

Records indicate that this boy moved from series to series, each time persuaded by the mother to choose a book other than from the preferred one as the series began to end.

The last case study that I would like to present also concerns a young boy who seemed to have some sort of natural immunity to the disease. The family had deliberately chosen not to own a television set and there seemed to be no other cause that could be said to be responsible for the immunity. It is of significance to note that, in this instance too, both parents were severely infected. A sibling of the young boy also had caught the disease. The teacher at school could not break down the immunity and perhaps this was because this child would often prefer to play outdoors rather than spend time in the classroom doing phonic exercises. One day, as he wandered into a class of older children, the teacher there happened to point out a bush-chat singing on a fence just outside the classroom window. Entranced, the little boy told his mother about how his teacher had shown him a "bush-chatter." The mother met the teacher and jokingly spoke about the boy's imagination about a bird called a 'bush-chatter,' at which point the teacher showed the mother and the child a picture of the bird from Salim Ali's field guide to birds. The young child asked for the book and was soon able to match the birds that he saw to pictures in the book and would often request the teacher to name them. Before long, he knew the book better than the teacher and could quickly turn to the appropriate page to show his friends a picture of the bird that they had all seen and which the young boy had confidently identified. The desire to read for himself the names of the birds proved much stronger than the boy's immunity and alas, this child too, soon fell prey to the infection. During a follow-up study, it was found that the boy, now a young man, had not quite kept alive his

interest in birds, but was fully infected with the reading disease, which showed no signs of abating.

So, fellow, RIPs, I leave you to ponder these case studies and urge you to document some from your experience so that we may better understand and manage the spread of this contagion.

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# PERSPECTIVES

## The Capability of the Child

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Language teaching and teachers in the primary classes often ignore the fact that the child in the class is an extremely capable being. A child of four is a linguistic adult in the sense that she is able to communicate, conceptualise and reason in her own language. The child of four can do many other things as well including physical tasks, competently using spatial relations and transformations; visualising, estimating and having a sense of number and quantity. She has acquired all this through a natural engagement with the world around her.

Among all these acquired skills, the best known is language. Language is central to human beings and to learning in the human child. While it is debatable whether her perception of the world is shaped by her language, it is certainly affected by the language she uses. There is no doubt that language is a very important part of our being and is constitutive of our identity in the sense that it both defines us and shapes our development.

### A Child can Deal with all Linguistic Situations

In order to understand the capability of the child coming to the school, we must recognize that she capably interacts with the whole community around her and competently participates in all activities at home. She is able to communicate with and be actively involved in all complex components of her social, cultural and linguistic environment. She can use language in and for any context that she is a part of or has an experience of. She can suitably adjust language to make it appropriate for the context keeping in mind the persons she is speaking to and the occasion for it. It is not that she would not make a mistake or err in choosing the manner of interaction but the mistake is because of her inappropriate reading of the situation, rather than a lack of appreciation of how she should interact in a particular situation. She knows that if it is somebody older than her or if she has to make a

request, she has to be polite and if she chooses not to be polite she has a reason for it. She is able to sense hierarchy and how to manipulate situations in her favour. She uses language fluently to express her desires, talk about her experiences and communicate her emotions. These are all fairly complex tasks and if analysed in detail to bring out what they require, the list would be astounding.

### Concepts and the Child

The child uses language to acquire new ideas and to build her concepts. All kinds of concepts relating to different disciplines, albeit arising from her experience have been acquired by the four-year-old child. For example: concepts about all kinds of social and family relations, the difference and hierarchies among them; concepts related to agriculture, plant life; concepts related to festivals, household work, etc. The child absorbs information like a sponge. We may consider some of this information inappropriate and some information important for her to know. But she learns it all. Once she becomes capable of all this and of conversation there is no stopping her. Be it names of people, utensils, trees, plants, animals, seasons or about who is coming and when, who is going and where, what is the relationship between one person and another, the conversations that happen in the market and many other things; the child knows about all this. Besides this, the child uses language to build arguments, defend her rights, analyse situations as well as build her imaginary world. Using words that she knows, she constructs a description of the world and builds her dreams.

### Syntax and the Child

It is not only important to understand the ability of the child in terms of the concepts that she knows, the intonation and the systematic processing of conversation but also her unconscious knowledge of syntax. The child uses all forms of the verb correctly depending upon the situation she is describing. She

also uses the correct form of the noun and pronoun, if there are multiple forms of these in the language. In her own language, she will not make a mistake in using the correct tense, the appropriate singular, plural or gender as well as the right connectors. If we take a few (say ten) varied sentences in English or Hindi and analyse them, we will realise that these sentences, chosen from a variety of contexts that the child participates in, require phenomenal ability to organise words and 'sub-conscious' knowledge of how to combine words. The sentences used by a three-four year old suggest the capability of making minute distinctions.

We also need to consider that the child comes across new words regularly. Once she knows a word and its broad meaning she uses it in different contexts to develop a deeper understanding of the word. Without prior exposure to all forms of the word she is automatically able to construct all these forms using rules she is unconsciously aware of. Many of these rules are recognised by linguists and some of these are included in grammar books, but many are not yet extracted and identified. Linguists are always trying to construct a better grammar for a language and formulate rules that are able to incorporate different contexts. Much before these rules can be formulated and articulated, all native speakers of that language use them through their shared understanding. The implicit understanding of all these rules including the new changed ones is available to the child.

How has this been Acquired?

There is enough evidence to suggest that in the absence of human interactions language does not develop. There is also ample evidence to suggest that children from different backgrounds and communities acquire different abilities and that their experience influences their knowledge. Though learning is not identical, there are some broad common features and somewhat common stages of learning. We know from our own experiences that adults try to support children in their process of learning. This they do in the manner they think best. In some cases it could be either

speaking like children to make them feel comfortable or trying to simplify sentences by breaking up what the children have to speak and requiring them to copy and repeat many times; or by correcting mistakes made by the child and asking her to repeat the corrected sentence a few times. The importance of these corrections can be discussed and debated but what is clear is that there is an expression of concern for the child and the recognition of making the child feel important. This recognition as well as the encouragement may be very important for the child to learn.

It is, however, clear that not much can be learnt by this prompting, goading and guiding. The knowledge and the ability that the child has is much more than what can be developed through such a process. How many corrections can we help the child make? How much do we guide the child to learn? We also know that children learn what we do not want them to learn very quickly. Children learn many things that we do not consciously know about. The amount that the child knows leads us to argue that it is not active pursuance but natural interaction and immersion in society that makes it possible for a child to learn. Just the fact that the human environment exists for the child and the child is in interaction with a variety of concerned human beings is crucial for constructing this ability in the child.

Do Children learn by Imitation?

Once we recognize that the child learns in interactions with the human world, we can also recognize that the nature of the interactions could influence her learning. There is a widespread belief that "children learn by imitation." It is important to take a view on this as it influences the kind of experiences we construct for the child. If human beings do learn by imitation, then the process of learning can be formulated as follows: Simply allow children to observe what you are doing, ask them to imitate you and make corrections whenever they make mistakes. This could be continued by asking them to repeat the task they have erred in again and again. It is, however, clear by looking at the

knowledge that the child has already acquired before coming to school that this is not an appropriate process. The child cannot participate in conversations and construct all the sentences she does based on what she has heard from somebody else. Most of the sentences that she uses have never been heard by her before. The contexts in which all of them have been produced could not have arisen. While we cannot show that this process of learning is entirely irrelevant at the present stage of our understanding about human learning, it is clear that only a very small part of what the child knows could have been influenced by these kind of processes.

#### Characteristics of the Learning Child

The key aspect of the process of learning includes the desire of the human being to explore the world. In this exploration, she wants to experience more and more of the world and widen the relationships she has with it. There is an inner urge to experience new things, to do new things and to become capable of comprehending challenges.

The second key aspect is the determination and will to do things and not give up easily. A child while learning to walk, tries to stand and falls but does not give up. A child while learning to converse finds that nobody understands her and even though it is not clear how much she understands, she continues to challenge herself to learn. There is, therefore, the determination to continue the struggle to learn things that they want to learn.

The third key characteristic is wanting to do things on her own and expressing everything herself. The outcome for the human child is not as important as what her role in the process was or is going to be.

The fourth characteristic is boundless curiosity. - about what is happening, to whom and why. The human being right from childhood wants to learn about everything around her. She wants to acquire the ability to deal with the world more efficiently and therefore is extremely curious. This curiosity is perhaps the underlying trait that results in the urge for exploration as well as wanting to do things herself. It is this trait

that makes the human child seek new experiences and engage in new situations, challenges and adventure. She is not afraid to explore what her parents are unwilling to explore and exercises her curiosity with determination and independence.

#### Implications of these Characteristics

These four characteristics suggest the kind of interaction with adults that would help children learn. This would include a concern for the child to allow her to explore, do things on her own, recognize her will and determination as well as respect her ability. It implies that the adult needs to recognize that the child will learn by absorbing her experience and while exploring more. The adult can provide opportunities for the child to do that and ensure that the child is only taking challenges and risks that are not hazardous. The classroom is a place which is different from the home and is the other environment that the child is placed in. It is important to underline the difference. The classroom is a place where learning is organized for a group of children not necessarily of the same background and experience. There are expectations of learning that the child is supposed to reach and often teachers do not understand or appreciate the culture and the language of the children. The relationship between the teacher and the children is very different from those of adults at home and their concern is also of a different kind. The time and opportunities available in school are limited. Every child cannot be allowed to explore whatever she wants to and learn whatever she is keen to at that point. These differences need to be appreciated for us to be able to think about possible implications for classrooms.

The four characteristics of the human child - boundless curiosity, the urge for independence, the need to explore and experiment as well as wanting to do things herself - have to be the basis for providing children learning opportunities in school. These would express themselves in different ways for different disciplines.

In the context of language learning, we need to recognize that the child is already capable of using her

home language, has a large vocabulary, uses complete syntax and has the ability to engage in dialogue. We also need to recognize that the child needs the opportunity to do things on her own which means express her ideas, use language differently and build arguments to defend her point of view. Mechanical copying of the teacher and copying from various sources does not help as it does not challenge or interest the child. Building of language ability needs to ensure that the child is capable of engaging with a variety of situations, build more complex arguments, deal with more complex ideas and sustain a dialogue for longer periods including those on abstract concepts. Our classroom processes, therefore, need to provide children space for acquiring this.

#### Allow Children's Languages

We need to recognize that the child would learn best when exploring things around what she knows and therefore can relate to. Constructing new sentences, participating in new kinds of situations require from her a certain degree of confidence and ability in the language being used. If the language of the classroom, therefore, has nothing to do with the language of the child and is not based on the words that she knows, there is no way that she can feel the confidence to explore and take up new challenges. From being a confident participant with a reliable learning process, she has to play a catch up game without adequate opportunity or time.

The classroom generally has children from different language backgrounds. The key principle, therefore, for the teacher is to identify one language which is a link language for all children and learn it. The dialogue in the classroom needs to be in that language so that it will strengthen the abilities of using language (logic, imagination, self-confidence, communication, widening of knowledge etc.). The challenge of removing barriers to communication has to be met by the teacher.

Children need to be allowed to use their own language and to play with all the languages present in the class. They can use words from various languages to express

themselves thereby developing an enriched capability to dialogue.

#### Children need Respect and a Positive Self-Image

The second critical point in the child feeling confident is a positive self-image. The culture, language and the identity of the child has to be respected. It is only when it is respected that she will learn to explore, exercise her will and her curiosity. In the absence of the confidence that what she says or feels will be respected, none of the critical characteristics of learning can be seen in her behaviour.

In order to understand the implications of this and what can be done in classrooms, consider these possibilities: draw a picture of an object on the board and ask children what they would call it. All names suggested by the children are written on the board. Children can then be asked to talk about everything that they know about it in their own language. The class would have children who can explain what has been said, if the speaker herself is not able to speak the other or link language fluently. There, however, must be a clear understanding that the child can speak in her own language and for as long as she wants. There can be many exercises of talking about an event, an activity or anything else. Children could be asked to describe someone they like or a moment in their lives that they cherish.

We must remember that language is far more than words and syntax, it is our entire being and therefore allowing the child to use her own language, means allowing her to express herself and present herself the way she is.

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