

## *A Cross-Cultural Experience: Support for Under-served Children in China versus the UK*

This summer, I had the opportunity to engage with two organisations supporting under-served children in different cultural contexts, offering me insights into how education, therapy, and creative expression are approached across China and the UK. Initially, I initially worked with icandance, a UK-based organisation that provides dance sessions for children with disabilities and special needs. My original plan was to create a video documentary of the rehearsal process leading up to icandance's annual show in July, but due to health reasons, I was unable to continue with the project. Nonetheless, I was able to observe the sessions closely and reflect on how icandance empowers children and young people through movement, self-expression, and autonomy.

At icandance, each session follows a consistent structure, providing a predictable and safe environment which is particularly important for dancers with learning disabilities. For example, sessions typically begin with a team meeting and warm-up, followed by an "Are You Ready?" song, breathing exercises, finding parts of the body, and relaxation. As sessions progress, children move from simply identifying body parts to exploring movement, stretching, and standing in a circle to perform individual solo pieces. While the structure remains consistent, the way different age groups engage varies considerably. Observing these differences made me reflect on the balance between routine and flexibility: the structured environment offered security, but individual engagement depended heavily on each child's developmental stage and comfort level.

One of the most striking aspects of icandance's approach is the emphasis on autonomy. I had initially assumed that therapeutic dance would involve structured steps or exercises to teach particular movements. In reality, dance at icandance is far less about instruction and more about self-expression. Children are encouraged to lead parts of the session, and volunteers work one-on-one with them to support individual needs while promoting exploration. For instance, dancers may all receive the same prompt, but the overall

goal was not to make everyone perform the same move, rather to encourage them to move in their own way. This dancer-led approach challenged my understanding of “teaching” in a therapeutic context, highlighting that facilitating creative expression often involves guiding rather than instructing, and amplifying the child’s voice rather than overshadowing it.

With icandance, I also witnessed the profound influence of rhythm and music on movement. During a session with researchers from University of Roehampton, we experimented with drums to explore abstract emotions like loneliness. Some dancers initially found it difficult to express abstract feelings through movement, but when a concrete rhythm was introduced, many began exploring new movements, using parts of the body they hadn’t engaged before and experimenting with different paces. It was as if rhythm acted as a bridge, making intangible emotions tangible and allowing self-expression to emerge organically. I noticed that children were particularly engaged when the leaders invited them to create their own rhythm or movement, when they were each asked: “What is your move?”. This observation reinforced the idea that self-guided creativity can foster confidence and a sense of ownership in the activity.

Another observation was related to the level of physical contact and interaction. Younger children often engaged closely with partners, while older children tended to maintain more distance. This adjustment seemed natural, reflecting their developmental stage and comfort level. Overall, icandance emphasises inclusivity, self-exploration, and engagement on the child’s terms, which I found both inspiring and thought-provoking.

After returning home for health reasons, I began volunteering with Stepping Stones China, an organisation empowering migrant workers’ children and children with special needs through providing English, socio-emotional learning, and creative activities education. Unlike icandance, where movement is the medium of expression, Stepping Stones focuses on academic and social skills important for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, bridging educational gaps for children who face structural disadvantages. The beneficiaries include children attending under-

resourced schools in urban areas, “left-behind” children in rural regions who have limited access to educational resources and parental support, and children with special needs.

One of the most striking differences I observed between the UK and China relates to supporting children with special needs. With icandance in the UK, the organisation emphasised one-on-one pairings, which allowed volunteers to develop a deep connection with a child and foster trust over time. In contrast, Stepping Stones in China encouraged children to engage with multiple adults across sessions. This approach helps children feel comfortable engaging in a variety of social circumstances and with different people. Experiencing both approaches not only highlighted the strengths of each, but also revealed the possible cultural values underlying them: the UK model seems to emphasise deep, individual relationships, reflecting an individualist perspective, while the Chinese approach encourages adaptability and social resilience, aligning more with a collectivist mindset.

In English classes, I used movies and songs to make learning interactive and engaging, moving away from rote memorisation and encouraging conversation and practical communication. We played games that explored contemporary themes like artificial intelligence and descriptive storytelling, fostering creativity while reinforcing language skills. In socio-emotional learning lessons, I introduced topics not typically covered in Chinese schools, such as conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and stereotypes. Activities included role play, acting, and movie-based discussions to allow children to practice empathy and apply skills in real-life scenarios.

Crafts sessions offered an even more hands-on form of learning and relationship-building, particularly with children with autism. For example, I supported a non-verbal girl during a mosaic stool-decorating activity. I adapted to her pace, modelling tasks, waiting patiently, and using consistent cues to build rapport and trust. Over time, she became more engaged, interacted with me through shared gestures, and even led me to her mother at the

end of the session, which was a deeply rewarding moment that showed me the importance of patience, consistency, and meeting each child where they are.

Across both experiences, I reflected on challenges and tried to find ways to resolve them. Balancing the needs of multiple age groups, ensuring every child felt included, and managing the student-to-teacher ratio required constant awareness and adaptability. I learned the importance of switching between leading and supporting roles, observing how small gestures, patience, and encouragement could foster inclusion and confidence. Both settings highlighted the value of fostering autonomy and self-expression, whether through dance, conversation, or creative activities.

Though not initially planned, this summer's cross-cultural experience profoundly changed my understanding of education, therapy, and social support. In the UK, support for children with special needs is based on individualised attention, which nurtures trust and confidence, while in China, promoting interaction with multiple adults fosters social flexibility and resilience. Both approaches have unique advantages, and seeing them in practice allowed me to think critically about how cultural context shapes pedagogy and child development. Equally as important, these experiences reinforced my belief that supporting under-served children is not just about teaching skills, it's also about creating environments where children feel seen, heard, and empowered; and meeting the child where they are rather than trying to change them.