally, each educator gets to have a snack. These snacks are voted for by the educators. Being aligned with Papagoya's philosophy gives a chance to the parent community to support educators and organizations and aid in creating a positive and conducive work environment. An illustration of this is when parents have the opportunity to share food they've prepared with the educators.



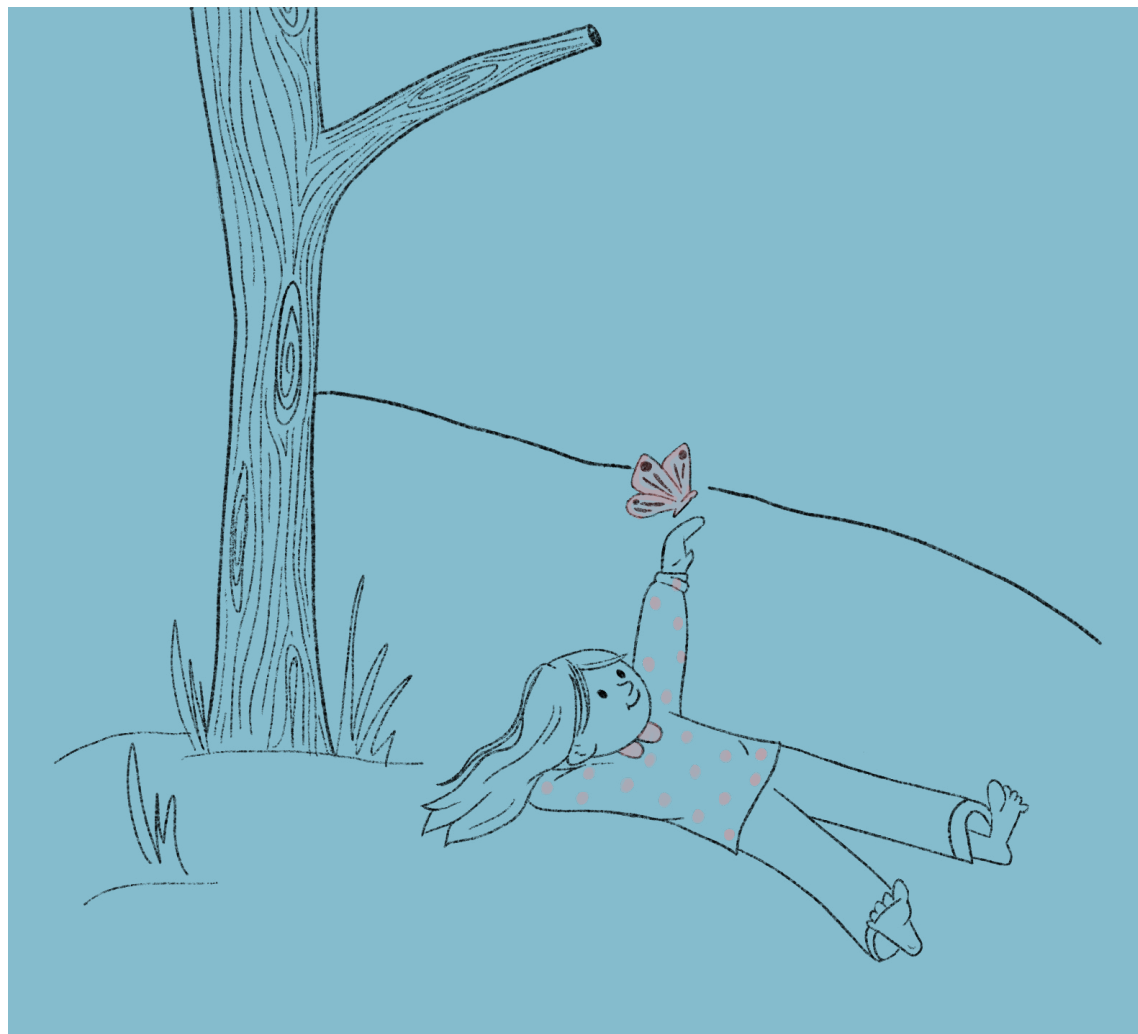
Along with food being a source to boost mental health and a conducive work environment, this organization encourages educators to spend time with children. The

philosophy of Papagoya is centered around the child. This calls for educators to provide and ensure a safe and secure environment. This child knows that this is their second home. A fellow educator mentioned in a conversational exchange that spending time with children brings happiness. "Children need attention, care and love no matter how advanced we become or reach to moon. Also spending time with children and working for their healthy development brings satisfaction. It gives happiness." This organization endears and supports educators to physically hold and comfort a child. A fellow educator shared with me the result of being surrounded by children.

"Their energy and warmth. Even on the heaviest of work days, there is a motivation to get through it because of the children that I am making a difference for. And I feel on the hard days, just dropping everything and just going on the field and playing is just refreshing, and it doesn't weigh you down because they genuinely want you, your presence, attention, and engagement. When you feel like you are wanted, it feels really good to go back to them."

This learning environment is close-knit, along with the children. As a result, children can sense when their educator is a bit down. This space allows for honesty and freedom while playing and conversing with the children to address mental health and burnout. The children are aware if educators' moods are different and have the freedom to inquire and ask how that particular educator is feeling. In a conversation, another educator echoed a similar sentiment. "They're very honest in their opinion, in their views and there's no filter. Sometimes we tend to lose out on being adults like being correct all the time..." Now and then, children walk up to their educators and ask them if they are doing okay. This kind of honesty and freedom results in a hug. The philosophy of the organization and learning environment encourages strong relationships to be built between children and educators. As a result, children are keen observers and sometimes will notice the educator and ask them 'You don't seem to be your usual self. Is something wrong?' This kind of attachment and care is created in a learning environment that allows for proximal contact, physical bonds of care, and honest and free conversations. The support provided by this organization allows for such a caring and honest environment.

This organization also prioritizes mental health and burnout by giving educators a chance to step out for a quick change of pace and place, when they are struggling with a particular challenge. As mentioned earlier, Papagoya educators meet in huddles to talk about the schedule and plans of a particular day. They are also



given the freedom to ask a fellow educator to step in and take their place. This happens when a particular educator needs a brief respite or a quick breath of fresh air. At times, an educator covers for another for brief breaks to regain a sense of internal equilibrium or change their frustrated mood. In this particular environment, educators can go find a corner in a room or step outside for a natural break. This ranges from going outside to be surrounded by the natural environment or go into a room to re-group. An educator cited an example wherein they said “I

look at the sky or other

things for 5 minutes...”

Within this space, different educators are always working together. The organization gives educators a chance to get to know one another after they discuss work in their huddles. Since they work close together, there are times when other educators take notice of their peers who may not be feeling alright. At that particular moment, there is a quick check-in to see if they are doing okay. These check-ins and quick conversations happen when the children are taken for their bathroom break, when educators sip coffee or chai in the morning/evening; or, during their lunch breaks. Apart from these daily check-ins, there are regular check-ins by the Team Leads and founder during the week. Educators are prompted to regularly check in, aligning their actions with the practices demonstrated by Team Leads and the founder. In this learning environment, educators know that they can reach out for a hug from fellow educators and children when they need to regain a sense of internal equilibrium. Team Leads constantly reassure the team that they are always there for support, especially in situations that can lead to burnout. One example of this is when children do not respond to cues or listen to what educators have to say. As mentioned earlier, there is a constant assurance that educators can share their struggles and challenges and find some solace. Team Huddles provide opportunities for brainstorming and collaboration to address challenges posed by a challenging child. This assurance and mutual support helps the team navigate through these situations, preventing burnout from being the main worry.

Apart from stepping out for a quick change





of pace, this organization provides certain physical strategies in the daily and weekly schedule to continually create an environment that prioritizes mental health. Exercise is seen as a strategy to help balance the physical and physiological imbalance. Every Friday, Music and Movement takes place at the kindergartens. At school, the children and educators have a dance party. This is a good boost of serotonin and dopamine and there is a feeling of rejuvenation and relaxation. Relaxation techniques also help in achieving an internal sense of equilibrium. It may further alleviate the causes of stress and tension. Doing yoga, meditation, or just focusing on your breathing helps. Along with Music and Movement, Yoga is also done with the children. The focus of Yoga centers around a story that an educator narrates. This story is interwoven around different yoga positions. Another provision is Quiet Time. Along with the children, educators get a chance to relax, rewind, and find peace in the silence. This benefits both children and educators, helping them find a semblance of internal equilibrium. As mentioned earlier, educators are given a chance to voice out their concerns and doubts. Apart from schedule changes, they also get a chance to talk about their feelings, both positive and negative, especially if they are experiencing burnout. Since they are allowed to get to know one another in their huddles, educators feel that they can be candid with one another without the fear of judgment, ridicule, or fear of suspension. This is advantageous as it establishes a channel for self-expression. Within this community of educators, a support system has been cultivated, serving as an ever-present source of comfort and encouragement for fellow educators to rely upon.

A previous practice that occurred in this learning environment was ‘Mental Health Mondays.’ The organization supported this practice to help educators work on their mental health and possibly provide a solution for burnout. On a Monday evening, educators would finish their huddles and then regroup in a big circle to participate in an activity related to a peer’s interest. The main goal of these activities was again, to find internal equilibrium and achieve some kind of peace. An example of a shared activity was a ‘Mandala Monday.’ Different genres of music accompanied the educators in painting a mandala. Educators, along with the founder shared that this was calming and helped them regain their emotional balance, and how this helped them with their mental well-being. Unfortunately, this practice didn’t last long as it became a fixed schedule, and regular follow-ups were done so that educators would share their interests. It lost the meaning from being a joyful collaboration and it became a task-oriented activity. The goal of finding peace was not achieved.

Another approach (which has existed in this environment for years) is spending time outside this learning environment. An educator shared this with me, saying that “having fun with the team is very stress relieving.” This practice is supported by the organization. Titled the ‘Social Fund’, one educator is responsible for collecting a little fund every month from the educator community. The organization then matches this amount that the fund has collected and the team is allowed to design their fun team

experiences and outings. This fund is used for team bonding and collective enjoyment outside the learning space. This helps in regaining a sense of internal equilibrium and bringing the educators closer together.

The challenge of addressing mental health and burnout is met by fostering a learning environment supported by the organization, aiding in coping with solutions. The organizational support enables and encourages educators to openly discuss their concerns and factors, contributing to burnout. From the founder to the Team Leads and fellow educators, these solutions above have proved to help in achieving an environment that prioritizes the educator's sense of well-being.

Challenge III: Lack of relevant Teacher Learning Materials(TLMs)

School teachers in India normally manage large classes with limited resources(TLMs) This can put them under pressure. (Mehta, 2023) Educators of different schools'(in India) mention that schools lack relevant teacher-learning materials. This isn't limited to Anganwadis but to schools as well. There are TLMs provided to educators but are not used because of a lack of knowledge of the usage of such materials or because these materials do not serve a purpose for that particular age group. Most of the time, the TLMs find a place in the cupboard or the highest shelf because it can be a hassle to use. Even if (TLMs) are available, they are deemed inappropriate, inadequate, and underutilized, and children are not allowed to use them (Reetu, Renu, & Adarsh, 2017) A study conducted by Ashaver, Igyuve (2013) in the College of Education in Benne State- Nigeria revealed that there exists a sufficient collection of teaching-learning materials, however, the lecturers rarely use TLM in classroom teaching. In some cases, TLMs are not used by the teachers which leads to students remaining passive participants of the learning process. (Okobia, 2011)

The issue of educators not being able to prepare TLMs also poses a notable problem. Markandeya (2016) followed a study in the primary schools in Solapur District (Maharashtra) which revealed that the teachers were not skillful in preparing the TLMs.

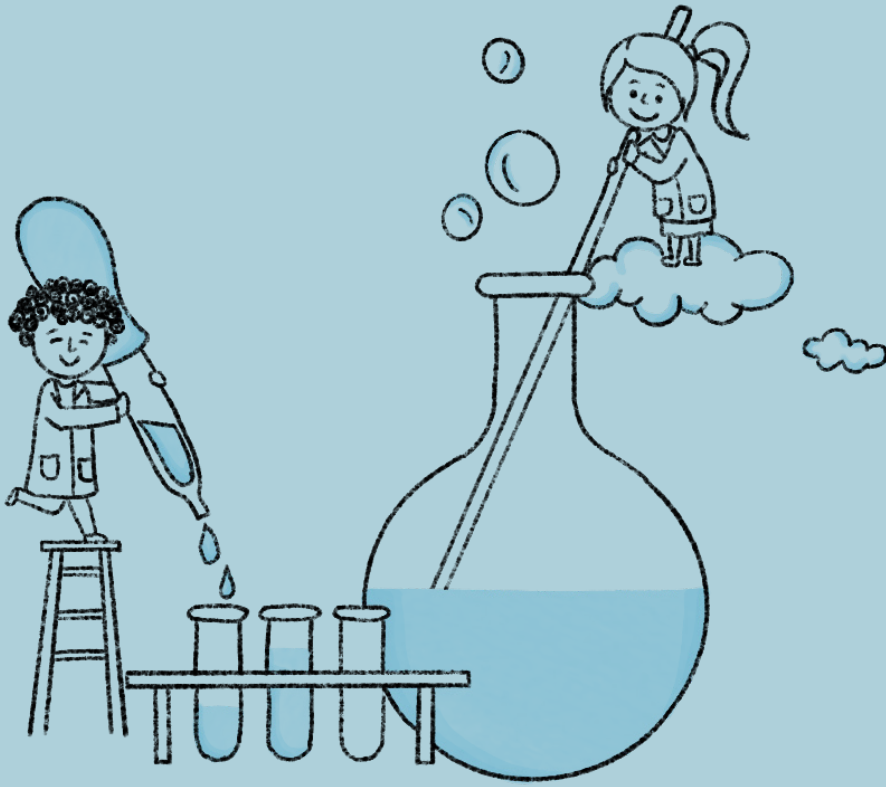
Solution III: Facilitating an Environment for Innovative and Relevant Teaching and Learning Materials (TLMs)

A survey study in the secondary schools of Mandleshwar, Khargone M.P. revealed that low-cost TLM of Science like Science Picture, Books, Charts, and Diagrams were used by the teachers of Government and private schools. 65% students of in Government schools and 70% students of in private schools had accounted that their teachers regularly used teaching-learning materials of Science during Science classes.



(Shri, 2013) Teachers were able to use TLMs because they were accessible and available.

The support provided by this organization contributes to the growth of educators by finding/locating and creating innovative and researching relevant TLMs. Papagoya educators are encouraged to locally source and find relevant TLMs that will aid in lesson planning and practice. The founder provides opportunities for educators to use the local bookstore (in Papagoya's case- the local bookstore is called Lightroom) to source books based on a particular theme. This is not limited to just one bookstore. If educators come across educational content through an Instagram reel, Facebook post, websites (Amazon, Tulika, Pratham, etc.) bookstores, or stores, they are encouraged to check in with the organization to see if it's relevant and then can pick it up. Books that are selected range from a particular theme, emotions, and feelings, or a learning tool for English,



Math or Science.

Apart from books, the purchase of other learning resources is supported by this organization. Papagoya uses Slack, the community workplace application for all official communication. One of the working channels is called #noticeboard. The purpose of this is to share any Instagram reel, blog post, LinkedIn updates; new research around Play, or a picture of a book/place/experiment/activity that can be done with the children or with the educator community. There is consistent motivation from the organization (from the founder to Team Leads to other educators) to look for relevant blogs, Instagram content, and Pinterest to gather inspiration for specific themes; build on skills (English, Math, and Science); create the layout for a new theme or opening day at Papagoya. There is a chance to curate a list of items that can be used for TLMs. In fact, in the last month of the academic year, one day is devoted to curating a year-long buy list that consists of TLMs, resources for teaching, and relevant digital learning sites. What is kept in mind is that these materials support teaching and educating children in a playful and relevant manner.

Along with sourcing TLMs, educators at Papagoya are asked to create innovative learning resources. A prerequisite to creating TLMs is to use recycled materials. To contribute to their ongoing growth, educators are constantly challenged to think outside of the box. Since educators work closely together, they lean on one another for ideas and prompt thinking. An approach provided by this organization is the provision of a 'Working Saturday' (once a month). These days take place in different centres. These days are known as 'Planning and Learning Saturdays' and serve multiple purposes: brainstorming for a new theme; thinking of relevant activities that support the theme as well as skills related to English, Math, and Science as well as as creating innovative and relevant TLMs (revolved around holistic and kinesthetic learning) Learning is intricately woven into the organisation. It promotes that it is okay to let a child know when they don't have an answer while simultaneously nurturing curiosity among the educators themselves. Educators are encouraged to be open to new learning opportunities and build their personal vault of learning and content. In this regard, the founder encourages educators to delve into research for TLMs. They are urged to explore pertinent research and seek out suitable resources. An example of a previous experience is research for the Solar System theme in kindergarten. Different groups of educators shared their knowledge through

Mac
&
Cheeze!



engaging methods. An educator explained the complex concept of the Doppler effect (which occurs when stars orbit and are either pulled toward or away from the Earth) by using a toy car to represent a specific planet and wooden blocks to symbolize other planets. Additionally, some educators creatively employed recycled egg cartons to demonstrate the formation of craters on the moon.

Sometimes, working Saturdays consists of having sessions based on the interests of the educators or different ways of learning methods for teaching children. This leads to new ideas for TLMs. They may not all be tactile but can be physical. An example of this involved two external facilitators who demonstrated Capoeira (the Brazilian form of self-defense). Educators were

able to learn about ways of attaching words to different actions/cues. ('Banana' meant a sudden freeze with support from a beam or a tree trunk.) These cues proved to be communicating tools for the educators to use on and off the field to get the children's attention. As mentioned earlier, the Papagoya philosophy allows parents to be a part of and contribute to the learning of their children by supporting the Papagoya educator community. They also are given a chance to share new and innovative TLMs or teaching/learning resources for children. One example of this is when the organization invited parents from the Papagoya community. Known as the 'Looru Club', they involved educators in an interactive, hands-on session that provided a comprehensive overview of the history, current status, and prospects of Bengaluru.

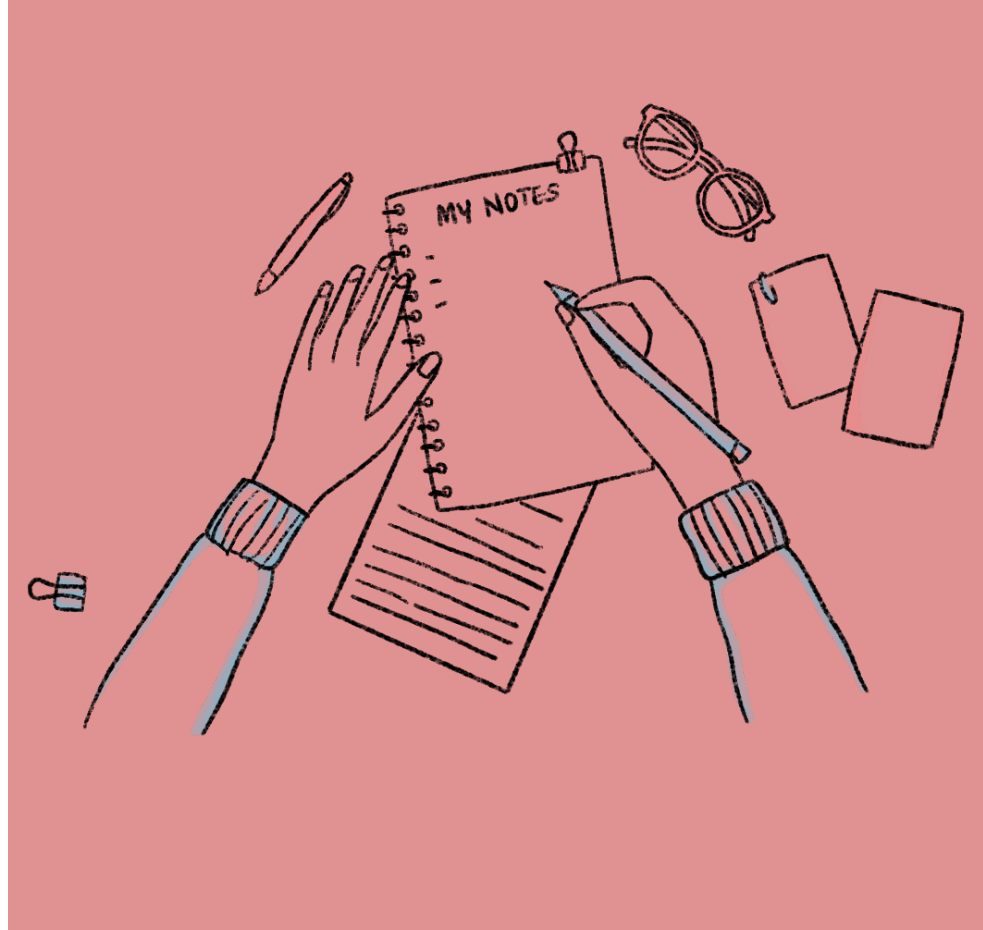
The challenge of relevant TLMs is met with the solution of support provided by this organization to allow and encourage educators to find and create relevant, innovative, playful, and creative TLMs that will benefit the children and educators alike, to teach a concept. The support from the organization has proven to be a learning aid for structuring lessons around creative and innovative TLMs. This in turn leads to new ways for teaching. The National Educational Policy calls for creative methods to teach children. Therefore, the organization at Papagoya continually supports new and creative ways of teaching.

Challenge IV: Lack of In-service training

'Challenges Pre-School Teachers Face in the



Implementation of the Early Childhood Curriculum in the Cape Coast Metropolis', a study done by Simon Ntumi, College of Educational Studies, Ghana, provided evidence that preschool teachers do not receive enough in-service training concerning early childhood curriculum. Most sampled preschool teachers for the study agreed that their school administrators do not organize frequent in-service training for teachers to be current on the new trends in the early childhood curriculum. (Ntumi, 2016.) Teachers training and knowledge were linked to their behaviour regarding the quality of education. The quality of teacher-child relationships was also linked to training in ECE. (Manning, Garvis, Fleming & Wong, 2017)



Educators need to be constantly in the loop for fresh, innovative methods of educating children, across different age groups. In the Indian context, educators from government schools and Anganwadis complain that along with being a teacher, they have other responsibilities that are answerable to the government. As a result, they spend less time teaching and more time advocating and promoting government causes (Especially during election season) Even the Supreme Court of India directs the Government not to engage teachers in non-teaching assignments except for duties concerning election, Census work, etc but despite this, teachers in India, especially teachers under the Government management, continued to be engaged in non-teaching assignments. (Mehta, 2023)

As a result, most educators are not able to keep up with the changing landscape of education. With the onset of the pandemic, teaching had to be revolutionized and evolved to facilitate online learning for children. Online resource materials are available and within reach of all educators. However, it is not being utilized because teachers are either not aware of online resources and materials or don't know its implementation. Another roadblock to the lack of in-service training is that the allocation of funds gets delayed which in turn makes the training programs non-existent due to a lack of the necessary resources. (Singh, Patel & Mishra, 2019)

According to the Unified District Information System for Education, approximately 56.5 percent of primary school teachers in India have received in-service training, while the corresponding figure for upper primary school teachers is 65.9 percent. However, these numbers exclusively reflect in-service training and do not account for pre-service training. (Foundation, 2023) In-service training opportunities are also a result of ideological differences. According to head teachers, education authorities, and management members, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of teachers is their responsibility; they can't help them with it. Teachers also demand that school administration support their CPD. Mandatory in-service training opportunities are only for government teachers. Teachers teaching in the private sector remain out of its orbit. (Tyagi & Pradeep, 2020)

Along with ideological differences, there is a lack of a proper mechanism for follow-up gains by in-service training opportunities for educators. It is reported that most of the in-service activities are irrelevant to the needs of teachers and do not care to know about how a teacher implements his/her enhanced knowledge and skills in the classroom. (Singh, Patel & Mishra, 2019)

Solution IV: Opportunities for continuous learning and training for educators

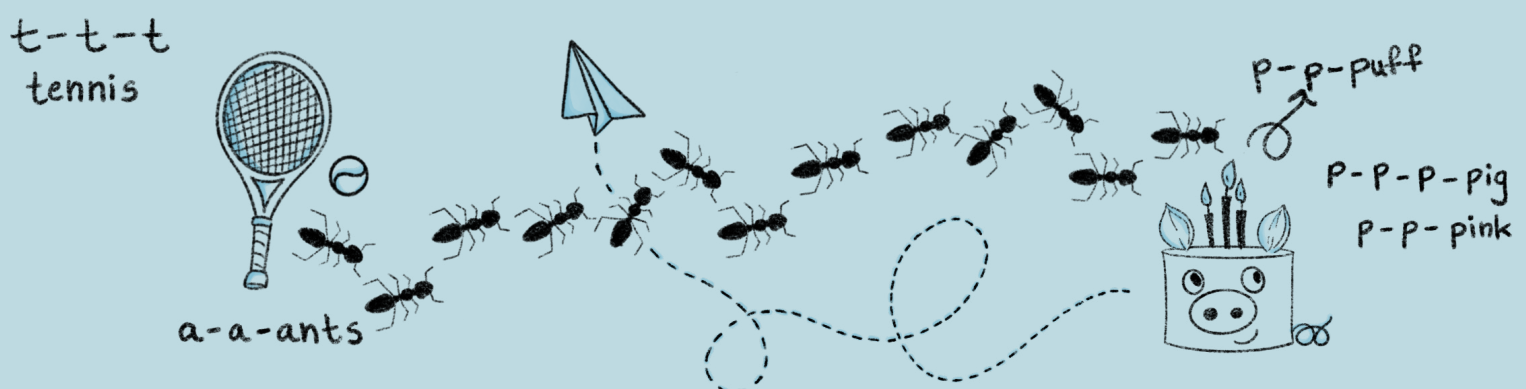
Development of teachers in an effective way to boost school education should be given priority and investment in this area at different levels is a must (Ibrahim,2017) A study by Singh and Mohanti (2012) revealed that (teacher) training had a significant role to play on productivity.

In-service teacher training programs are very important to maintain the teachers' motivation and their professional development (Gorozidis & Papaioannou, 2014). In-service training sessions can be in various forms, for example, workshops, conferences, educator meetings, etc. Teacher motivation and in-service training are important factors to maintain the effective teaching process. Hence, it might be interesting to know the role of these in-service teacher trainings in improving teacher motivation and professional development.

Fisher (2013) also argues that it is important to teach new skills to teachers because, otherwise, they will not be able to deal with a generation that is learning more outside the classroom. It is also proposed that the teacher be exposed to the training to know the new pedagogic ways, innovations, and emerging trends in teaching, and how they can implement them in their own classrooms (Ramatlapanana, 2009)

The challenge of the lack of in-service training calls for a solution that allows for opportunities for continuous learning and training for educators. Organizations and educator communities should be kept abreast of new and transformative ways of teaching and educating children across age groups. As a part of the changing educational landscape, this is essential. At Papagoya, the organization provides various learning and training opportunities for the educator community. An example of such opportunities is training workshops (both online and offline) A previous opportunity was when the organization conducted a Jolly Phonics training workshop on one of the Working Saturdays. This workshop presented educators with a chance to learn about different phonic strategies, various songs for the different letters, and distinct learning approaches one could use as educators. The previous summer, the entire educator community got the opportunity to participate in the virtual 'Power to Play Summit' as a part of the Fairy Dust Teaching organization. The Papagoya organization took care of this three-day virtual workshop. The educators were introduced to different educators, facilitators, and stakeholders in the field of education. The topics ranged from how teachers play to materials educators can use during play (especially recycled materials) and even detailed the importance of a name; regaining autonomy and making and building environments suited for play. This year, the school educators were given a chance to sign up for the Cambridge Teacher course (that was provided for by the organization)

As a part of their continuous support, this organization advocates for educators to come from a diverse array of professional backgrounds and careers. Apart from new training opportunities, the organization revisits the philosophy of Papagoya to the educator community at the beginning of each new year. Educators are reminded of the philosophy and are encouraged to use this approach while creating lesson plans and activities. The environment is cultivated in a way wherein the organization invites fellow educators to share any upcoming webinars, seminars, or discussions that would benefit the team. Educators are also encouraged to find courses that might interest them for their professional development that in turn will always benefit the organization. Papagoya will find ways to monetarily support them. Two previous



examples are from an educator who did an upskilling Early Childhood course for a year and another educator who attended a three-day music workshop. The former mentioned how it “was really interesting to see even though we were all from different places in the world, our struggles were so similar. It helped quash a lot of images that I viewed children through and helped me question approaches” while the latter mentioned how play-based education and music education “resonated deeply with the Papagoya philosophy, and I found alignment with insights gained from the workshop.”

This chance to share their learnings continues to build a sense of trust in fellow educators’ professional judgment. This empowers them to also know that their voice is being heard. This organization creates an environment that motivates each educator to infuse their personality and knowledge into interactions with fellow educators and children. While conversing with an educator at Papagoya, they spoke about having

“a lot of creative freedom, and our opinions always matter.”

This arises from having the opportunity to be able to ask questions or raise queries whenever one is stumped or needs assistance. As mentioned earlier, the Team Leads and founder are always around to help and assist previous and present Playmakers with any doubts that they have.

The challenge of lack of in-service training is addressed through a solution that establishes an environment supported by this organization, providing diverse learning and training opportunities. Within this learning environment, the organization advocates for pertinent and up-to-date in-service training opportunities through webinars, supporting participation in online courses, and facilitating access to both online and offline workshops. These engagements not only involve and benefit this educator community but also contribute to maintaining the philosophy of teaching through play, fostering continuous growth among educators.

Challenge V: Conversing with Parents

In an interview with Jessica Winter, Michael Thompson mentioned that there’s a sad paradox in the fact that the pandemic increased the amount of contact between many teachers and parents at the same time that it spiked the tensions between them.

“Over the last twenty years, parents have become much more anxious in their parenting. For these parents, the pandemic was an anxiety factory. Then school went back to being a place where they couldn’t be there.” (Winter, 2023)

Schools often don’t have formal policies around parent-teacher communication, so expectations are unclear. (Winter, 2023) As a result, educators are uncertain about how to approach parents when it comes to discussing the child. (especially when they have to address a situation where their child is hurt; or was involved in an accidental altercation) As a result, the educators’ body language may reflect their mood. Their tone might change and they are suddenly unsure of what to say. Sometimes, the educator is ready for a parent conversation but it takes an unexpected turn when a parent has been caught at an inopportune time and is not ready for a conversation. Very often, this could lead to raised voices or being unapproachable. In a conversation





with a Papagoya educator, they mentioned that “talking to parents is hard... when you’re conveying not-so-positive information, how do you frame it? Messages are hard. Where do I put the punctuation or the smiley face so it isn’t harsh.” As a result, this can shake the morale of an educator and steer the whole conversation in a different direction. Research states that majority of the preschool teachers complained about the attitudes of parents (Ntumi, 2016)

Solution V: Cultivating an Environment of Ongoing Training for Effective Parent-Educator Communication

The Ministry of Education published ‘Guidelines for Parent Participation in Home-Based Learning During School

Closure and Beyond’ in 2019. This provided a framework for parent participation in education. There was one section that was dedicated to parent-school partnership and it mentioned how schools and parents should converse with each other.

In a 2021 study of a socioeconomically diverse group of elementary schools in Hawaii, participants said that the most positive and constructive exchanges between teachers and parents happened through informal, face-to-face conversations, of the kind that occur at drop-off or pickup or school events. (Chappel and Ratliffe, 2021)

The organization at Papagoya provides a framework for conversing with parents. As a part of the philosophy, educators’ initial days are spent in training to gear up for parent conversations. This is done through observing parent communication at drop-off or pick-up between past educators, Team Leads, and the founder. Along with this, there are sessions provided that detail what to say and when (what is suitable for a morning gate conversation vs. an evening gate conversation); sensitive topics (on occasion, the founder is included in such conversations); and, what might be difficult to verbalise to parents. The educators here are trained and told that they can never take a child’s name with a negative connotation. They are encouraged to maintain the same tone while talking to a parent. If a Papagoya educator feels like a conversation is not reaching a positive result, they are given a chance to tell the parents that they will get back to them. Educators here are made aware that they can immediately approach the Leads and ask them to step in to finish the rest of the conversation. (This is done with prior knowledge and information exchanged between the specific educator and the Team Lead, detailing what that particular parent conversation will entail) Across centres, old and new Papagoya educators maintain discretion while sharing conversations with their Team Leads and the founder.

Another practice was a nascent one that was introduced by the founder. This year, they conducted a mock session of talking to parents. The older educators, Team Leads, and founder acted like hypothetical parents and the rest of the team had already selected an issue to converse with that “concerned” parent. The issues ranged from a specific child not using the restroom after lunch; an incident of accidental negative play; a child not participating in anything during the day because the child wanted to go home. This session helped educators navigate different types of parent conversations; remind them of the importance of body language, maintaining composure, and refraining from becoming defensive in their tone, even in moments of provocation.

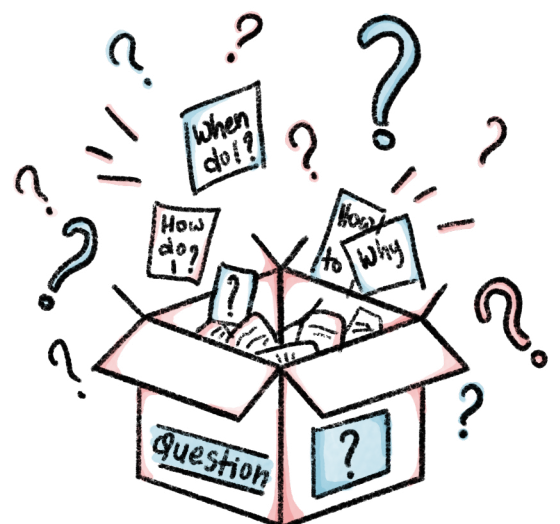


As a part of the frequent check-ins provided by this organization, Team Leads, and the founder, Papagoya educators are given a chance to have conversations about parent communication. In this learning environment, educators are encouraged to converse with at least two different parents each week. Every week, the founder meets each team (School; Kindergartens; Team Leads) Apart from discussing curriculum, weekly goals, the work environment, and children, educators share struggles with certain parents and find possible solutions for the same. As mentioned earlier, there is no room for judgment and the founder listens to each educator. Educators are also constantly reminded that the founder has their back when it comes to any difficult parent conversation. This has been a source of comfort for educators, as they know they are constantly supported by the organization.

A previous practice supported by the organization was having a Question Box in one of the kindergartens. The purpose was to navigate certain incidents between

children and share the same with parents. Each week, educators would write down any question that they didn't have an answer to. Every day, one question would be taken out of the box and shared with the educator community. Since the organization supports educators' opinions, they each got a chance to share their input and a possible solution. This practice doesn't exist anymore but educators still get a chance to voice out any pressing concern (about parent communication) to their fellow educators; Team Leads and the founder.

The challenge of effective communication with parents is addressed through a solution that establishes an environment promoting ongoing training in this regard. This specific learning environment involves organizing mock parent conversation sessions, holding weekly meetings to address any challenges in dealing with specific parents, and ensuring the reassurance of support from both the founder and Team Lead to step in and assist in completing difficult parent conversations. Currently, the Centre Head poses a reflective question to the team. This promotes conversations around pedagogy, the day gone by, and suggestions for ways to better a particular approach.



Moving forward

Teaching children is not easy. It has its challenges as well as various learning opportunities. There is consistent effort put in by the educators and the organization. They are driven by their constant love for children and teaching, as shared by different educators. The purpose of this paper was to mention five challenges that early childhood educators face and offer tangible recommendations and successful solutions derived from the experiences of educators at Papagoya.

When an educator is open to learning and taking feedback, challenges become a little less to deal with. Even when surrounded by the thought of physically calming a child, relying on a tight-knit cohort of educators for support (physical and emotional); having the natural environment to take a breather, and allowing for a space to play and be with the child, this helps in dealing with challenges.

The teaching profession is a continuous learning process that requires ongoing learning and adaptation, keeping children and educators intellectually engaged. Educators create strong and meaningful relationships with their children, helping them navigate their formative years, by providing support and guidance. Despite the challenges of educators, this profession offers opportunities for experiencing intangible rewards, such as the joy derived from witnessing a child, who after a resilient effort, finally understands a challenging concept. In such instances, the intrinsic and unique worth of an educator makes it an exceptional and worthwhile calling.

As an educator, who has been associated with Papagoya for the last two years, this has provided an opportunity to be part of a learning environment that comprises of a supportive organization, encouraging teammates, and honest children. What helps is not having a highly competitive environment. Every child and educator is given the chance to be themselves and reflect their personality while being surrounded by children. In a conversation with a fellow educator, they reiterated the same sentiment. “At Papagoya we know each child deeply for all of their uniqueness by celebrating each of their varied personalities. And at all times setting them up for success and not failure, and not writing them off for the things they cannot do.”

My association with this learning environment notes Papagoya as a changing educational environment that is kept abreast of the happenings of educators. This environment is a space for continuous learning and is open to constant feedback from peers, children, and the organization to navigate challenges and hardships. In a conversation with a fellow educator, they shared that they

“have finally reached a stage where I’m so comfortable with the workspace, I have a lot of freedom to make decisions and also was able to explore different stages of being an educator.”

Despite the challenges that occur, the recommendation is creating a learning environment that is supported by the organization, which allows for constant communication, open dialogue, trusting professional and personal judgments, finding time to relax and rejuvenate outside the work environment, assurance of leaning on one another during hard times, being surrounded by the love and comfort that children provide, and exploring ways to revisit our innate child-like qualities and rediscovering the motivation behind our role as educators.



Notes:

A Lead is a fellow Playmaker who is in charge of a particular group of Playmakers. They are normally centre-related and age group-related.

Playmakers are what educators are called at Papagoya.

Skill Building refers to educating children in English, Math and Science i.e. building their skills.

The National Educational Policy was established in 2020. It marks a transformative policy, replacing a three-decade-old framework, and envisions a modernized education system that transcends boundaries. It is a shift from the traditional 10+2 model to the progressive 5+3+3+4 structure.

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