

## A Lifetime of Learning Experience

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### ABSTRACT

This paper depicts the learning experience of the child to adult development during the stages of early primary education to secondary education. It relates the development of the student through a lifetime of learning experience starting from cognitive aspects of learning to conceptual learning. It purports how evolution in learning takes place and how this leads to the development of the child through pedagogy. It explains that learning in the Mauritian society remains academic and is devoted essentially to rote learning with a view of obtaining excellent results in final examinations. It emphasises the need for effective education through learning that is stimulating, relevant and appropriate for the learner. In the end, the aim of the learning experience could be the benefit of learning for life with the view of integrating society as a cultured individual more likely to be useful for society than for self-benefit. This publication, earlier featured for a Teachers' Day article, delicately explains in a brief way the journey of learning from childhood to adulthood.

**Keywords:** Learning, Learning Experience, Society, Education.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

One could go back some forty to fifty years to remember how primary school children in the age group six to nine learnt penmanship. This was a late afternoon activity in some classes helping children to beautifully craft their handwriting and make their sentences look nice to read. To write the 'a' alphabet in the correct way, the teacher would firstly draw an oval shape and tell the students that it takes the shape of an egg and then a tail added to it forms the alphabet. For alphabets going beyond the double line of penmanship, students were told to keep certain shapes above or below the line like the 'f' with a curved shaped extending like a turned pole or an 'l' that is twice as long as the 'i'. These were the initial pleasures of learning to shape alphabets as desired and ensure that our handwriting was legible, nice to look at and simply easy to read. According to Dineheart (2014), early fine motor writing skills were quickly recognised as an important school readiness skill associated with later academic success. As the child grows up, he enters the deeper world of exploration. Kohn (2015) states that reading cannot be rushed as it does not develop 'naturally' as do other complex skills such as walking; it can be fostered not forced. At around eight years or so, he learns to draw maps which are in fact an aerial view of objects that he encounters in his daily life. Piaget (1956) argued that a child's drawing performance reflected the child's cognitive competence. Drawing could merely be a window into the child's cognitive development. A house might look like a rectangle, a tree resembles closely wool or curly hair and a car could be two rectangles superposed on each other. It is just like what one can see from the first storey of a classroom and create the shapes from atop. Then, this map helps in the understanding of space and area management that the child uses to answer questions in geography or environmental sciences in upper classes.

### 2. THE TEACHER IN THE LEARNING PROCESS

In the teaching profession, singing holds a prominent place in teacher training. Teachers are taught to develop their vocal ability and this impacts children who learn songs and poems that they are taught in the different

classes. Obviously, the national anthem remains the easiest one to practise but when the child grows up and develops good memory and better understanding of rhymes, singing becomes an effective way of memorising and practising songs. The popular 'Frère Jacques' or 'Au clair de la lune', sung in chorus and loved by thousands of students evidence the importance of the tune in assisting pedagogical learning over the years. As the child matures, he understands the meaning of the words and tries to better grasp the concepts so that misspellings are avoided. From this standpoint, it is clear that teacher satisfaction in the learning process is increased in relation to professional development activities considered to be 'close to home' and to their needs and expectations, and when they contributed to the improvement of curriculum understanding and increased self-efficacy (Lovett et al, 2008, Nir and Bogler, 2008).

### **3. CONCRETE LEARNING**

Concrete learning takes place in the initial years of childhood with a lot of emphasis on rote learning and practice. Ginsberg and Opper (1969) posited that it is in the classroom that children, especially young ones learn best from concrete activities. This proposition altered the role of the teacher from expositor to one of facilitator who promotes and guides children's manipulation and interaction with various aspects of their environment. Drills through the use of tables in English language help students make a variety of sentences through certain plausible combinations while ensuring that there are limitations with certain usage like 'I go' but 'He goes'. This type of learning develops a degree of accuracy and mastery if it is repeated in the long run.

At the age of ten or eleven, things get tougher for the student. Vocabulary is already over a thousand words for the average learner and even more for better learners. At this level, the child learns to apply his understanding to situations. Comprehension passages are longer and so being the associations of words and ideas. To better develop understanding through conceptual learning, the child learns to mind-map ideas, associate events in a chronological way but also learn the flow of concepts through the sequential relating of events. In 'Paul et Virginie', the departure of leading character Virginie for France is related in terms of an unexpected visit of the French governor Mahe de Labourdonnais to the La Tour family as the children forming part of the idyllic couple in Ile de France have grown up as adolescents after the wonderful and carefree years of bountiful childhood (Betchoo, 2018).

Entering the Primary School Achievement Certificate (PSAC) Grade is the first milestone of the child's academic achievement through gaining the first academic certificate. This has been a competitive contest long before and continues to be so. Competitive learning quickly waives the pleasures of learning through discovery and creativity while placing much emphasis on rote learning. With changes in the curricula, the child learns to develop deeper conceptual skills that include complex multiplication, division and algebra where applicable. Learning to use scales for calculation, performing multiplication through an association of split figures like units and tens or judging an outcome on a pie-chart through percentages require a higher level of interpretation and intuition. A recent meta-analysis of studies compared the use of manipulatives or hands-on practical apparatus in teaching mathematics, with teaching that relied only on abstract mathematical symbols. There was a significant evidence

that manipulatives had a positive effect on learning (Carbonneau et al, 2013). But this might not be the case in competitive learning all over the world. Note that at this level of competitive learning, the brightest minds get things first while those lagging behind start feeling the toughness of learning and might also feel the frustration of not 'getting into the picture'.

#### **4. THE LEARNING PROCESS IN EARLY SECONDARY CLASSES**

The transition to college or secondary school is another key stepping stone in the child's educational development. The first three years of secondary schooling are a refreshing cycle for learning as they avoid the toughness of competition undergone in the final years of primary education. All of a sudden, more than ten subjects are proposed to students with equal emphasis given to academic and non-academic issues. The inclusion of arts, music, physical education or entrepreneurship along with ancestral languages make learning bulky but challenging in the early years. Nobori (2012) commented that arts integration goes beyond including art projects in class; it is a teaching strategy that seamlessly merges arts standards with core curricula to build connections and provide engaging context. Recently coupled with computer education, learning becomes tougher as existing subjects like Mathematics, languages and the Sciences go a step deeper in terms of complexity and conceptuality. Gaining new words, vocabulary, concepts and ideas make learning challenging and stimulating. To some extent, the inclusion of literature in lower secondary classes makes sense through the possibility of associating learning to a different context often quite different from the Mauritian one. Learning Shakespearean prose or idioms encourage the child's association with prose that he was not accustomed to earlier. Smith (2005) explains that an enjoyment and appreciation of literature gives students the ability to develop this into an interest in books and reading as they move away from their studies into their adult lives. They develop the confidence to approach and tackle new forms of books and writing. They do not only learn language aspects but also use it for specific and aesthetic purposes. Familiarity with literature can provide students with a fresh and creative angle with which to approach their studies and their lives in general.

#### **5. THE LEARNING PROCESS IN UPPER SECONDARY CLASSES**

The upper secondary classes are tougher especially when the first secondary cycle ends with the School Certificate or 'O' level examination. The learning behaviour tends to change as well with greater emphasis on developing learning, retention and answering skills. This adds to learning complexity in an atmosphere characterised by intense competition and the need to score the highest percentage. In a competitive situation, very often, the pleasure to learn freely and espouse notions of wider learning like philosophy or the liberal arts are cast aside to the detriment of academic learning. For this reason, the next higher level examination known as the 'Advanced level' examination offers room for some critical thinking through the well-established General Paper, a mandatory subject for all students, which requires a mix of mastery of English language with greater openness of events within and outside the educational boundary of the student. This compels additional effort in learning concepts that might not have been included in the prescribed curriculum of the student.

So far, the learning experience evolves constantly from childhood to adulthood from a concrete learning experience that requires sensory-motor knowledge at the beginning of learning to pre-concrete knowledge during the early school years and concrete knowledge as the child matures in the higher classes. It is seen that essential learning experiences are developed at times when final examinations are not looming and there is ample time to fit in all types of learning experiences for the student. This is a welcomed idea but the sheer learning pleasure through discovery and acquiring new learning skills and techniques are not developed in the years that precede the 'O' and 'A' level examinations that are competitive with a system focused essentially on grading and rating.

What sounds alarming is whether the learning experience culminates into something really meaningful in the longer run. Assuming that some fifteen years of continuous schooling have helped develop a variety of learning skills from the innocent child to a full-fledged educated and developed adult, there might still be some missing gaps in learning. Academic learning, being a high component in the instruction of the individual, often limits the real and expected learning experience. One might learn to qualify for a certificate and seek opportunities like higher education or a job prospect. In the quest for such demanding goals, other important considerations seem to be left apart. This is where experiential learning might be useful but the question is whether it really applies. In experiential learning, the student has to manage his own learning. The relationship between student and instructor is different, with the instructor passing much of the responsibility to the student. In this case, the curriculum may not be clearly defined with the student having to identify the knowledge that he requires, then acquire himself, reflecting on his learning as it goes along (Moon, 2004).

## **6. LEARNING TO LIVE IN SOCIETY**

Learning to live in society has been a major missing component of the student's learning experience. Although efforts have been made to inculcate values like citizenship and ecologically-responsible living, little is seen in terms of the real contribution that the young generation might make of the environment where he lives. The family might have had a persuasive role here although it looks that parental values look more absent in Mauritius today. Walberg (1984) concluded that family educational culture includes family work habits, academic guidance and support provided to children and stimulation to think about issues in the larger environment. For example, little is seen in terms of social responsibility of younger citizens in a society too much dependent on consumption, materialism and spending. According to Andrzejewski & Alessio (1999), issues of global justice, environment, survival, human rights and citizenship are, for the most part, not major components of the curriculum in PK-12 schools and are still given short shrift in higher education institutions. They are rarely addressed by administrators, school boards or trustees, teacher or faculty unions, state legislators, proposals for educational reform. Where global issues are addressed, they are often approached through the biased perspectives of ethnocentrism, national chauvinism, and global economic dominance. For instance, the green environment is not looked after with enough care and littering and poor management of waste are common eyesores for the public. Poverty might not be rampant in the country but ways to alleviate it through more sharing and social involvement with the vulnerable groups might be helpful. Here again, with little empowerment on behalf of the young generation, a carefree free attitude might be

instilled among the youth. Next comes the engagement of the young people with civil society. This looks to be apparently something rare since the young generation is concerned particularly in developing competences to become employable, pursue a rewarding career and enjoy personal comfort.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The learning experience is something enticing to know, share and develop in the course of a lifetime. Definitely, each individual has his own way of learning and perceiving it. It is clear that everybody wants to learn in order to fulfil a life ambition with a rewarding career. What remains interesting so far is the adventure that he goes through his lifetime which is in part an obligatory pathway filled with programmed instruction at all stages of his learning lifetime and, in another part, the epicurean pleasure of learning through discovery and intuition—a bit like the small egg and the tail making a beautifully crafted ‘a’. On this Teachers’ Day, a reflection on a lifetime of learning experience adds a droplet to the ocean of learning and teaching. An odyssey from early childhood to adulthood brings us back to where we needed teachers to help us climb each learning step and without whom, today’s achievement would not have been possible and worse, meaningful.

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