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New Season of Learning

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If as educators we come to the classroom as believers in holistic education, we know that it was the symphony of the harmonized development of the head, heart and limbs that created meaningful education. We, at Shikshantar School, believe in creating an environment of joyful learning for children and evolve our curriculum as per the group need. My group last year was a remarkably intelligent thinking group. Most of the seven year olds seemed to enjoy activities which needed to search facts from encyclopedias, play quizzing games at meal times, loved making riddles, sharing opinions on almost everything, and in science, trying to make hypotheses. It seemed to be a class that any teacher would love to belong to.

Since most of the children were strong in their cognition or thinking abilities, our task was to identify the other areas that would need developing. I found it striking that, on a theme in science, of light and colour exploration, most of the activities that children enjoyed were related to acquiring facts, e.g. how are rainbows formed, speed of light is 300,00 km/second, etc. What we needed at that age was to just admire the light and colours around us, explore how sunlight affects us, how it makes us feel, how it brings a change on the ground around us, how it changes the colour in the world around us, etc. It was only when we “felt” what we “did” that we could “think” in our own way and enable discovery.

This ability of being able to manage the complete integration of the realm of thinking with feeling and doing, which we often philosophize in theory, was integrated in action for me in my classroom when I got introduced to the Dr. Rudolf’s View in Education

by a fellow colleague, Mrs. Ameeta Shetty Kapur. One such integration is illustrated below.

As winter approached, we attempted a thematic integration with the world around. Winter as a theme was explored, where we started by seeing what makes us realize that winter is there. Discussion in circle time on “Change of season” brought in the much needed directions for the projects that we had planned in the coming two winter months. ‘Temperature change’ brought focus on clothes and yarns, where we felt the different textures, and brought in first steps of knitting in the classroom. The knots were learnt, need for wearing shoes got integrated with learning how to tie our shoe laces. This activity was explored by making a cut out of shoe flaps with punched holes, and children learned, through step-wise demonstration, how to tie laces in them.

Next, dexterity in fingers was challenged by their knitting the wool. This project was demonstrated by us to children in the form of a story which could be repeated, as the sequence required to finger knit. There was a small pond (here we make a loop with the wool, right side up), a kingfisher bird felt hungry and dived in (we can demonstrate how we put our finger in) and from the water brought out a fish to eat (pull the thread in a loop). The pond was calm again (loop is back in same size again). Different children were able to achieve this to different levels; the important thing was that their attempting, and continued practice. Therefore this was made as a corner activity which children could continue doing in the classroom in their free time. This definitely kept them engaged if they finished their work ahead of time. Even the ones who mastered these were encouraged

to try knitting with needles. Though for a facilitator, it required a lot of material organizing and demonstrating skills, besides keeping loads of patience with children getting stuck at each step and individually addressing each one at their level, it is worth the effort when you see how many skills the children have learnt. I was facilitating this activity alone, but it would certainly be useful to have another person helping out for hand-work in case it is being done for the first time.



Next, the theme of 'Food' was explored and projects like making methi chapatti were learnt from start to finish. The children, as a collective group, learnt to cut the methi, add spices, knead the flour: when twenty-six children take turns at kneading, the flour is really well done! They were handed small balls of dough at each table which they tried to roll out as chapattis to their liking. They also took their chapatti to the kitchen and if they felt confident, under supervision of the facilitator, also cooked it themselves.

The theme of 'Season' was further explored in the next dimension when the focus went from Man to nature, in the next theme - 'Trees/plants in Shikshantar'. The first day of the project was marked by a visit to the first tree planted in the school and we realized why the school had a banyan tree as its logo. For all of us, it was discovering our roots in the school as each child put up their feelings as a leaf on the banyan tree displayed and created a



class tree for the month. Next day, each child had a tree/plant they chose after their nature walk and throughout the week they were near that tree - feeling it, drawing it, taking the leaf imprints, bark imprints, checking facts like what changes the tree underwent over the year, fruits, flowers, seeds, age height (how many storeys, steps, hand spans, etc.). Most of their research was guided by the caretaker of the garden, our Maali Bhaiya. As facilitators, this was a theme which needed minimum managing as each child was settled in different corners of the school, near a palm tree or a mango tree or bamboo plants or a tulsi plant, etc. They were even motivated to finish other work in the classroom before time so that they could discover a new thing about their tree. They were so engaged that they forgot to talk to each other even if they were sitting beside one another under the tree. Finally, a beautiful booklet emerged as a result of this relationship with nature, which was unique with each child's thoughts - a story or a heart-felt poem, hand/feet measured facts, etc. Each drawing was also indicative of the relation that the child had built with their tree. A bamboo grove could look like a plant with hands reaching out to touch the sky or a mango tree could make us feel it needs to shelter itself from snow and have pointed leaves. This was complete 'learning-by-doing' in action.

The journey on the theme of 'Season' went on when these trees turned into homes for our birds. The trip

to a Bird Sanctuary, that houses migratory birds, led to an integration of the 'Season' in totality. The children, in groups, observed and created three different habitats of birds, which were modeled out of Papier-mâché. The kingfishers' tunnel was dug near the make-believe lake in the sand area next to the classroom. We could find a peacock hiding between the tall bamboo groves with a nest there. The details just kept enriching us as adults, for it was visible how keenly children had observed the birds.

All of these themes had certain essentials - The age appropriateness of content; the circle time setting direction of the day; blackboard drawings, in one corner, lending teachers interpretation of that day on the theme that changed every day; verses with or without movement; stories to highlight the sensitive areas; mind mapping to provide closures on themes.

The classroom had a lot of singing, poetry, art and what we saw at the end of three months was the love of children towards poetry, music and art. Even in word-lists, some children had an image next to the word or sentence they wrote, as they had silently absorbed and deeply felt!

Children need to learn more and be creative, but it is us who need to be creative first. We all need to feel, then create in thought, and perform in action.

As teachers, we actually need the maximum learning and not from books alone. We need a journey inwards where we step back, include child-like wonder in our life, relook at nature and the world around us, to feel and do things naturally. This makes all our work just fall in place, and immerses the child in learning. This alone changes our perception, makes us aware and prepared as a teacher.



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