

CREATING A JOYFUL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AT PRIMARY LEVEL

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Abstract

The “joyful learning” is a kind of learning experience which could make learner feel pleasure in the learning process. A suitable learning environment with proper learning sequence is essential for learning, especially for children who are still in the early development period. In classrooms of today, we are more likely to see academically oriented teacher directed instructions than active learning based on socialization, imagination, and creativity. When teachers use strategies to reduce stress and build a positive emotional environment, students gain emotional resilience and learn more efficiently. Psychologists emphasize that teaching should take place at a level that is neither too difficult and stressful nor too easy and boring for the age of the child. It is the responsibility of the teacher to make the journey of sharing and construction of knowledge joyful.

Key words: Joyful Learning Environment, Primary Level

Introduction

Childhood is a distinct phase of human life span that is eventful and unique phase of life which lays an important foundation for the later stage of life and is highly differentiated from them. Each and every child is unique and follows a particular developmental pattern. Middle and late childhood extends from about six to twelve years of age which we sometime call age of elementary/primary school years. From six to twelve years of developmental period, we can observe physical and psychological changes in children. They master several skills and confront new life tasks during this period. This is a special time of growth and change and special care and resources are required to educate children of this stage. Children master the fundamental skills of reading, writing, and mathematics at this time. Psychologists emphasize that education should be developmentally appropriate. That is, teaching should take place at a level that is neither too difficult and stressful nor too easy and boring for the age of the child.

Childhood and learning at primary level

Childhood is a period of physical, mental and social development and the learning therefore must respond to physical, mental and social characteristics. The tendency to work and socialize in groups, as the power of reason and imagination, the formation of intellectual independence, of moral sense, and of social organization are the common characteristics of this age. The classroom environment, lessons, and materials should be developed and used accordingly to respond to these new characteristics. During the past few decades, researches have generated new information about childhood as a separate and distinct stage of life. Understanding early childhood theory is essential to knowing what children think and feel, and how you can help them become caring people and joyful learners. Keeping in view that free and compulsory education to all children up to the age of fourteen years is the Constitutional commitment in India, significant efforts have been made in the last fifty years to universalize elementary education. Elementary stage has become a compulsory component that has been incorporated as a directive principle in the constitution in 1950. The Indian government has recently introduced the Constitutional Amendment Bill, RTE 2009, which has made elementary education a fundamental right. This is implemented as a part of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Now the question arises whether making education a fundamental right will bring children school and able to retain the children in classrooms? The answer of this question is quite tricky and not easy. In this

connection, the teacher, his way of teaching and the class environment play an important role. Unless the teaching at every level is based on daily experiences, is sequential, appropriate to age and directed towards creating a conducive learning environment, the learning can not be joyful and enjoyable.

What is Joyful learning?

Let us see the meaning of joyful learning. Joyful means “experiencing well-being, success, or good fortune.” Joy, according to the Oxford English dictionary, is described as a vivid emotion or feeling of pleasure. The adjective of joy is joyful which also describes a kind of feeling, expressing and causing great pleasure. The “joyful learning” is a kind of learning process or experience which could make learner feels pleasure in a learning scenario/process. Children deserve school experiences that foster a sense of well-being; that all children should experience success; and that all children must have opportunities for good fortune - all this, while making certain that all primary school meet the academic standards that fosters future school and personal success. Yashpal committee (1993) also opined that burden of school bag should be reduced drastically to make learning enjoyable. It recommends, “There is no jurisdiction for torturing the young children by compelling them to carry very heavy bags of books everyday to schools. Textbooks should be treated as school property and thus, there should be no need for children to purchase the books individually and carry them daily to homes. A separate time-table for the assignment of home work and for the use of textbooks and notebooks be prepared by the school and be made known to the children in advance.” Kohn (2004) as a neurologist and classroom teacher has shown that there are several benefits of joy in the classroom. Neuro imaging studies and measurement of brain chemical transmitters reveal that students' comfort level can influence information transmission and storage in the brain (Thanos et al, 1999). When students are engaged and motivated and feel minimal stress, information flows freely through the affective filter in the amygdala and they achieve higher levels of cognition, make connections, and experience “aha” moments. Such learning comes not from quiet classrooms and directed lectures, but from classrooms with an atmosphere of exuberant discovery (Kohn, 2004).

Suitable teaching techniques and learning environment at primary level -

The focus on education of children at primary level is urgent and important due to the fact that learning of the child at primary school level is the foundation for his later achievements. It has been realized from last few decades that traditional method of imparting knowledge to primary level children is quite defective. Children usually do not enjoy when they sit passively and learn the things which are not relevant for their life. It is well known that hands on practical learning are better than merely memorising from books. “Children learn in a variety of ways - through experience, making and doing things, experimentation, reading, discussion, asking, listening, thinking and reflecting, and expressing oneself in speech, movement or writing - both individually and collectively. They require opportunities of all these kinds in the course of developments (NCF, 2005). Washburne (1936) also defined learning as a process of acquiring knowledge, technique, attitude and value through instruction and experience. Human intelligence development is affected by the inborn conditions and acquired contexts since childhood. The development process contains several steps, and the time required for reaching each step is different for each individual learner because each previous step is the foundation for the next step and the sequence is successive (Flavell, 1963; Piaget, 1970). Therefore, a suitable learning environment with proper learning sequence is essential for learning, especially for children who are still in the early

development period. Besides, researchers have also emphasized the importance of joyful learning for children in recent years (Fisher, 1998; Heywood, 2005).

Academics have the opinion and assume that students who are laughing, interacting in groups, or being creative with art, music, or dance are not doing real academic work. The result is that some teachers put pressure to preside over more sedate classrooms with students on the same page in the same book, sitting in straight rows, facing straight ahead. The truth is that when we scrub joy and comfort from the classroom, we distance our students from effective information processing and long-term memory storage. Instead of taking pleasure from learning, students become bored, anxious, and anything but engaged. They ultimately learn to feel bad about school and lose the joy they once felt.

Role of Curriculum developers and teachers-

Bredenkamp (1990) also summarized the considerations that curricular developers should take into account when they represent developmentally appropriate practice for young children. They include child development knowledge, characteristics of children, knowledge of various disciplines, values of our culture, parent's wishes, the practical knowledge that children need to function in society. Bredenkamp & Shepard (1990) have warned us about inappropriate teaching practices that can hinder the learning of young children. They advise against using standardized tests to place young children in kindergarten classes and even up to the Grade three level. They also advise against extensive uses of drill and practice in workbooks for young students. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) in the United States has described how young children learn differently than their older peers. "Children in the three to eight ranges acquire knowledge in ways that are significantly different from the way older children learn. Young children learn best through direct sensory encounters with the world and not through formal academic processes. Since early childhood is a period of rapid mental growth and development, children seek out the stimuli they need, to nourish these developmental abilities. Young children acquire knowledge almost exclusively by doing and through movement." Long back John Dewey (1938) in his book 'Democracy and Education' quoted that 'It is the business of the school to set up an environment in which play and work shall be conducted with reference to facilitating desirable mental and moral growth. It is not enough just to introduce plays and games, handwork and manual exercises. Everything depends upon the way in which they are employed.'

Bangladeshi teachers found a new, joyful way of teaching during an Australian Government-funded IDEAL project (1995). The traditional teaching approach in Bangladesh used to be based on rote learning. Teaching became 'child centred' with teachers showing children how to learn. Both children and teachers were enjoying being at school. Children love the new painting and decorating their classrooms with colourful motifs, numbers and letters. The bottom half of previously whitewashed walls are painted black, so each child has their own personal blackboard. Tables and benches have been replaced with mats on the floor and the teacher no longer stands at the front of the classroom teaching monotonous lessons. Lessons now use dance, role-playing, stories and drawing, and children participate in group work. Teachers use pictures, models, puppets and cards to teach, to complement traditional materials like blackboards and textbooks. Children have really taken to the new teaching methods. So the result was joyful teaching and joyful learning. This example shows that how child centered teaching strategies changed the scenario.

Schools are strongest institutions in the child's life. Schools play a crucial and a formative role in the spheres of cognitive, language, emotional, social and moral development of the children. Teachers who are the key masters of this institution have a major role in shaping the future of the

individual children. In mono grade /traditional classrooms, teachers are the sole leaders who lead the students from lesson to lesson and it is a teacher-directed process. In most rural primary schools the passive and one-way communication and multi grade situation results into children not acquiring the competencies or the abilities to read, write or comprehend. Classrooms can be the safe refuge where academic practices and classroom strategies provide students with emotional comfort and pleasure as well as knowledge. When teachers use strategies to reduce stress and build a positive emotional environment, students gain emotional resilience and learn more efficiently.

Further, in conventional classrooms, a teacher governs, dominates and holds the class. He uses lecture method with less teaching- learning materials, give emphasis on rote learning and traditional evaluation system. The assumption that he knows everything creates a gap between him and student. The focus is on teaching rather than learning and especially the absence of joyous based extra activities and absence of play way and learning by doing activities, there is less chance for mutual and self learning.

Techniques to be adopted by Teachers for joyful learning-

Looking in the maladies of conventional teaching learning process few strategies and techniques may be adopted by teachers to make learning joyful. Classroom transaction should be based on child's needs and interests. Rote learning and memorizing should be discouraged and emphasis on Activity Based Learning (ABL) with enough freedom in selection of activity be given to the child. Avoidance of extensive uses of drill and practice in workbooks. Encouraging new and novel ideas and not discouraging curiosity will be taken care of. There should be scope for development of creativity and use of multimedia to explain new concepts. Repetition of points when necessary and the medium of instruction should be in mother tongue or the language they understand properly. Learning experiences should match the personality and learning style of learners. Development of communication and other skills through activities like dance, play, role playing, storytelling, and drawing should be on priority. Providing incentives for homework completion or on-task behaviour and environment of asking, listening, thinking, expressing oneself in speech, movement or writing may provide better environment for learning. Individual differences should be welcomed, and supported. Role of teacher in joyful learning environment should be as facilitator not dictator. Collegial, supportive, and spontaneous classroom climate will certainly help a child to communicate, learn and move freely. A social skills group or "friendship group" can help the child learn skills such as taking turns, not standing too close, not dominating a discussion, finding out what others are interested in, etc. Evaluation should be inbuilt in the system and it should be done without the child knowing it. Finally, students should be treated with the dignity and respect.

Conclusion

Majority of our school going children at primary level view learning at school as a boring, even unpleasant and bitter experience. The limited purpose of preparing them for examination is indeed a very important factor for the unpleasantnesses of learning. Psychologists emphasize that teaching should take place at a level that is neither too difficult and stressful nor too easy and boring for the age of the child. When teachers use strategies to reduce stress and build a positive emotional environment, students gain emotional resilience and learn more efficiently. The classroom environment, lessons, materials should be developed and teaching strategies and techniques should be used accordingly to respond to learner's characteristics. It is the responsibility of the teacher to make the journey of sharing and construction of knowledge joyful by creating appropriate environment.

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