
Title	Day care: A discussion of language and related issues
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Day Care:

A Discussion of Language and Related Issues

Rationale

So far two day care centres have been opened by the People's Association to cater for the children of working parents. It is expected that many more such centres will be opened in the future to meet the growing need.

In addition to the problems of organizing and implementing a developmental daily programme and providing adequate and appropriate facilities for such centres, several other concerns necessitate comment and an exchange of ideas from interested professionals. Although Singapore cannot afford to let the decision making process be hindered by divisive and prolonged dialogue, the success of a programme does depend on the clarity of its objectives and the degree to which those objectives are understood and accepted by not only those who implement the programme but also by those who are beneficiaries of it. Clear objectives, in turn, result from constructive discussion and planning.

This paper will consider areas within the scope of competence of the authors and is based on related experience of early childhood education in several countries. Their opinions may not be definitive but hopefully will initiate discussion that will result in a comprehensive, child-oriented philosophy and programme for day care that is an appropriate Singaporean model.

The paper limits itself to the discussion of three topics but this does not preclude other important issues. The topics are language, teacher training and parent involvement. These three areas will be considered with the proviso that the day care programme aims to:

1. promote the total development of children,
2. make adequate provision in terms of staff facilities and equipment to cater for this development,
3. encourage the development and maintenance of positive home/centre relationships in recognition of the fact that parents are the prime influence on the child and

4. organize homogeneous classes in terms of the stage of development as well as the chronological age of children.

The recommendations that follow in each of the areas are based on both accepted child development theory and a knowledge of what is feasible and practical in the Singapore context. In line with the recent report of Dr. Goh Keng Swee and the Education Study Team and recent research in the area of language in early childhood education, it is strongly recommended that at the ages of three, four and five, language be accepted as the medium through which children learn and not as something to be learned in itself. The primary responsibility of a day care programme must be to provide opportunities for the child to grow in the areas of social/moral, emotional, physical, and cognitive/intellectual development.

The acquisition of language is an integral part of overall development and therefore it must be seen as a means to an end. It is through language, i.e., listening and understanding, then communicating orally and later in writing, that children learn to interpret experiences. Research has shown that without vocalization of experience, children's thinking skills are not adequately developed. Thus the choice of a medium of instruction becomes crucial to the effectiveness of the learning programme.

Work in second language situations in other countries highlights the problems and learning constraints that ensue when children are faced with the task of learning in a language other than their mother tongue. A prospective bilingual child's first experience in a formal learning situation, i.e. day care, can closely predict his eventual failure or success in the educational system.

While there are many examples of parents, particularly well educated professionals, teaching young children to speak and sometimes read and write two languages, these are isolated situations where the motivation and skills of the parents and the high aptitude of the children were important controlling factors.

The implications for bilingual education of such examples indicate a need for socio-linguistic research (with control groups) that is cognizant of:

1. the linguistic environment of the sample,
2. the effects of introducing second languages at different ages and stages of development, e.g. particularly cognitive,
3. the effects of different second language programmes and
4. the results of the degree of reinforcement of second language in the home.

The purpose of such research would be to indicate the extent to which children's development is affected by the acquisition of second languages. In addition, the research should show the level of proficiency possible in simultaneous second language learning situations. This research may demonstrate whether the focus should be on language development *per se* or on overall development.

However, although research with sample groups is necessary to provide information that may lead to new directions in the bilingual education of young children, the authors believe that subjecting all Singaporean children to this experience without adequate local data to back up such a decision is unjustified. With these points in mind it is further recommended that children's initial learning experiences, particularly at the three- and four-year-old levels, be in the mother tongue.

In the Singapore context this is possible for children from Tamil,¹ Malay and English speaking homes. However, the case of the Chinese child is not so straightforward. The spectrum of language diversity in the Chinese speaking population means that a variety of situations may exist, e.g. 1) one language/dialect for all members of the family, 2) any combination of languages/dialects (Hokkien and Teochew grandparents, English speaking father, Mandarin speaking mother, etc.). The diversity of familial situations, economic considerations and the availability of suitably trained teachers have necessitated a government policy that precludes teaching through "dialects". Therefore, it is necessary that Mandarin be the medium of instruction for Chinese children.

It is further suggested that, as there is a notable lack of research in this field, the day care centres should be used for case studies of bilingual education with the Malay, Tamil and English groups used as control groups. This study should be multi-disciplinary with relevant government institutions and independent organizations parti-

cipating. The results may have far reaching implications for Singapore and other countries facing similar problems.

Language – Recommendations

Malay, Tamil and English Speakers – At age three communication should be in the child's mother tongue. Before the fourth year English or other second language songs and finger plays could be introduced to familiarize children with the sound system. The second language could be introduced gradually during the fourth year to those children who have consolidated the vocabulary and structures of their mother tongues. With many children this consolidation might not take place until the end of the fifth year and provision would have to be made for appropriate developmental activities in the mother tongue. These children could be combined with English speakers who were learning Tamil or Malay as a second language.

Chinese Speakers – At age three communication can be in Mandarin if it is supplemented by dialect. The fourth year should be a period of learning and consolidation. The children need to be given *at least* one year to practise structures and vocabulary before having to deal with another second language. It is generally agreed that children are usually in command of the structure of their mother tongues by age five. This period may be prolonged in those cases where Mandarin differs significantly from a child's mother tongue or where there are developmental problems. It is to be hoped that this period of early education will enable the Chinese child to become reasonably fluent and comfortable with Mandarin.

Children with a special aptitude for language as identified by teacher evaluation (NOT TESTING) and who have mastered Mandarin sufficiently may be introduced to English during the fourth and fifth years. Teachers, supervisors and centre staff should be extremely resistant to parental pressure to force English on children before they are ready. It is far better for children to be effectively communicative in one language than ineffective in two or three. There is an inherent danger in the one-day-English, one-day-Mandarin approach. It is that by halving the exposure time to each lan-

¹ At the time of writing, the authors have no recent information on the numbers speaking other Indian languages who might be enrolling in day care programmes. However, it is doubtful if the government can do more than cater for the major languages.

guage, the child's competence in both languages may be restricted. As a result his effectiveness in verbalizing and possibly reasoning could be less than that of a child who has used one language. There appears to be a definite correlation between language proficiency and cognitive development. The child may be able to use both languages but his structures would be too limited for developmental programme requirements. It is believed that a good parent education and involvement programme will ameliorate some of these problems.

There is much talk about LET (Language Exposure Time) when considering the amounts of time allocated to the different languages children have to learn in Singapore. This usually results in a certain amount of the school day being reserved for exposure to English or Mandarin or one of the languages. However LET is not so relevant in the day care situation. The children's day is not segmented into rigid lessons and the atmosphere should be far less formal than the normal school. Adults move freely among the children, talking, helping and guiding. In this kind of learning environment the constant factor should not be *time* allocated to the language but rather the language of the "instructor". Therefore it becomes important for the adult to remain "constant" in his language. In this way children learn, as they do naturally in a bilingual or multilingual home setting, to switch languages, depending on whom they are talking to.

It is debatable whether a poor model of English, say, is beneficial in any way to children's learning of English. It is better that the fluent Mandarin speaker retains Mandarin when speaking to a child rather than resorting to substandard English because it is "English time".

Teacher Training

Teacher training for the day care centres has already begun with trained experienced teachers from the kindergartens undergoing special re-training courses. With the previous recommendations, e.g. language and parent involvement, future courses will need to consider the following:

Selection Criteria A. The number of teachers required will depend on:

1. the number of centres and children,
2. a desirable child:teacher ratio,
3. the language requirements of children – e.g.
 - a) a centre in a predominantly Hokkien area will require more Hokkien speaking teacher volunteers/ Mandarin speaking teachers,
 - b) a centre attended

by a majority of Malay speaking children will require Malay speaking aides and a teacher who is fluent in Malay and English.

B. Teachers need to be tested for aptitude and suitability for working with this age range. Extent of experience and formal academic qualifications are less important than personal qualities and attitudes towards children in this age range. Substitute parenting (i.e. mothering), approachability, empathy, the ability to give and receive affection spontaneously and high intergroup sensitivity are relevant qualities.

Training Programme – Skills Apart from fundamental early childhood education and child development principles, teachers need to acquire specialized skills. They must learn how to assess children's progress by using a developmental chart. The chart lists stages of development in the basic areas, i.e. social/moral, physical, emotional and cognitive development, and relates them to chronological age. This skill will assist teachers to plan appropriate activities for all ability levels and to make recommendations on the readiness of children for second language learning.

Another skill is the ability to encourage children to talk about what they are doing without interfering with the learning process. This means teachers must be clear as to the difference between intervention and interference in learning. The dialogue between child and adult plays a vital part in helping children verbalize activities. Without this verbalization, cognitive skills can be retarded. Teachers should be able to design plans, both long and short term, which allow for enough flexibility in the daily programme to maximise learning opportunities as they occur. The key to a good child development programme is flexibility without forgetting the importance of structure for achieving long term goals.

With reference to the section on parental involvement, teachers' sensitivity training would seem to be a necessary component of the course. It is expected, on the basis of an English Proficiency Test, that many of the teachers will also require a compulsory supplementary course to improve their own spoken English. This course should run concurrently with the main course.

Finally provision should also be made in the teacher training programme for helping teachers to accommodate handicapped children. By accommodation is meant training in preparing suitable equipment and activities, integrating children in the classroom, assisting the development of friend-

ships and also providing simple counselling for parents of handicapped children (and perhaps for members of the community who have reservations about including handicapped children in their programme).

Parent Involvement and Education

Educational research and literature throughout the world affirm the role of the home as the primary influence on a child's attitudes towards education, his behaviour and his scholastic success. It would seem, however, that most educators and administrators have traditionally refused:

1. to deal realistically with the results of this research and
2. to develop programmes that include effective parental involvement.

Parents enrol their children in day care centres for convenience and because they feel that the child will profit from the experience. Parents expect the centres to be run by well-trained professionals who share their ideas and expectations about education. However, as few parents are educators or specialists in early childhood education, it is unrealistic to expect parents and teachers to agree on educational programmes. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that parents have opportunities for observation in the centres, interaction with teachers and guidance in understanding programme objectives and methods. This should not be a haphazard arrangement but a planned, well organized and stimulating orientation. Parents' concerns and questions should not be treated lightly. Suggestions for programme improvement should be duly considered and implemented as appropriate. This has to be an ongoing effort whose leadership is turned over to a parent organization as soon as possible.

Eventually the parent organization could be given the responsibility for the development of the parent education programme. It is hoped that as family members develop skills, e.g. reading stories, intervening and helping children in their activities, a volunteer programme will be developed utilizing these skills. Volunteers in the classroom will, of course, improve the child: adult ratio in classrooms thereby providing more opportunities for child-adult interaction.

The possibility of training parents with particular aptitudes in this area as paid teacher aides should be considered. This approach has proved successful in the American Head Start Programme as a means of conveying, in a constructive and favourable light, the policy and objectives of the centre.

As day care has broad cultural and sociological as well as educational implications, it is vital that the community be knowledgeable to facilitate its effective cooperation. It is difficult to imagine such a programme being successful at all without community support.

Conclusion

Meetings with members of the People's Association and the staff of the National Youth Leadership Training Institute have shown that there is a real concern and desire to have day care centres that cater for the developmental needs of children. There is also an awareness of the immensity of the task and the need for professional dialogue that will assist in shaping the type of programme that will truly benefit the young children of Singapore. The main aim of this paper is to encourage that dialogue. In conclusion, the authors wish to stress that the above recommendations are meant to stimulate constructive discussion and the consideration of alternative approaches in achieving policy objectives. 