On November 26, 2019, we interviewed Shannon Lockhart, associate director of the early childhood group at the HighScope Educational Research Foundation, where she has served in multiple positions over the past 30 years. We asked Shannon to tell us more about a few parts of the HighScope curriculum and approach and to provide a picture of what it looks like in practice.

1) I want to focus in on the plan-do-review method. Can you tell me briefly how it works?

HighScope continually updates our curriculum based on early childhood research that comes out. And we are updating the curriculum currently, on everything from new research on how the brain works to trauma-informed practice. So the curriculum has really adapted, and is culturally adaptable because the curriculum is being implemented in 10 other countries through the HighScope International Institutes.

But what sticks out for the field is the Plan-Do-Review process. PDR allows children to articulate their thoughts and ideas and put them into action. And once they are supported in the action piece, they come back and are able to recall what they just did.

The way the process goes is that teachers will use specific types of activities to help engage children’s minds. We help them to think further into the future about what they want to do, what materials do they want to engage in, what do they want to do with those materials, and is there anyone they would want to work with. This is about getting them to really think through about that plan of action and anticipate any problems that might occur or make predictions within their plans of action.

Once children make their plans they go ahead and follow through on those plans, which is the “Do” part of the process. At work time, children engage in their plans as teachers partner in their play. Teachers follow children’s lead and scaffold and extend on their learning. They are actively engaged in children’s plans.

From work time, children then come back to those same planning groups and teachers use similar types of activities to engage children in talking about what they did. So teachers are helping children to think into the past, (past the present) and talk about “how did you follow through on your plan(s)?” This helps to develop sequential thinking skills: “what did I do first, what did I do next?” The PDR process helps develop executive function skills like working memory and mental flexibility and executive function, by getting children to think past the present and back into the past expanding on their memory, building problem solving skills, planning and strategizing skills and more.

2) What kinds of conversation and talk do you typically hear when children are planning? when they are doing? when they are reviewing?

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It’s all about the conversations that teachers and children have during planning and recall times that build executive functions. It can’t be just a superficial question such as: “what are you going to do today?” It goes deeper than that. It is conversing about, “what do you plan to do and who with? What materials will you need? And what does that look like? How are you going to do that?” That is where you get into those strategizing and organizing ideas.

And for recall or review: It is a social interaction. It is about conversing with each other and hearing each other’s ideas: “I was playing in that area too.” “I was over there too.” You both were playing in the same area.” “Well, what did you do in that area?”

As children learn to plan and recall early in the year, it might be very vague. They might say, “Block area.” Or even just point. But when they understand planning and recall time, they use their language to express their ideas in more elaborate ways. So, as time goes on, we would expect those plans and recall conversations would become more complex, that we will be getting more language from them on what they are doing, what they want to be doing next and what they did do remembering back to their original plan(s).

So you might see, at planning time, a teacher say: “What is your plan for today?” “I’m going to the block area.” “Tell me what you will do in the block area.” “Me and Amari are making a race car.” “You are going to play with Amari and make a race car. What materials will you use to build your race car? “The big blocks and the steering wheel.” “What other parts will be on your car?” “We are going to make the exhaust?” “What will you use for the exhaust?” “I don’t know?” “Think about what an exhaust looks like. What materials in the block area could look like that?” “The long blocks” “So you are going to use the long unit blocks to put on the back of your race car for the exhaust?’ “Yes.”

So it’s about getting them to think about the materials and what are they going to make from those materials. And there is problem solving: if you don’t have the materials to make an exhaust, where else might you get something that could work? The idea is to get them to anticipate any problems that might come up.

We want children to predict and anticipate what might happen with their plans. So for example if the teachers put two different colors in the water table and a child plans to go to the water table, the teacher might say “we put blue and yellow coloring in the water table today.” The child might say, “I’m going to the water table to mix colors.” And the teacher would say, “What do you predict? What do you think is going to happen when you mix those colors together?” The teacher would listen to the child’s prediction and follow up at work time as well as at recall time by saying: “Remember that your plan was to mix colors in the water table, so what happened when you mixed blue and yellow together?”

3) Ideally, what would you see happening in a classroom if this part of HighScope is being implemented well?

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During planning time you will see teachers using different activities and strategies to get children engaged. And a lot of time we use materials that children use during the day and that will remind them of what they have done and what they might want to do.

It shouldn’t be a testing time. It shouldn’t be “what is this color? Okay, now tell me your plan.”

If I saw a child using the trains in the block area one day, I would bring that into the planning time for the child the next day. It’s vitally important that the planning and recall activities are directly connected to children’s plans and how we plan and get them to recall.

When it comes to work time, we would expect to see children following through on their plans, being actively engaged and focused because they are the ones making decisions about what to do and who to be involved with. Teachers are fully engaged playing as partners and scaffolding within children’s play. As children are supported and they continue to plan and play together, by mid- to-end of the year we would see more complex and cooperative play.

So you might see children whose ideas may extend over several days or even several weeks. You might find someone who is pretending to blow dry someone’s hair and it becomes a full-blown hair salon over the next few weeks. Teachers will observe and capitalize on what they see and extend children’s play so that it doesn’t become stagnant and look for books and materials that help them see past their present experiences.

We would also see children problem-solving with materials and sticking with it or even asking for help. And the teachers are not solving the problem for them but asking open-ended questions to help children solve the problem by themselves.

Another example is social problem solving: HighScope teachers use the Six Steps to Resolving Conflicts with children to help them develop the social skills to solving problems with others. When we follow the six steps, it involves all the children—not just the victim or the one that caused it—but both children or all the children involved in the conflict and work together to solve the problem based on children’s solutions.

4) Generally speaking, what do you look for in the interactions between teachers and students in a HighScope classroom?

Besides what we have talked about already, in our curriculum, we would want to see shared control. Children making child-sized decisions and teachers making adult-sized decisions. Primarily, teachers planning out the day and incorporating children’s choices throughout those plans.

For example, this could happen at large group time by asking the children how they want to move their bodies to the music. Or say “For this song we will keep the beat. How do you want to
keep the beat on your body?" A shared process is through incorporating child choices throughout the day.

And you want to see teachers forming authentic relationships through being down on their level and engaging as partners with them, having authentic conversations with children, not superficial ones. Teachers really listening to children and what their thoughts are. That is going to tell teachers so much more about who they are and what they know rather than testing for their knowledge. Also, you will see teachers encouraging children rather than praising them, encouraging them in what they are doing and supporting them in their intentions.