
Pre-School Curriculum And The Total Development Of The Child In Malaysia.

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Tumpuan utama rencana ini ialah untuk merangkakan sifat-sifat penting kurikulum prasekolah untuk tujuan-tujuan perkembangan kanak-kanak yang menyeluruh dan seimbang. Perhatian juga ditumpukan kepada faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi kurikulum tersebut.

Bentuk kurikulum prasekolah yang diingini ditinjau. Bahagian-bahagian yang dianggap mustahak dibayangkan, seperti dalam bidang bahasa, pemikiran, nombor, sains, otot-otot dan koordinasi anggota, seni lukis dan kerjatangan mainan, sosio-emosi, pergerakan dan moral.

Aspek-aspek pelaksanaan kurikulum yang waras dan seimbang juga dikupas dan diuraikan. Peranan sikap masyarakat terutamanya sikap guru, ibu bapa dan tuan punya prasekolah ditegaskan. Tanggungjawab dan peranan guru diutamakan dalam konteks dan masalah yang terdapat pada masa ini.

Beberapa masalah pelaksanaan khususnya masalah perguruan berhubung dengan gaji, dedikasi, motivasi, komitmen dan taraf profesionalisme guru-guru prasekolah juga dikaji.

Akhirnya, beberapa cabaran masa depan dikemukakan. Di antaranya ialah golongan yang tidak beruntung dan keperluan golongan yang cacat, rencat atau sebaliknya yang bergeliga. Jurang perbezaan individu yang besar di antara kanak-kanak yang telah menikmati pendidikan prasekolah dengan kanak-kanak yang belum mendapat pendidikan prasekolah dan cabarannya merupakan masalah yang rumit sekali untuk Negara sebab ia berkaitan dengan pokok persoalan konsep keadilan untuk semua kanak-kanak.

Context of the Pre-school Curriculum

The concept of the curriculum, if taken broadly, encompasses the total planned and unplanned experiences the child is exposed to in the pre-school. These experiences are programmed or organized in various ways to achieve the broader goals and more specific objectives of pre-school education.

The curriculum would include both the formal and informal experiences centred in the pre-school. Examples are found in the structured and unstructured activities organized by the teacher, or the more spontaneous and incidental experiences that occur in the pre-school. The curriculum must also include the influences of peers, teachers and all other aspects in the school environment.

It is clear that all these elements and aspects in the curriculum shape the child consciously and unconsciously towards the expressed goals and objectives considered desirable in pre-school education. It must also be evident that the curriculum is not merely limited to the more formal classroom experiences organized and sequenced by pre-school teachers. It is neither restricted to books and other materials which usually occupy a place of prominence in teacher centred or initiated activities. The pre-school curriculum must be broader in its conception than this because early childhood education, especially at the pre-school level by its very nature cannot be easily confined to such narrow boundaries. A good and sound pre-school curriculum must have an educational outlook that can be no less than that defined and accounted by the total experiences and influences in the child's life centred in the pre-school.

We also need to be reminded that the pre-school curriculum is especially sensitive to the inclusion of methodologies which are rich in their variety, and which are often very peculiar to early childhood education. These methodologies form an integral part of the pre-school curriculum. Their nature, characteristics and implementation belong to the domain of the pre-school curriculum as much as other elements and aspects which are frequently focused on.

Perspective for the Pre-school Curriculum

The perspective that we seek for the pre-school curriculum that is geared to the total development of the child must begin with the realization that though the effects of the pre-school can be very significant, there are non pre-school experiences and influences which are at least as far reaching if not much more important in their impact on the child. This admission in no way diminishes the established significance and importance of pre-school education. It is rather an attempt to develop a wholistic view of the various contributory factors in the total development of the child, and their respective places and roles, in proper perspective.

Pre-school education for most of those involved, spans on the average about a year. During this year, the child attends pre-school 190 days. In each of such days, the pre-school is in session for about 3 hours. We have, therefore, a total of about 570 contact hours for pre-school education. This must be a measure of the humility that is needed when we try to make excessive claims about the effects of pre-school education in the context of the total development of the child. This humility among pre-school educators should lead us to take a harder look at other factors in the child's life. It must lead us to work out ways to take them into account more effectively and meaningfully in pre-school education. This should be done to enhance the effects and contributions of the pre-school curriculum through all these various factors in the life of the pre-school child. What is needed then is a model consisting of co-operative and mutually supportive factors in pre-school education together with factors outside the pre-school. The outcome of such efforts will consequently be truly addressed to the issues of the total development of the child in the most effective and meaningful manner.

The pre-school curriculum that is well-based and well located in reality must recognize the importance of the following in the total development of the child, namely:

- (a) the home and the extended family; and
- (b) the community with its various institutions.

These factors contribute uniquely and powerfully to the growth and development of the child. They, in addition, moderate and mediate the effects of pre-school education. The influences originating in the family, may change or alter the effects of the pre-school curriculum. The mediating role of the family, for example, comes out clearly when one considers the foundation of characteristics that the child brings to the pre-school. The pre-school curriculum builds on them, and also works through them to achieve the desired effects as expressed in the broad goals and specific objectives. It pays to constantly remember that the pre-school curriculum cannot operate or bear good fruits in isolation. Its role and contribution can best be appreciated in this total picture of the interaction between in home, extended family, community and the pre-school curriculum.

The pre-school curriculum for the total development of the child has to take into account the dimension of time. The continuity of the past, present and future in the development of the child must be emphasized. No pre-school programme can be effective and meaningful if it does not understand the child's past. The pre-school programme must start from

and build on the past as seen in what the child brings to the pre-school. The past and present then flows into the future. The future is made up of desirable goals and objectives. Without this emphasis on the continuity of past, present and future, total development would be very seriously disjointed and ineffective, however impressive the pre-school programme may be on paper.

Aspects in The Development Of A Balanced Pre-school Curriculum

A sound curriculum is always in a dynamic state of development. It is never completely finished neither can it take a final form which is unchangeable. A pre-school curriculum more than any other curricula for the different levels of education, is always in a state of flux and development. It must always take into account the different batches of students it serves and the changing patterns of challenges that may emerge in a society. Besides these, it must take into account current educational ideas based on research findings. The characteristic of the curriculum which is dynamic as contrasted to what is static must be stressed. Although these aspects deserve more attention because they are often easily forgotten, the pre-school curriculum also contain more perennial, stable and core aspects which are lasting and still relevant over the years. This is because young children have not changed very much basically over different generations.

Taba (1962) suggested that seven important aspects should be taken into careful consideration in the development of a balanced pre-school curriculum. These are, namely:

- (i) The determination of the full range of variety of the needs of the child nested in the home, community and society.
- (ii) The development of objectives which are based on the needs established earlier.
- (iii) The selections of content in consonance with the achievement of the stated objectives.
- (iv) The organization, sequencing and structuring of the content selected.
- (v) The selection of activities and learning experiences which exemplify the content areas focused on.
- (vi) The organization, sequencing and structuring of the learning experience selected along sound learning and teaching lines, and principles of child development.
- (vii) Curriculum efforts which are designed to evaluate the effects and consequences of the pre-school activities and experiences. These are implemented through different ways and means. Their results are measured against the needs and objectives delimited earlier.

A balanced pre-school curriculum is continuously sensitive to these seven aspects. There is also the need to as frequently as possible re-examine the implication of each aspect in the context of a changing environment filled with different cohorts or batches of students whose particular characteristics may differ from year to year. This sensitivity will result in planning which will continuously seek to renew, revitalize and reorientate the pre-school curriculum to the more contemporary needs and challenges that may emerge. The curriculum like the pre-school child must grow and develop along relevant lines which match the needs and challenges posed by the changing groups of students entering the pre-school each year.

In the development of a balanced pre-school curriculum, it would be wise to re-

emphasize the following principles which have been tested from time immemorial and found sound:

- (i) The integration of all the experiences and activities found in the pre-school curriculum. The emphasis on inter-relationships of experiences and activities should be in sharp contrast to the dangers of rigid compartmentalization often associated with an over structured curriculum.
- (ii) Child centred experiences and activities based on sound principles of child development.
- (iii) A methodology which is characteristically pre-school in nature and suited to young children. This is especially important in pre-school education because methodology and content are almost inseparable in early childhood education. The methodology uniquely employed in pre-school is often more informal and less structured. It also appeals more to the interest, responses and active participation of the young children. An example of the unique methodology associated with pre-school work is the play-way method of organizing activities, projects and experiences. This, of course, does not mean that more structured methods have no place or cannot contribute to the fulfillment of the total needs and development of the pre-school child. It is merely suggested that these more structured approaches be used more sparingly for specific purposes and for shorter periods.
- (iv) The pre-school curriculum must also be characterised by a large measure of flexibility. This concept of flexibility usually means that continual adjustments must be made based on particular demands, problems and challenges. Rigidity of form, procedures and experiences should be avoided.
- (v) The pre-school curriculum is definitely characterized by a more leisurely pace. This pace is determined in concert by the children and the teacher who is sensitive to their needs.

Form of the Pre-school Curriculum for Total Development: Some Concerns

If the pre-school curriculum is to have a truly meaningful role in meeting the total needs of young children and find a place for itself in the Malaysian education system, it must conceptualize and demarcate a unique, if not an indispensable domain of interest and concerns. The areas delineated for pre-school education must be relevant to the needs of children in the age range served. More importantly too, they must not pre-empt and repeat what is already sufficiently covered in the New Primary School Curriculum. Whilst some overlap may be unavoidable because of the range of individual differences that exists both at the pre-school level and in standard one, the core of what is actually implemented in the pre-school should be materially, qualitatively and quantitatively different from what is done in the early stages of primary education. Needless repetition and overlap in coverage is both wasteful and boring in most instances, and does not contribute to a continuous and harmonious total development. The danger implied is real in a significant number of pre-schools which openly advertise the fact that they intend to cover standard I or even standard 2 work. This is meant as an incentive for parents who are overly anxious for the rapid development and progress of their children.

Taking into account the content and methodology recommended in the New Primary School Curriculum, pre-school education can most easily find and occupy itself with areas of concern and efforts which need not duplicate early primary education. There is a legitimate, viable, crucial and unique domain that deals with the **pre-requisites** and **foundations** of skills, knowledge, attitudes and values fostered in early primary school education. The scope

for a pre-school curriculum which can cater to total development which is sound is boundless and also most deserving in that it deals with needs, growth and development of children at a unique and important stage in their formative lives. Bloom would, for example, capture the importance of the early years before 6 by pointing out that about 50% of the variance involved in a child's relative standing or position in his group at age 17 is accounted for by the time he is 6. The need for special, unique, stimulating and enriching experiences on their own rights and claims at the pre-school level is not hard to establish or convince parents, decision-makers and the general public.

The broad shape of the ideal pre-school curriculum is not something that is completely new. Work done in the Curriculum Development Centre, Malaysia and in many foreign centers of early childhood education and curriculum development institutions have mapped out the boundaries and the elements within them that should comprise a sound pre-school programme. What remains is adaptation and adjustment to our national and local situation of specific needs and challenges.

Some areas which deserve to be developed and receive urgent priority are:

(i) General Language Development

- mastery of the mother tongue or the language used as a medium of instruction.
- emphasis on the spoken language and listening comprehension. Skills in expressing ideas clearly.
- attempts to widen the vocabulary and conceptual range of the child.

(ii) Thinking Skills

- simple experiences involving making discrimination and generalizations.
- exposure to a variety of experiences with emphasis on relating and summatizing them
- helping children to arrive at simple conclusions based on experiences resulting from experiments in, for example, water and sand play.
- developing their creativity and imagination through projective play.
- stimulating their curiosity and natural desire to find out and work through situations and problems.

(iii) Number Skills

- a variety of pre-requisite and foundational number skills could be fostered, namely, classification, comparing, matching, arranging in order, making judgments concerning size, shapes, height, width, and breadth.
- concrete experiences with a range of objects in activities involving sharing, buying and selling.

(iv) Science Concepts

- nature observation and study of objects, plants, animals, insects and other aspects of their environment.
- experiences are discussed and simple records in the form of specimens and scrap books are planned.
- attributes of things, objects and living things are noted.
- relationships between observations and experiences are stressed.

(v) Muscular Control and Co-ordination

- control and co-ordination of the fine and large muscles through games and activities like beading, threading and manipulating blocks and objects.
- eye-hand co-ordination activities.
- balancing skills.
- judging speed and spatial relationship through play like catching and throwing balls.
- using different parts of the body effectively.

(vi) Art and Craft

- finger painting and other forms of simple painting activities.
- making patterns with a variety of materials.
- handwork.

(vii) Play

- role play of important people in the children's lives.
- imaginative and projective play.

(viii) Socio-emotional Development

- fostering confidence, co-operation, helpfulness, kindness and other desirable qualities in both formal and informal situations.
- developing attitudes of perseverance, curiosity, and tolerance of difficulties and frustrations.
- skills in inter-personal relationships.

(ix) Music

- appreciating songs and other forms of music.
- skills in singing.
- appreciating sound patterns, tones, rhythm and melodies.

(x) Movement

- skills in timing and rhythm in body movements.
- expressing feelings through movements.

(xi) Moral

- being thankful to God for all the good things and blessings enjoyed. Ability to express these feelings formally or informally.
- saying simple prayers of thankfulness or requests.
- sense of right and wrong.
- sense of reciprocity of effects.
- values of truth, honesty, justice, kindness, tolerance, sympathy, compassion located in concrete instances and practices.

The areas suggested and outlined briefly by no means exhaust the myriad possibilities for pre-school work which is sharply focused on pre-requisites and foundational aspects of

the New Primary School curriculum or the total development of the child. It would be fairly evident that pre-school education has its own legitimate core domain. The brighter children in the pre-schools may be able to do far more, whilst the slower children in standard one may have to be espoused to more pre-school experiences. It should also be reiterated that pre-school education employ methodologies which are characteristically less formal, less structured, less rigid and more geared to play-way approaches.

Some Important Factors in the Realization of the Pre-school Curriculum for Total Development.

In a situation where there are no official, definitive and clear guidelines for the realization and implementation of the ideal pre-school curriculum, more awareness and weight must be given to the pressures and stresses that may distort it. A variety of distortionary pressures may cause the pre-school curriculum to deviate from the ideal. These pressures which may deform the ideal pre-school curriculum may emanate, for example, from parents, teachers, managers of pre-schools or other members in the society. Parents, as a specific example, may exert unduly strong pressures on the ideal pre-school curriculum. It is only natural among many Malaysian parents to want their children to have a speedy and accelerated head start through pre-school education. The common indices often associated with this type of head start are in the areas of reading, writing and arithmetic. These indices, moreover, revolve more specifically around the more formal skills in the areas focused on. Many teachers and pre-school principals are easily cowed and held ransom to these high expectations originating from the parents and the society in general. There is also the possibility that the teachers and principals of pre-schools may take the initiative in generating these pressures because they want to be seen to be effective, successful and delivering the goods as exemplified in the more formal skills referred to earlier. It is, therefore, fairly common to find situations where parents, teachers and principals interact to set up an upward spiral of standards and expectations. These are pressures which are most difficult to resist especially in the private sector where pre-schools may have to compete for pupils, or to hold on to them.

The pre-school curriculum that is actually implemented is often quite fluid and changeable dependent on localized factors. In such a situation where the curriculum has not assumed a definite and generalized form, the play of effects consequent to the pressures mentioned earlier could have a profound impact on the nature of the curriculum. What often results from the resolution of these forces on the ideal curriculum, is far removed from the desired curriculum that is truly committed to the total development of the child. The ideal is thrown to the wind, and the pre-schools bend to the unreasonably high expectations of those who have produced these pressures. What, therefore, is needed are more influential and powerful voices or forces that can moderate the effects of these pressures and stresses on the ideal pre-school curriculum. It may not be possible to remove altogether these pressures and stresses. However, there must be some attempt to contain them or minimize their distorting effects to the extent that the ideal pre-school curriculum can find expression and a reasonable chance of successful implementation.

The question of whether the ideal pre-school curriculum can become a reality hinges to a large extent on a crucial factor in the pre-school curriculum. The factor is the role and contribution of the pre-school teacher. The pre-school teacher enjoys an immensely larger measure of freedom as compared to her counterparts in the primary or secondary schools. However, with this large breadth of freedom lies the problem of responsibility and choices for the pre-school teacher. The critical question could possibly take the form of whether the pre-school teacher is ready to assume a responsibility of such a magnitude. A concrete example of the weight of this responsibility rests on her ability to withstand unhealthy pressures from parents, principals or the society at large. It has been observed too often that though a few may measure up to these challenges, the majority are sadly ill-prepared to face or overcome these problems.

A variety of reasons explains this phenomenon where a large majority of the teachers are not up to the task and challenges that await them. Some of the reasons are namely:-

- (i) Poor and unattractive remunerations which often reach very depressing levels. The median pay of pre-school teachers is in the region of \$200/- to \$300/- per month. This is hardly an incentive for anyone to be reasonably motivated and hardworking if she were concerned with monetary returns. Many have to, therefore, find comfort in other sources.
- (ii) Large turnover of teachers.
- (iii) Lack of emphasis on professional training and qualification. The predominant measure used to admit pre-school teachers into the profession is academic. (SPM, MCE, etc.).
- (iv) Lack of long term commitment to pre-school education as a career. This is largely caused by the lack of prospects, job satisfaction or gratifying treatment.

In such a backdrop, where the crucial role of the teacher must be underplayed, one then should not be surprised that the implementation of the ideal pre-school curriculum must remain for a long time and among many pre-schools a dream or a vision hard to grasp and materialize. The weaknesses associated with this key factor in the implementation of the pre-school curriculum must, therefore, attract and demand more attention, if pre-school education is to rise to the ultimate level where the total development of the child can be truly achieved.

Challenges

The pre-school curriculum designed for total development must have a pointed focus on the needs and characteristics of each child. The child that is focused on, is however never alone and is only best understood within his group of peers. The pre-school curriculum that is able to foster total development must possess the capacity to deal with particular individuals and also members of the group. It merely remains to be pointed out briefly that the members within the group are never uniform, but that they differ from each other in varying degrees. It is also necessary to remember that even groups may be different from each other, especially when we consider the degree and aspects of differences that may exist within each. Practicality and necessity at least, therefore, must demand that the pre-school curriculum considers both the individual and the group that it must deal with.

Taking the above into consideration, several important challenges are prominent namely:

- (i) The range of individual differences that a pre-school curriculum has to deal with in various contexts, situations and environments. This is an issue that has generated very intense controversy. It is often the source of heated disagreements among educators who may have different foci of concerns. All the controversies and arguments often imply and suggest that the issues of the large or small range of differences among the pre-school children have never been fully taken into account in the design of the curriculum or the resolution of thorny points. This problem of the range of individual differences also includes the challenge of children with special needs. Some examples are children who are very creative and children who may have specific learning problems. These few examples indicate that the concept of total development for various children may have to be approached differently. The range and variety of potentialities, needs and problems forces the pre-school curriculum to make equally variegated provisions to reach these diverse forms of total development.

- (ii) The social conscience of educators in pre-school education must be moved to take notice of the fact that only about 17.4% of the 4, 5 and 6 year olds in 1981 were catered to in the existing pre-schools. The situation is seen clearly in Table 1.

Pre-school Age Children	1978	1979	1980	1981
Total No. of children 4+ to 6+	911,000	941,000	954,000	972,000
Total No. of children in Pre-schools	98,862	116,664	146,805	168,768
% of children in Pre-schools	10.9%	12.4%	15.4%	17.4%

TABLE 1: Children in Pre-school in Peninsular Malaysia, 1978-1981

Source: Educational, Research and Planning Division, Ministry of Education, Malaysia. (1981)

It is quite apparent that those in the lower socio-economic status groups especially the poverty groups, in the rural and urban areas are left out. The concept of total development must embrace the imperative of total development of **all** Malaysian children, and merely those who have this particular privilege conferred on them. This situation, therefore, must challenge us to seek ways to extend the reach of pre-school education beyond those suggested by the figure of 17.4%. Those outside this pale have just as much equal right to claim for themselves the benefits of total development. Implied in these problems are issues of:

- (a) Access to equal opportunities.
 - (b) Creation of possibilities where all may have fair chances to achieve successes in the variety of forms in total development.
- (iii) As one is moved by issues of social justice and social conscience, one is also inevitably led to confront the issues of cost and affordability congruent with the ideal curriculum geared for total development. As the quality of the curriculum improves and approximates more and more the ideal, costs will invariably soar to levels beyond the majority. This may create problems of affordability which may place total development through pre-school education much beyond the reach of the vast majority. How this issue can be settled may require us to seek the help of Government, and to work towards a situation where government resources can complement and supplement those from the private sector. This would be with the purpose of extending the coverage of pre-school education to include those presently left out.
- (iv) A variety of issues could also pose serious challenges and claim our attention. Some of these have been touched on earlier, like:
- (a) The problem of interfacing and integrating pre-school education with the new primary school curriculum so that the principle of continuity is maintained. This cannot be separated from the issue of the range of individual differences that may exist at the level of children of pre-school years and others at the standard I level.
 - (b) The teacher factors with special focus on the need for high levels of professionalism, commitment and dedication to ensure success of the curriculum.
 - (c) Curriculum materials and facilities needed to translate into reality the curriculum that is truly geared towards total development.

Conclusion

It is not difficult to conceptualize the ideal curriculum that can promote the total development of the child or groups of children. The more difficult problems in Malaysia are associated with issues of dissemination, training, facilities and implementation. Unless these receive more attention, the ideal curriculum will only remain on paper and never be actualized in its fullest form.

The balanced and well developed curriculum alone is not enough. It must be linked with efforts to claim a higher priority for pre-school education than currently enjoyed. This would appear to be a herculean task in the present context of fiercely competing priorities. To make matters worse, resources are scarce and their management very stringent under present circumstances.

Educators, teachers and others who are sympathetic are faced with the task of convincing important decision-makers, parents and the general public to accord pre-school education a higher level of priority necessary for the successful implementation of the ideal curriculum. In the light of the difficulties outlined throughout the paper, it would appear as if this is a daunting task which requires those involved to persevere with a stout and resolute heart. These stamina and commitment are only possible if those involved are clear about the vision and the effort that it entails.

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