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The National Experience In Pre-School Education

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Introduction

This paper traces the early beginning of Pre-School provision and the subsequent adherence to its changing needs and the importance of competent teachers and developmentally appropriate programmes.

A Brief History Of Pre-School Education In Singapore

Although Pre-School provision was well established by the 1960's, there was no systematic training of teachers until 1969. At this time the Adult Education Board and the Ministry of Education conducted basic training and this involved participants from private organizations, the People's Association, the People's Action Party Community Foundation, Social Welfare Creches, and Schools for the Handicapped. The Teachers' Training College took responsibility for training from 1977, and this continued when the college became the Institute of Education, in 1981. Training for Child Care began in 1985. At this time there were around 50 Centres with little more than 100 staff. The Institute, and later NTUC ChildCare Services, and a Private Group, extended the training provision. The Institute training included kindergarten teachers and Child Care Personnel employed by PAP/CF, People's Association, Voluntary Organizations, Workplace and private individuals.

Pre-School programmes were planned according to prescriptions gleaned from overseas, and, with an increasing professionally trained supply of teaching personnel, the programmes took on a new emphasis where attention to the total needs of the child became an increasingly important focus. Child Care programmes, being full day, were designed for the education, management, and care of children from 2 to 6 years of age, whilst Kindergarten programmes catered to the needs of children from 3 to 6 years and were of 3 or 4 hours duration. Full session Pre-Primary programmes were available for 5 and 6 year olds in some schools.

All programmes involved a large group of trained personnel, and Child Care Centre Legislation in 1986, required Centres to have fully trained personnel for licensing purposes. To date, the Ministry of Community Development remains responsible for planning and development of these centres, and for provision of information and operations. The Ministry of Education is responsible for registering Kindergartens.

Currently, all programmes in all Centres are thoroughly planned, resourced, and evaluated. Complacency, however is far from the lips of Pre-School personnel in Singapore,, and attention to variety, innovation, and change, constantly prompt those involved in improving provision according to the changing needs and requirements. Such a pro-active emphasis, is a feature of educational provision in Singapore in general, and Pre-School provision in particular. What though, is the philosophy of Pre-School provision and how has this been established in Singapore?

A Balanced Curriculum For Pre-School. The Historical Perspective.

In line with quality programmes overseas, the curriculum is built on firm, well evaluated foundations. Such a perspective relies much on systems developed elsewhere, but commensurate with shared values and beliefs about the needs of children within the needs of the society in which they live. Such influences stem from the nineteenth century educators and their concerns for equality in provision for all. The needs of society at large and minority groups in particular were their central concern:

- (i) Dewey stressed that learning should be relevant and related to requisite social skills. These were seen as important for the current and future generations of children in American Society.
- (ii) Eliot, influenced by Dewey, stressed the importance of active learning, and his "Bank Street" approach was designed to address the developmental needs of minorities.

- (iii) The Pre-School movement worldwide remains influenced by the earlier educators such as Rousseau, Froebel, Pestalozzi, Montessori, and the MacMillan Sisters.

The combined theories about childhood have stressed manipulation and play with concrete objects for the continued development of the senses, within a child-centred, and an integrated curriculum. This so called progressive tradition, has required provision for a prepared environment following sequential steps in learning, coupled with an emphasis on the health, welfare, education, and provision for the disadvantaged in society. It has resulted in some high quality programmes with curricula which have received support from a variety of funding agencies anxious to redeem inequalities in educational provision.

Such influences have though, resulted in a wide variety of programmes each with a slightly different emphasis, and with slightly different outcomes, depending not least on teacher involvement as well as manner of presentation. Some have made an impact on provision in Singapore as this paper will show.

The Differing Aims Of Contemporary Programmes

These can be summarized as follows:

- (i) Active experience programmes, such as those provided by play groups (Pestalozzi); nursery schools (MacMillans); sensory experience focused (Montessori).
- all of which could be categorized as:-
- (ii) Early intervention programmes: any programme where the content is designed to impose learning and experiences not normally available. For example, Head Start, Follow Through, and High Scope, are more recent examples.

The most successful programmes can be summarized thus:

- a) needing to be well structured
- b) needing to set goals
- c) needing to specify teaching strategies
- d) needing to reflect agreed values
- e) needing to monitor progress and innovation

(Lazar and Darlington, 1982)

The provision of the early intervention programmes has resulted in many valuable research findings which have prescribed influential parameters for future research and programme design and provision. These have been especially useful for developing nations, in their quest for quality in, and availability of, appropriate programmes.

The Influence Of Early Intervention Programmes

As has been noted, these programmes were originally designed for disadvantaged groups and were planned on the premise that early education may alleviate inadequacies in educational and social provision for such groups. The focus was on language enrichment in a systematic programme with, as the research indicated, well trained and competent teachers. Such programmes, later enriched by a cognitive and self-development emphasis, revealed some influential lasting effects. These included findings that any improvement in verbal performance depended on the quality of the staff involved, and, the most positive effects resulted when programmes stressed highly structured adult/child interactions. Special programmes for children with behaviour and adjustment problems produced insignificant changes in the children's behaviour however, and there was little evidence that any inequalities in educational provision were minimised. The research also showed that whilst the commitment, enthusiasm, and collaboration of teachers was essential for success, so too was the programme's philosophy which needed to be adhered to as part of a continuous process of planning, presentation, and evaluation. (Lazar and Darlington 1989).

The Singapore Perspective – A Changing Focus.

Expectations about Pre-School provision in Singapore are related to parents' expectations for their children in the meritocratic climate in which they grow and develop. This has resulted in a need for both quality and quantity in provision. However, with the aims of pre-school focusing on bilingualism and preparation for primary one, quality has tended to be linked with an academic- type of curriculum typically stressing a subject centred, teacher directed, achievement orientated environment. More recently attempts have been made to alter both the imbalance in clients' expectations, and the Pre-Schools' quasi progressive philosophy.

With common agreement amongst the major providers of Pre-School Education in Singapore, curriculum guidelines have been designed to both cater to the needs of parents and the aims of Pre-Schools, and, at the same time attempt to emulate the type of design most closely resembling those successful programmes from overseas. The key features are thus:

- (i) Integration of knowledge and skills across subject boundaries, to facilitate concept development and to provide a broader knowledge base.
- (ii) A stress on oral language to improve mother tongue and English.
- (iii) A focus on Asian values as a basis for developing topics across subjects.
- (iv) Attention to basic skills required for reading, writing, number and language, and creative activities.

Building on the merits of an integrated approach to learning derived from research findings in UK in particular, (Sylva et al 1980, Thomas 1990), topics for investigation and study have been planned which both match the child's developmental needs and interests, and which are related to their local environment and culture. However, planning has proceeded enthusiastically yet cautiously, since wise advice stemming from the results of the British studies (op cit.) have

been noted. For example, it was revealed that there appeared to be insufficient attention to the structuring of activities and experiences in an integrated setting, and this resulted in many children being left to struggle or plod along below their ability levels. It was also noted that some teachers were found to have insufficient content knowledge, and basic teaching skills. Thus the integrated approach, although sound in theory left much to be desired in practice. The proposed solution was to plan sequentially and systematically, to accrue resources, ideas and materials gradually, and to keep an efficient record'keeping system.

For Singapore, taking cognizance of such practices has resulted in planning and preparation using a system known as the Advance Organiser Plan (Ausubel 1963). For this paper, the finer details of such an approach will have to be left to another paper. For now, some further timely advice from research will serve to fuel ideas about the future.

Pre-School Education In Singapore – The Way Forward

Findings from follow up studies of "Head Start", indicated that measurable gains are maintained when children experience instructional skills commensurate with their abilities, when the teachers' content knowledge is sound and when teacher initiated activity is matched by child initiated activity. (Singer, 1992). The key experiences of the "High Scope" programme have been found to be effective when there is a choice of materials and experiences within a framework of language enriched support. (Titchner and Titchner 1990).

Clearly these findings point to the merits, certainly for minority groups, of providing high risk children with an early advantage in the form of preventative intervention. However some timely advice from Elkind (Elkind 1989), could be noted. He argues that early education teaches the wrong things at the wrong time when teachers ignore what the child has to learn and impose what they want to teach, so that early education helps fewer children.

If then we note the importance of the positive characteristics of the early intervention programmes and their stress on competent teachers and well structured programmes, and the importance (noted above) of adhering to developmentally appropriate activities, and if we continue with pro-active planning and evaluation then early education in Singapore will continue to be worthwhile.

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