

John dewey and early childhood education

Education



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“ Education is not preparation for life. Education is life itself. ” – John Dewey (1859-1952) (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2003) The set of Desired Outcomes of Pre-school Education that the Ministry of Education(MOE) had put together in 2003 highlighted the significant importance of pre-school education being the platform for lifelong learning. It's intention were far beyond preparation of these children merely for Primary School curriculum (Wong, 2000). Very much alike to John Dewey (Dewey)'s quote, MOE's take on pre-school education exists similar context.

I felt that it challenges the perceived notion that education is only about getting the necessary qualifications or securing a good job. However, with an open mind, education in fact occurs throughout life. This brings about a few educational principles of Dewey which had influenced me in my workings with children in a pre-school setting. I felt that the central concept of Dewey's view of education was that there should be greater emphasis on allowing children develop problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, and being able to make decisions on their own, rather than simply on the memorization of lessons.

Through real life experiences, instead of merely being on the receiving end of secondhand information, children were able to develop the required skills effectively (Seefeldt and Barbour, 1998). Active learning has been widely advocated in my child care centre. I often incorporate and encourage it too. Let's say I will be teaching on the theme of occupation and doctors are the topic of the week. For the younger age group like pre-nursery and nursery, I would provide real materials like a doctor play set.

Children would be encouraged to explore these materials at their own pace and interests. They would be able to experience how it feels like being a doctor and thereafter get an insight of what a doctor's work scope is about. Concurrently, they would be exposed to the instruments that a doctor uses. I would also ask children open ended questions like " What does a doctor do? Which tool do you think a doctor uses to hear your heartbeat? If you are a doctor, how would you hear my heartbeat?"

I believe that such open ended question encourages children to construct their own understanding of concepts. I would also drop hints and attempt to spur their interest when children become uninterested and seem clueless. On top of these activities, for the kindergarten classes, I would introduce a " Doctor of the day" where the child would, alongside the teacher, assist in the daily temperature taking of children. This way they would understand the concept of what is taken to be ill and what is not, and also who should they visit at times when they fall sick.

I would also liaise with a nearby clinic and bring the children on a trip, getting the doctor to assist in giving the children a short demonstration of a regular consultation in the clinic. The children will not only be able to see how a clinic setting is like, they will also be able to pose questions to the doctor to find out more. Following which, I would plan for a clinic role play where children are free to express their own interpretation and ideas of a being a doctor. In tie with Dewey's avocation of active learning, this concept of learning has been strongly supported by the local context too.

In the Code of Ethics, professionals are obliged to promote and encourage children to be actively involved regardless of ability (Association for Early

Childhood Educators, Singapore, 2005). Dewey also advocated that the school is a social institution (Flanagan, 1994). He believed that through social interaction with adults and peers, learning would be further reinforced (Henniger, 2002). Communication with peers or adults allows children to think, process their thoughts into verbal words and therefore encourages and stimulates a child's thinking.

Interactive learning is also vital to social development. Being able to develop a positive and satisfying relationship with peers and adults is crucial for effective social interaction and is often a focus of pre-school programs (Early Childhood Teachers' Association, 2003). In my workings with children, I have realized the important role social interaction plays in a child's development. Children across all pre-school levels enjoy talking and interacting with each other over their thoughts, opinions and experiences.

One way I encourage this is by planning for problem solving in group discussions. For instance, the kindergarten children would be issued a problem at the start of the day: " What are the features of an insect? " They would then be divided into groups to explore the problem by going into the various learning centres I have set up to acquire the information. This can be followed up by bringing the children on a field trip to the Botanical Garden where children are able explore on the topic and make drawings and notes on their observations as a group.

At the end of the day, they would discuss about their gatherings again in groups, and then present their findings. Other than learning how to function as a member of a group, children would also be able to learn cooperative skills and conflict resolution through the activity. Besides peer interaction,

adult interaction plays an equally important role. In the Assessment of Licensing Standards in child care centre, staffs are to encourage interaction with children in order for children to be able to understand self and others (Ministry of Community Development and Sports, 2003).

In the pre-nursery and nursery classes, I take time to listen, make eye contact and respond to children. This makes children feel comfortable and it motivates them to interact more with adults. I would also plan for activities like dough play and painting on large papers where children are able to proceed with the activity together. Through such activities, they are able to discuss, comment and communicate with each other too. I would also ask questions like, “ What do you think Clarisse has molded?

Does it look like a sandwich? ” which allows for creative thoughts to be expressed and interaction to take place. Dewey’s philosophy perceived a teacher’s role as a guide and observer, rather than an instructor or a disciplinarian. The teacher is to provide and prepare the environment and curriculum to allow children to benefit and learn productively from it. Teachers were also expected to observe children and come up with activities designed to facilitate optimal learning (Feeney, Christensen and Moravcik, 2006).

For the pre-nursery and nursery classes, I would provide a large variety of materials where children would be given the choice to choose based on their preference. I would not interfere in their choice activity as long as it conforms safety standards. I would also plan for activities where children could explore and exercise trial and error. For instance in the dough making session, they would be able to explore how much water is needed to achieve

the texture of dough they would like, and what should be added when the dough becomes too soft.

However, I would be guiding children whenever they are stuck or faced with much difficulty. I would also put up children's work like their art work at a prominent corner of the classroom to make them feel that their work is valued. For the kindergarten classes, I would plan the lesson together with the children and come up with activities that could tap on their interest. For instance, discussing with children about which occupations interests them the most by showing them a variety of it. After the children have made their choices, I would plan activities catered to their interest.

Throughout the lesson, I would make observational notes about each child and provide experiences or materials catered to individual's interest. For example if a child shows immense interest in the occupation teacher, I would plan for the child to have a go at teaching his fellow classmates a song. Or if a child is interested in being a policeman, he could patrol the corridors before nap time to ensure that children are not hiding in the toilets or up to mischief. Similarly, under the Framework for Kindergarten Curriculum, MOE recommend putting their principles into practice in a few ways.

These includes, preparing the learning environment by encouraging learning at their own pace and choice, planning meaningful activities based on children's interest and abilities, allowing resources and materials to be easily and readily available and observing and monitoring children's development. (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2003) Through Dewey, I become aware of various methods and principles which plays a vital role in children's pre-school learning. Though there were also controversies in Dewey's

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philosophy, I believe that each philosopher possesses their own virtues and Dewey was one which struck me the most.