

How an Intentionally Inviting Play Library Benefits Young Children and the Community

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Abstract

A qualitative case study sought to investigate the impact of a recently opened Play Library in Istanbul, Turkey upon the acquisition and development of literacy and creative reading culture for attending children and their families. The research was carried out among pre-schoolers from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds attending the Şişli Feriköy Kitap Okuyan Çocuklar (Children Reading Books) Play Library, which was the third Play Library opened in Turkey. *Kitap Okuyan Çocuklar* is a civil society group that works to establish local children's spaces, blending the concepts of play-centers, children's libraries, and family-centers as found in Western countries. The qualitative methods utilized during the research employed direct observation, interviews and questionnaires with stakeholders, which included librarians, children and their families.

Keywords: Children's libraries, Şişli Kitap Okuyan Çocuklar Play Library, diverse cultures, the impact of children's libraries, children, family involvement literacy, emergent literacy.

Introduction

Play libraries that have been recently opened could play a crucial role in young children's lives in Turkey. In order to see how a play library affects the lives of young children and their families, the researchers carried out a study of the Play Library located in the cosmopolitan district of Şişli in Istanbul to examine the Play Library's impact upon children's emergent literacy skills, socialization, and cultural sensitivity development. Located in what has been one of the most multi-cultural districts of Istanbul since Ottoman times, the Şişli Play Library offers a multicultural hub for families and children to promote creative book-reading, emergent literacy, children's artistic endeavours, cultural awareness, and imagination, while helping the children discover their interests. Even though there are hundreds of existing children's libraries in Turkey, a Play Library seeks to bring a new perspective. While traditional children's libraries serve to lend books, they only provide books, tables, and chairs. By contrast, a Play Library introduces regular creative reading sessions, art and craft activities, sensory play activities, play units such as kitchens, repair shops, and green grocers. The researchers observed the engagement of children within the Play Library in relation to development of their literacy skills, socialization, and cultural sensitivity. During the study, qualitative methods that included interviews and questionnaires with stakeholders as well as direct, on-site observations were conducted. Participating stakeholders included the librarian, children attending the Play Libraries programs, and the children's families.

Significance of the Study

One important aspect of this study was the realization of how Invitational Education theory and practice was embedded in the desire to examine the impact of intentional invitations upon the effectiveness of play libraries in Istanbul. According to Purkey and Novak (2016), as an imaginative act of hope, Invitational Education (IE) “is a theory of practice. It is designed to create and enhance human environments that cordially summon people to realize their potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor” (p vii). By understanding the nature of “signal systems,” practitioners of IE theory seek to “identify and change those forces that defeat human potential” (vii). Following the presentation of this study at the 2019 IAIE World Conference, the authors were encouraged to further reflect upon and explicate how Invitation Education theory and practice impacted the study and the development of play libraries in Turkey. This paper will therefore describe the genesis of the play library as an imaginative act of hope and how being an advocate of principles found in IE theory and practice helped identify and change the forces that defeat and destroy human potential. Essentially, this case study describes how the Şişli Play Library created and enhanced human potential. Ideally, this case study will provide insights into the connections that motivates us as human beings to bring about change for the better and to be able to touch others in a positive manner.

Background

Where and how did this case study begin? The study started off with a meeting between the two authors, Ms. Akçay-Duff, a civil activist who founded the civil society group *Kitap Okuyan Çocuklar*, whose purpose was to open Play Libraries in Turkey, and Dr. Edizer-Shine, a lecturer in Early Childhood Education in Istanbul Bahçeşehir University. As a civil activist, Ms. Akçay-Duff was busy trying to persuade local governments to open play libraries in an effort to support families and children from diverse cultures. It became clear to the writers that play libraries could provide an important service on multi-dimensional levels. In developing the concept for *Kitap Okuyan Çocuklar*, everything was imagined and designed to the last detail including: Support, emergent literacy skills, site placement, and the provision of a positive environment open to all people from diverse socio-economic status and cultures.

Play libraries are places where children can play and enjoy books. The Şişli Play Library in Istanbul includes a little stage and several learning corners. Parents come with their children to the Şişli Play Library and spend time there with their children.

The librarian that works at what is now the Şişli Play Library had some experience working with children having earned her baccalaureate degree in child development. The librarian sought to prepare developmentally appropriate activities with the parents for the children who come to the Play Library. Seeing greater potential, leaders of *Kitap Okuyan Çocuklar* documented every single detail and doggedly endeavoured to convince Istanbul government officials of the importance of play libraries. Having been convinced of the project’s potential, Ms. Edizer-Shine gave support to Ms. Akçay-Duff in convincing city municipalities to actualize the project. Financial support was won after emphasizing the crucial role that the Play Library Project would have in helping diverse children develop emergent literacy skills and for their family’s language development. As a mother, Ms. Akçay-Duff effectively demonstrated the positive impact a play library would have upon the diverse Istanbul community. As a result, several play libraries, including the Şişli Play Library, were established in Turkey. They all began through an imaginative act and an inviting mindset.

Statement of the Problem

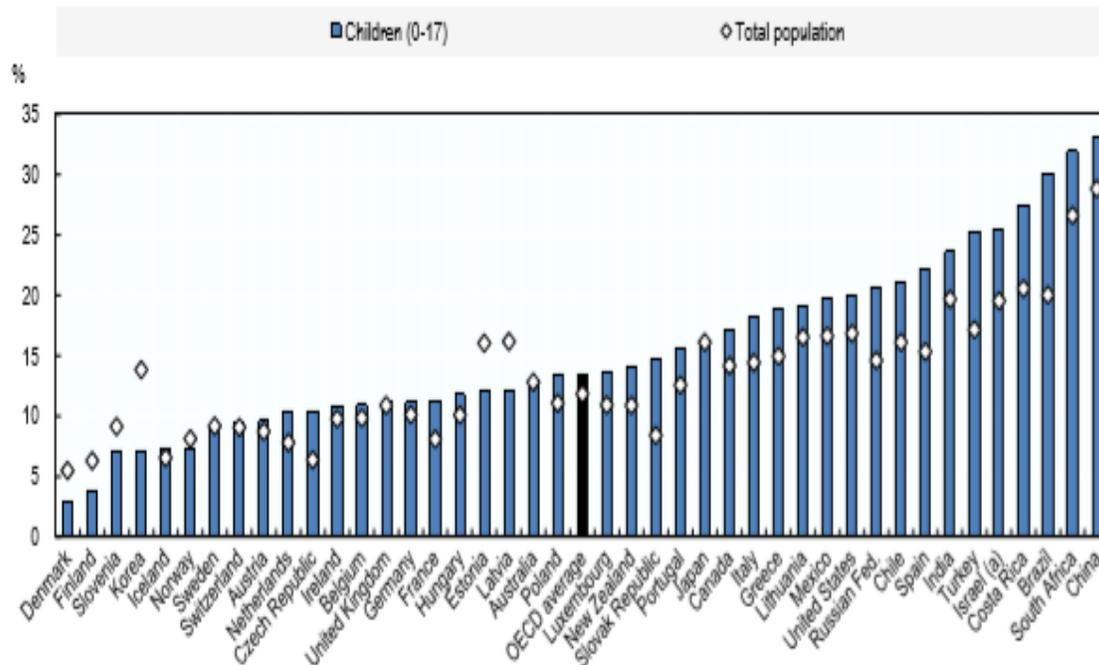
How did the Şisli Play Library Project change negative forces that have the potential to hinder human potential? One of the most important aspects of this project is that participating in the Şisli Play Library activities is cost-free and open to every family regardless of their socio-economic status. Conceptually, being free encouraged diverse participation and mitigated the negative impact that being from lower socio-economic status has on the opportunity for children and their parents to reach their human potential.

Research has documented the negative impact of being of lower socio-economic status upon children's potential and the positive impact of governmental support (Meyer & Wu, 2018). Being of lower socio-economic status in Istanbul is associated with deprivation and negatively impacts children as they do not have as easy access to learning and education as the children of families from middle or upper socio-economic levels. Poverty impacts children in many ways and leads to an improvised life style that has adverse consequences for children. Some of the visible negative impacts include hunger, emotional instability, health issues, and feelings of not being safe. Children in poverty also have more issues related to academic achievement, social and emotional development problems, and behavior issues (Caldwell, 2014). The health of an impoverished child can also be compromised through obesity. Obesity issues do not relate to overeating alone but rather to stress and unsafe living situations. As a result, children can develop immune and cardiovascular system problems and adverse developments that can also affect their neuroendocrine and cortical systems, which have further connection to ineffective learning and decision-making (Aber, Morris, & Raver, 2012).

According to a study conducted by the Bahçeşehir University Center for Economic and Social Research (BETAM), the rate of children in Turkey living in poverty is 38 percent. For 2016, an increase of 1.6 percent was observed. Therefore, based on the European Union standards for poverty used by the BETAM researchers, more than one out of every three children in Turkey live in poverty. As confirmation, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) chart below identifies the child relative income poverty rates for 43 countries as of 2015. Turkey ranks number six in the comparison. China was identified as having the largest percentage of children living in poverty. By contrast, Denmark had the lowest percentage of children living in poverty.

It was believed that play libraries could significantly impact the literacy and socialization of children living in poverty. The Şisli Play Library was conceived as a place where children and parents from diverse socio-economic statuses or religious backgrounds were welcomed. Regardless of race, ethnicity or even religious backgrounds, diverse people were intentionally welcomed to attend and participate in the Play Library programs. The Play Library's conception was consistent with an invitational mindset, that should consistently exhibit intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT). As such, children and parents would be greeted and welcomed into the Şisli Play Library and thereby encourage further participation in programs and activities. The goal was to ensure anyone walking through the door felt just as important and valuable as any other person.

Chart CO2.2.A. **Child relative income poverty rate, 2015 or latest available year**
 Relative income poverty rate (%), for the total population and for children (0-17 year-olds)



Note: Data are based on equivalised household disposable income, i.e. income after taxes and transfers adjusted for household size. The poverty threshold is set at 50% of median disposable income in each country. Data for China, India and the Russian Federation refer to 2011, for Japan to 2012, for Brazil to 2013, and for Australia, Hungary, Iceland, Mexico and New Zealand to 2014.

a) The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

Sources: [OECD Income Distribution Database](#)

Review of the Literature

Invitational Education Theory provides a framework for assessing and monitoring organizational climate. Rather than suggesting a quick-fix, the framework encourages ongoing vigilance before affirming sustained change. Vigilance is required because changing how a learning community operates requires transforming its people (Asbill, 1994). Reform requires systemic change, a metamorphosis, based on analysis of the people, places, policies, programs, and processes, which are collectively known in IE literature as the 5-Ps. This structural analysis of climate discerns whether any part of the whole is disinviting (Schmidt, 2007).

Intentionally inviting behaviors, as exhibited by leaders, optimize an organization's climate (Asbill, 1994; Purkey & Siegel, 2013; Schmidt, 2007; Smith, 2015). An empirical study by Anderson (2016) increased understanding of how demonstrated or applied emotional intelligence behaviors correlate with the stakeholders' perceptions of the learning environment and whether certain emotional intelligence sub-skills more or less influence perceptions of the learning environment as related to IE theory. The organization's climate plays an important role in how stakeholders perceive a learning community (Anderson, 2017; Curry, 2009). Advocates of

Invitational Education theory and practices encourage rating the learning climate based on the five domains known as the 5-Ps: People, Places, Policies, Programs, and Processes. During development, the Play Library sought to evaluate the 5-Ps to optimize opportunities for children and their families.

Creating Opportunities for Human Potential Through Enhanced Environments

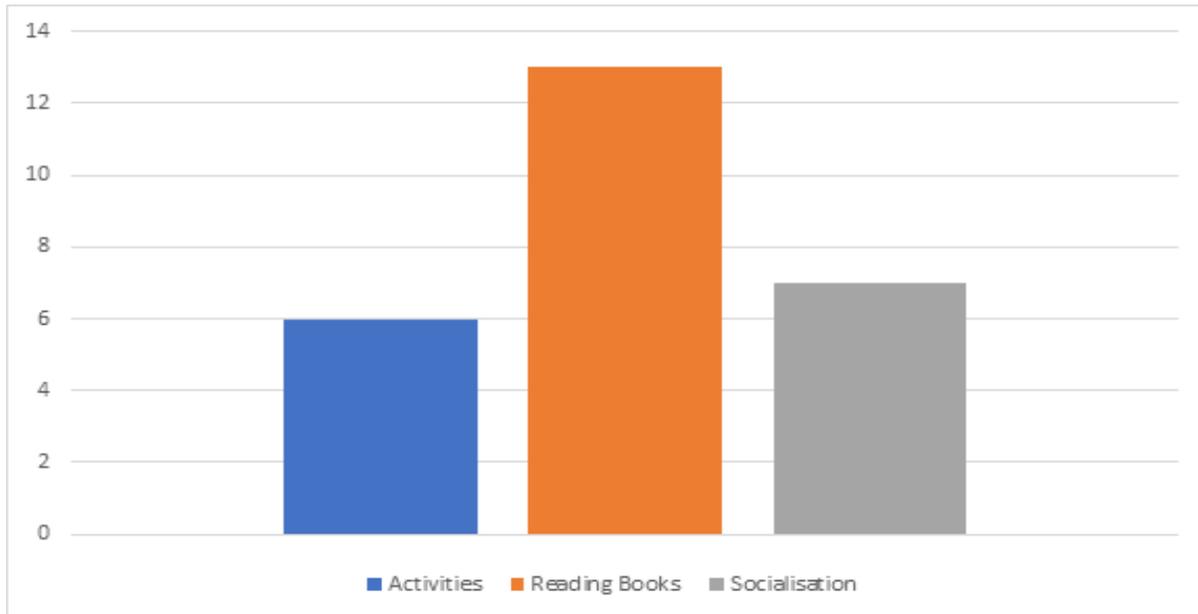
Early literacy skills are very important for young children's self-esteem development and future academic or economic success. According to the Academy of American Pediatrics (AAP), promoting literacy should be an important element of practice for pediatricians because reading routinely to young children stimulates optimal patterns of brain development (AAP, 2014). Routine reading also enhances the child-parent relationship, which in turn promotes language development and increases early literacy skills. Social-emotional skills are also being developed at the same time. This reading practice should begin during infancy (AAP, 2014). Reading to children supports early brain development as reading aloud to children at a young age helps children gain the knowledge that will later enable reading success (AAP, 2014). As a literacy development strategy, reading aloud to infants and emerging readers results in the child having a larger vocabulary and exhibiting more success in school. Crucially, children participating in early literacy activities develop a love for life-long reading and are more active learners. In the United States, one in three children enter kindergarten without the basic skills needed to be emergent readers (AAP 2014). As conceived, the Play Library would address these needs and provide enriched opportunities for children.

The Play Library itself is a developmentally appropriate space for children and their parents. Children begin to acquire literacy skills without even realizing it. The Play Library concept seeks to provide plenty of time for socialization, which would benefit the child in ways beyond language development alone. Therefore, the Play Library concept would seek to intentionally create an environment designed to enhance human potential.

Methodology

The scope of inquiry for this qualitative case study utilized direct observation and stakeholder interviews. This research method sought to address the statement of the problem. While a case study approach creates extensive limitations and is prone to bias based on assumptions, the researchers were able to collect significant responses from a range of stakeholders and conduct observations to more reliably identify how the Şisli Play Library project changed negative forces that could potentially hinder human potential. Following customary approaches for analyzing collected qualitative data, the researchers grouped the answers into categories. Responses to the initial question to stakeholders regarding the desired outcomes and benefits of the Play Library (Chart 1) were categorized into three areas: Emergent Literacy, Socialization and Cultural Sensitivity. For this case study, the researchers focused on the three major outcomes and subsequently analysed results through triangulation of qualitative responses collected during the study.

Chart 1: *What do you like most about the Play Library?*



Limitations

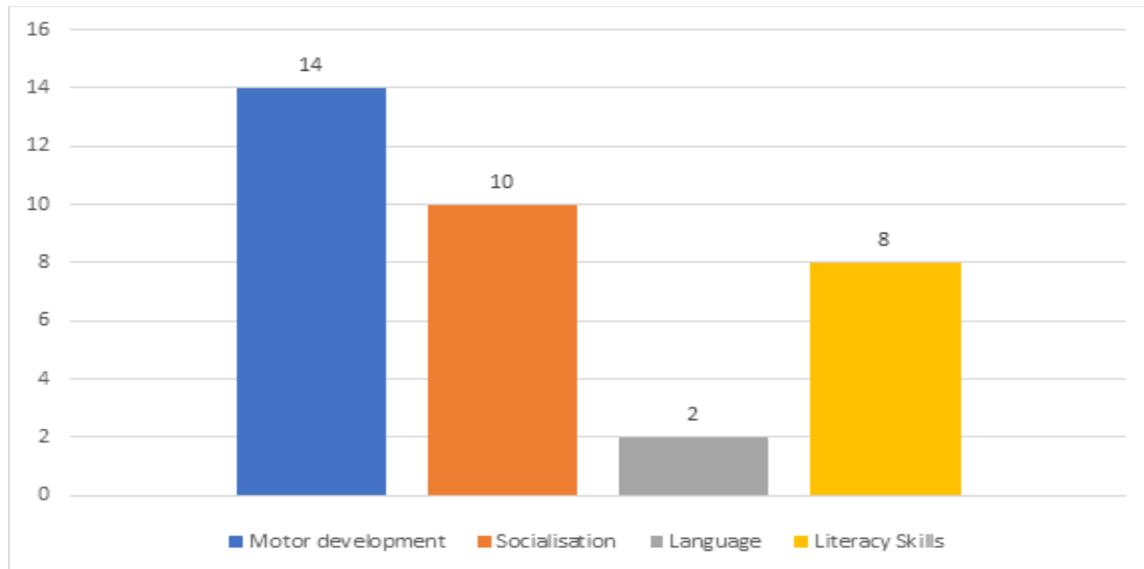
The outcomes of the research paralleled the expected results as assumed prior to the start of the research. As the interview and survey questions were asked to diverse stakeholders, a range of answers were inevitable. The innate limitations of this case study’s approach beg caution when interpreting results. Limitations adversely influence the ability to generalize this study’s results.

Results

Based on analysis of the collected observation and interviews, results would be described below graphically through charts and anecdotally through a narrative. Throughout the study, the researchers witnessed both children and families typically refer to the librarian as ‘teacher’ and the Play Library as ‘school.’ During a 2015 study of the first Play Library, located in the Asian section of Istanbul that opened in 2014, the researchers’ (Akçay-Duff and Edizer-Shine) impulse was to describe the phenomenon of parents not getting involved in organizing activities for their children or reading books in a creative way as one caused by a lack of motivation. The researchers’ perception was that parents passively expected the education to come from the system. The assumption was that passivity is why parents choose to use words such as “teacher” for the librarian or “school” for the Play Library. However, three years passed since the initial research in 2015. It seems parents have since responded to the intentional invitations conveyed by leaders and staff of the Play Library system and now feel empowered to participate in organizing the activities and actively reading books to children. Thus, the Play Library has moved from concept to practice and through the leaders and staff exhibition of I-CORT effectively created an environment designed to enhance human potential. The Play Library officer no longer needs to get involved in the preparation process of the activities nor the readings. Compared to their initial assumption, the researchers now believe the reason children and parents refer to the Play Library as “school” and the librarian as “teacher” is that the Play Library fills a huge gap in the need for free early childhood education programs. Therefore, while the Play Library’s librarian or officer is not acting as a teacher, participants still perceive the Play Library and staff as a caring, optimistic, respectful,

and trust-worthy authority and intentionally respect in kind. Chart 2 below identifies the kind of learning skills the parents felt their children acquire as a result of participation in the Play Library.

Chart 2: *How and what kind of learning skills does your child acquire?*



Results based on Initiatives to Optimize Emergent Literacy Skills

It is important to provide children with various opportunities to use language because this supports their language development (Cabell, Justice, McGinny, DeCoster and Forester, 2015 and; Justice, Jiang, & Strausser, 2018). Participating in the Play Library, children were given ample opportunities to speak. They spoke to each other, with parents, and with the librarian. They listened to stories, discussed the stories, and talked further during extension activities related to the story. Research has always demonstrated that language skills are associated with children’s ability to learn to read (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemer, Hammer, & Maczuga 2015). Research has also established that children who have strong language and vocabulary skills devote less mental energy trying to decode or figure out what a word means, which allows them to focus more on being fluent (Wasik, B. & Hidman, H.A., 2018) and comprehending meaning. The comment of one of the parents exemplified this reality: “This place helps a lot with my child’s speaking abilities.”

Reading aloud to children is one of the most critical activities that adults can do to nurture a child’s literacy development. Some of the major benefits of being read to include expansion of vocabulary and an improved ability to comprehend written language. Enthusiasm is developed as the reader models for the children, thereby allowing the children to become aware of story structure, different kinds of text, as well as diverse genres (Temple, Ogle, Crawford & Freppon, 2011). While participating in the Play Library, parents are encouraged to read a story to the children there. Positive literacy experiences were provided to the children in a variety of ways, such as singing, activities, drama, yoga, and art.

Results based on Initiatives to Optimize Socialization Skills

Socialization can be interpreted as the process to create cultural sensitivity within a community. It is arguably the first step when seeking to create a strong community. By participating in the Play Library, parents who did not know anything about each other began to

know more about each other as they were intentionally invited to communicate and collaborate around their children's development. The researchers found socialization not only develops around the children who go to the Play Library on a regular basis but even more strongly when parents accompany their children in the Play Library and become actively engaged. Observations indicated parents initially went to the Play Library so that their children learn, play and develop. However, the intentionally inviting concept of the Play Library encouraged and empowered families to optimize their potential. As a result, peer parents helped each other to optimize whatever can be done for all the children participating in the Play Library. Furthermore, parents learned how to read aloud to children, exhibiting creativity and intonation. Parents quickly began to organize the craft and art activities. The result was increased socialization skills for children as well as their parents.

Results Based on Opportunities to Become Culturally Sensitive

The interviews with the officer and the parents showed that children and families celebrated various religious and cultural holidays together. These included, Islamic Eid, Christmas, and Easter. Clearly, the I-CORT mindfulness exhibited throughout the Play Library optimized an environment that encouraged mutual sharing, understanding, respect, and tolerance. Researchers observed that participation in the Play Library resulted in people from diverse backgrounds and cultures getting together and doing something useful in the best interest of their children. Ideally, the tenets of Invitational Education displayed through the Play Library help people demonstrate that true peace can be created and sustained when children's needs are given utmost consideration. The Play Library officer remarked that many foreigners expressed their satisfaction and appreciation for such a welcoming place existing within Turkey. Foreigners seemed to have an easier time adapting because the Play Library offered them a place to establish contact with locals and spend time together.

Conclusion

The researchers focused on three of the major findings related to this study. These were increased cultural sensitivity, improved emergent literacy skills, and optimized socialization skills. It is believed developing these areas as a result of participating in the Play Library benefited not only children but also their families and overall community. The researchers determined that the Play Library helps to empower participants. As a result, they socialize, develop children's activities and literacy skills, and become more aware of the value of cultural diversity.

The researchers determined that the Play Library provides a support system. Families share their problems and have free consultation for their children's development. They have a place to develop social solidarity.

The researchers determined that the Play Library fills a gap in early childhood education. It allowed children to interact with books and talk about stories, which made the children realize that sharing books and talking about stories was interesting, fun and exciting. Henceforth, the first step in positive attitudes towards literacy is taken as a result of participating in the Play Library.

Researchers found it interesting to observe how both children and families referred to the librarian as 'teacher' and the Play Library as 'school.' This observation should be considered evidence that the Play Library concept fills a gap in early childhood education in Turkey. It is beneficial when the librarian comes from a child development background. It is important that all stakeholders practice tenets of Invitational Education to ensure a child-friendly, intentionally inviting perspective is sustained throughout all developmentally appropriate activities.

Recommendations for future research.

Another Play Library was opened in 2019 in Şişli. The newest 250 m2 Play Library building is a certified green building with a green roof, solar panels and a permaculture garden to raise awareness on sustainable energy and ecological values. It also has a specially-designed “Emergent Literacy” learning area, where children can get more familiarized with letters and writing. Future research will seek to evaluate the impact of having this specific learning area included within the fourth Play Library.

By 2020, more research assistants will be employed to regularly carry out thorough research involving the Play Libraries and the impact upon stakeholders. The additional personnel would require training so as to follow the developed observational protocols to optimize content and inter-rater reliability. Qualitative research software, such as N-Vivo should be utilized. Data-based monthly reports will document the children’s development in relation to emergent literacy and socialization as well as families’ level of awareness regarding cultural diversity.

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