

# Seeds of Hope to Gardens of Potential

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## *A story of International Community Development*

Dawne Clark and Cassandra Skoworodko

What started as seeds of hope for the children of Sri Lanka after the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 has turned into gardens of potential of community development. “Community development is the process of promoting change, helping a community strengthen itself and work toward its full potential.” The Janoda Centre and its programs in Hambantota District have grown significantly in the last six years from four acres of bare land and a vision to two buildings, one housing a variety of educational and community programs and the second a two room preschool for three and four year olds. The future is filled with potential and opportunities for continued growth and expansion. As with many gardens, some plants dried up and did not produce any fruit but the gardeners continue to be vigilant, pruning and caring for the promising plants and fruit. Hard work and vigilance are starting to be seen in the fruits produced.

### **Background**

In January 2005, students from the Bachelor of Applied Child Studies at Mount Royal University (MRU) in Calgary Canada wanted to help after the devastating tsunami that hit the Indian Ocean, December 24, 2004. The students decided to visit the country of Sri Lanka and see how their experience and knowledge could support recovery efforts. Professor Dr. Dawne Clark started the search for a partner organization in Sri Lanka that had similar goals as the Department of Child and Youth Studies at MRU. Often, organizations in North America assume that they know best how to help people in impoverished circumstances but there are organizations on the ground who have an intimate knowledge of the people and their needs because they are the people. What these existing organizations need is access to resources, whether it be knowledge, experience, or finances to begin to make significant progress in their goals.

Mount Royal University and Sri Lanka connections started when Dawne met the visionary Karu Gamage. Karu is the founder of Janoda Foundation, established in 2003. Janoda Foundation “seeks to build educational networks locally and globally for educational empowerment, is committed to preserve cultural diversity and unity protecting the rights of all ethnic groups, and to conserve and restore the bio-diversity while enhancing the well being and sustainable livelihood of the people through educational empowerment.” When Dawne met Karu in the fall of 2005 Karu was in the process of increasing the services offered by Janoda to meet the huge needs of the people in the south after the tsunami.

While Janoda looked to support the Sri Lankan people in several different ways, it became clear that MRU and Janoda shared a passion for the importance of the early years. This shared passion led to

a Janoda/MRU partnership to provide education and support for preschool teachers and ECCD government field officers with a long term goal of developing lifelong skills among preschool children such as decision making, problem solving, confidence, and competence, hoping to give children the best possible start for their school careers, even with limited resources.

Preschool education in Sri Lanka has become a government priority. While the Sri Lankan government supplies children with uniforms and textbooks for primary school, many children in the rural villages lack access to the full potential of school because of the cost of transportation, services, or learning materials. Without proper supplies, the likelihood of success in school declines greatly. Quality preschool education is seen as a way to give children from rural areas a head start for primary school that may help to mitigate the lack of resources in other areas.

### **2006 – Seeds of Hope**

In May 2006, Dr. Dawne Clark, an assistant instructor, and nine students from Mount Royal University headed to Sri Lanka to work with Karu Gamage and four preschool teachers. The preschools were located on the southeastern coast in Tissamaharama and Hambantota, areas very hard hit by the 2004 tsunami. The focus of this first student visit was on helping children heal through play, as parents and the community were focused on reconstructing their lives and livelihoods. Two of the teachers had received preschool training through Sarvodaya (a large Sri Lankan non-governmental organization) and had a good understanding of play based philosophy. Their understandings made for an easy transition for the MRU students to better assist these teachers and their students. The students developed a resource manual for the teachers and conducted workshops on healing through play to help the parents and extended community better support the continued healing of their children. The various workshops focused on the importance of play and brain development, developmentally appropriate practices, team work between teachers and families, and techniques for literacy development when materials are limited (none of the preschools had any books or literacy materials for the children).

#### PuBudu, Sarvodaya Preschool – Tissamaharama





Above – The preschool building and playground

Left – After a couple days of observation, the MRU students introduced some toys made with local materials for the children to explore. This picture shows toys made using water bottles, water, and sparkles or oil.

Right – The MRU students introduced a parachute brought from Canada. The parachute sounds and moves in a similar way to ocean waves. The children loved determining how fast and slow the parachute moved.



### Preschool - Tissamaharama

This preschool was located in a brand new building funded by the son of the president of Sri Lanka. Two preschool rooms housed over 70 three and four year olds with one teacher and one assistant. Needless to say, so many children filled the rooms with little space for toys or other activities. However, Amitha, the teacher, enjoyed great support from parents and community members, who were keen to attend workshops conducted by the MRU students.



Left – This toy-making workshop introduced parents and community members to simple toys and literacy materials made with local materials to support child development.

Thisara, Sarvodaya Preschool – Hambantota



After spending two weeks in Tissa, it was time to move to two more preschools located in Hambantota. The preschool shown above was located in a temporary building as their original building had been destroyed by the tsunami. Most of the children who attended this preschool had lost family members or their home in the tsunami. One child in particular caught our interest as he was living in temporary housing with his aunt and grandmother. The leadership and resiliency this boy demonstrated captured our hearts.



Left – Again the MRU students provided a parachute for the children. They loved running under it as it come down.

Right – One of the centres the students used to support healing through play was the water table. As most children had developed fears of the ocean, this allowed them to play and take control of making waves. Here the children are exploring water using strainers and pouring containers.





Left –The MRU students put on another parent workshop to support healing through play. They also had centres for the parents to participate in focusing on cognitive, social, and physical development.

Below – During the workshop, parents had opportunities to play with the parachute and bubbles to explore how their children learn through play.



### Bringing the Story Back to Calgary Canada

After returning home to Canada, the MRU students and instructors were involved in several media opportunities to share the work they did in Sri Lanka and the effects that work had had on their personal and professional lives.

“When you have learning, you have knowledge; with experience, you have wisdom.”

“What you teach will be the people’s reward. What the people learn will be your reward.”

- Articles

- Healing focus on MRC trip to Sri Lanka, Newsroom, Mount Royal College, June 23, 2006
- Healing through play – MRC students build smiles after the tsunami, The Reflector, Mount Royal College, September 14, 2006

- Play helps heal scars from tsunami, The Calgary Sun, Date Unknown
- Students riveted by Sri Lankan experience, Calgary Herald, July 6, 2006
- Shaw TV ???

The Sri Lankan government declared 2006 the Year of the Child under the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Development. The Janoda Foundation was given land by the Sri Lankan government to build a child development center in the tsunami housing complex (Tsu Chi or Siribopura) in the district of Hambantota. Sadly, the ongoing civil war resulted in Canada instituting a travel ban and students from MRU were not allowed to travel to Sri Lanka. However, the partnership between MRU and Janoda continued.

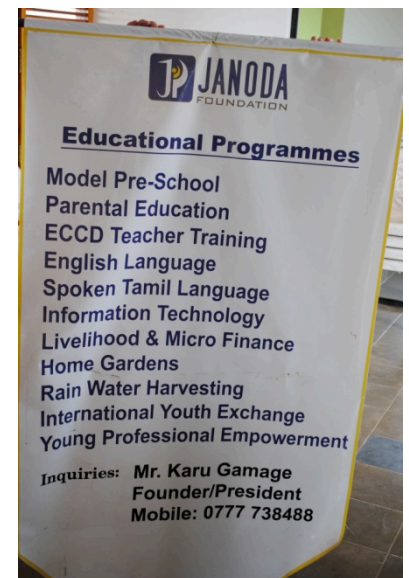
### 2008-2010 – Pruning the Garden

During the visit of MRU students and instructors, discussions began among Glynn Richards and Anne-Marie Evans from International Baccalaureate Overseas (IBO) Asia Pacific, Karu Gamage from Janoda, Sarvodaya Early Childhood Unit, and Dawne Clark with MRU to develop and deliver a preschool teacher education program based on learning through play. A curriculum was developed based on the Early Learning and Child Care Certificate offered at MRU and delivered in Colombo and Hambantota by IBO trained facilitators. During the two year program, Dawne made field visits to gather feedback on the training and how the program could better support the teachers. In 2011, IBO's strategic directions shifted and funding for the education program was no longer available. This was a significant loss as field visits in 2011 showed huge changes in the preschool programs, most especially in teacher efforts to support children's learning through learning centres and the use of a range of literacy materials.

Despite economic challenges, the Janoda Foundation has expanded and flourished. In August 2008, construction started on the Janoda Centre building in Tsu Chi, a village just outside the town of Hambantota. Tsu Chi or Siribopura was built to provide houses for those who lost their houses in Hambantota as a result of the tsunami and who have been displaced by the building of a commercial harbour.



Left – In June 2009, the Janoda Centre officially opened. The building houses a range of programs as described in the banner to the right.



## 2011 – Nurturing the Garden

In June 2011, Dawne and Cassandra Skoworodko (Child Studies graduate and current preschool teacher who had travelled as a student to Sri Lanka in 2006) returned to Hambantota to conduct workshops with government ECCD field officers and preschool teachers, and field visits with preschool teachers.



June 27 marked the official opening of the Janoda preschool building. The current preschool running in the Janoda Centre will move to this building in August and will expand with a second class at the beginning of the school year in January 2012.

After the opening ceremony of the Janoda Preschool, it was time to focus on the workshops for ECCD Field Officers and preschool teachers. Two one day workshops were conducted focusing on early brain development and learning centres. Twenty-five field officers and 37 preschool teachers attended. Donors from MRU provided funding for the workshops (including transportation, meals, and resource materials for all participants), teacher resources for a future resource room, children's books in both English and Sinhala and supplies (such as coloured paper, crayons, and pencils) for each participating preschool teacher, and learning materials (such as magnets, stringing beads, math materials, and felt story boards) bought in both Canada and Sri Lanka for all visited preschools.



### Workshop with the Government ECCD Field Officers (June 28)

In the morning, participants were given an introduction to recent science of early brain development with translation provided by Karu Gamage. To help explore how much children can learn through play, participants were taken through the process of making play dough, following a recipe, one step at a time. As they made and played, they were asked to describe what they were learning in each of the following areas: sensory, cognitive (math, science, language), emotional, social, and physical development. The most memorable moment was their looks of astonishment when they learned they had been playing for 45 minutes, from the start of making play dough until lunch. This activity showed how much children will learn through play with some adult direction.



In the afternoon, the field officers had free play time in the classroom at learning centres. They were shown how literacy can be included in each centre, the importance of organizing materials so they are more accessible to children, use of labeling (environmental literacy), and the need for unstructured time to enable children to explore. The ECCD field officers were able to experience learning and play through the eyes of a child. They also began to design a checklist to support teachers during preschool visits.

One of the centres was a “frustration table” designed to demonstrate how organization is key to providing effective learning centres. The ECCD field officers were asked to put together a puzzle from a jumble of puzzle pieces. It intrigued some enough to spend the whole play time trying to complete a puzzle. Even with teamwork, there was no success – not one single puzzle could be completed because of the many missing pieces. The field officers then discussed how lack of organization and proper storage and care for materials would frustrate children and not result in any meaningful learning.





## Workshop with the Preschool Teachers (June 29)

We were pleasantly surprised to have 37 preschool teachers attend the one day teacher workshop. The preschool teachers were introduced to the same early brain development science that the ECCD field officers had received. They were quite interested in the subject and asked for more information in another workshop.



After tea, the large group was divided into two small groups. One group discussed effective lesson planning and experienced the same play dough exercise as the field officers, while the second group had free play at learning centres in the classroom. After lunch, the groups switched.

Lesson planning was requested by one of the Janoda preschool teachers. She wanted to know how to expand each centre once it was first introduced. In the workshop, teachers were asked for a “Big Idea” which could be explored in each of the learning centres. For example, one group chose the “Big Idea” of animals and discussed the types of activities that could be explored at the science, environment, math, literacy, and art centers.



The preschool teachers also had the opportunity to explore the free play centres in the classroom. The discussions in this section of the workshop included circle time, reading books (teacher appropriate and child appropriate), organization and labeling, simple and effective rules for the classroom (Respect my friends and Respect my classroom), and English songs (as most preschools are bilingual). Each teacher was given a children’s book in either Sinhala or English and a resource book on learning centres which we had created.

## Fruit from the Garden

### *Preschool Teacher Support Network*

At the conclusion of the teacher workshop, a Preschool Teacher Support Network was established under the leadership of the Janoda Foundation. Each teacher attending the workshop agreed to observe, support, and mentor four other preschool teachers in her district. Communication with the parents was mentioned as an important role for the Teacher Support Network. The teachers were asked to journal what they had learned from the workshop and relay their new knowledge to the parents. They were further asked to journal learning centre activities at their own preschools and how those activities help develop the children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills, information which they will then share with parents and other preschool teachers. Future workshops and sharing of resources are planned to further support and help the preschool teachers, parents, and community. There are also plans to develop a teacher resource room in the Janoda Centre once the preschool has moved to its new facilities in August.

### *Preschool Visits*

After the workshops, to further support participating teachers in their environment, we visited four preschools in Tissamaharama and Hambantota. We had a bag of toys and learning materials for each preschool which had been provided by MRU donors.

### Janoda Preschool – teachers Chandra and Ransi



Left – The children at the math centre were using their creativity to make geometric shapes and count.

Middle – One little boy explored the felt board and started telling stories.

Right – Giving children responsibility and identity – the children put their name into an attendance board when they arrived in the morning before they started to play.

## Leila's Preschool – Hambantota



When we arrived, the children had just finished their snack and all the toys were put away. We introduced magnets, beads for stringing, and a felt board which we had brought from Canada as well as play dough from the previous day's workshop. We were thrilled to learn that Leila had held a parent meeting that morning before school to share the things she had learned at the workshop the day before. She had also written some of this new information on a bulletin board outside for the parents who could not stay for the meeting.

## Iona's Preschool – Hambantota



This preschool was eventually relocated from the temporary building we had worked in in 2006. However, it was no longer being supported by Sarvodaya.

Left – These teachers were already implementing learning centres and children were exploring on their own. When we first arrived the children were playing with puzzles and musical instruments.

Centre – One by one, we introduced new toys such as magnets to the children.

Right – As at the previous preschool, the children loved the stringing beads. One child had Down Syndrome so we ensured she had access to larger beads that were easier for her to manipulate. It was wonderful how quickly the assistant teacher got involved in helping this child with fine motor skills.

## Amitha's Preschool – Tissamaharama



This was another preschool that we had originally worked in in 2006. Amitha's school has grown even more and now has 80 three and four year old children. By the time we arrived, it was the end of the school day and some children were being bused home. For those children waiting for parents, we brought out our bag of toys and learning materials. The children were enamored by the new toys and most did not want to go home.

During our visits to the preschools, we were reminded why this work in Sri Lanka keeps calling us back year after year. The teachers truly want to learn and do their best for the children in their care. The children are so eager and joyful; their smiles light up their eyes and spread from ear to ear.

### A Special Experience – A Cow Release

The work we are privileged to do with Janoda Foundation is not the only garden in Sri Lanka; the seed of hope is being planted yet again...



On Canada Day, we attended a "cow release" at a preschool in a village, Embilipiliya, organized by the senior Buddhist monk of the Southern Province, Dr. Omalpe. One hundred and fifteen cows and water buffalo were rescued from slaughter houses and donated by Sri Lankan and Malaysian Buddhists to poor families in the village. A cow gives butter, oil, ghee, milk, and curd, all of which can provide an income for a family.

After the cows were blessed, the families were called one by one to draw their cow's number from a pot. There were overwhelming emotions of joy, relief, and hope in the air. What a wonderful way to celebrate Canada Day!

