Implementing a Developmental Perspective of Learning in the First Year of School: Brunei Darussalam

"Melentur bulah semasa masih rebung"

"To bend the bamboo start with the shoot."

(Malay proverb)

This is a report of an intervention program in a primary school in Brunei Darussalam. The program was designed to assist the process of educational change from a traditional model of learning, to a model based on a developmentalist perspective. The intention was to demonstrate to educators and to parents the relevance of developmentally appropriate learning practices to the early learning experiences of young children.

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Introduction

Building on the belief that young children learn best in an environment which provides them with an interactive role in the learning process the researcher worked closely with a preschool teacher to implement a developmental perspective in the classroom. The intention was to help the teacher construct a learning environment appropriate to the needs and learning styles of young children, one which provided an alternative to the traditional approach dominant in Brunei, and encouraged children to construct their own knowledge. Working as a teacher educator in Brunei I was concerned that there was not a venue within the government or the private school systems of Brunei, where teachers could observe developmentally appropriate learning strategies being implemented. Frequent observation visits to graduate students in schools had given rise to an awareness of a trend amongst graduates to revert to traditional methodology. This research was an attempt to develop a strategy to assist in overcoming the problem.

The focus of the intervention was to introduce learning activities, which reflect the educational philosophy of educators such as Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky who suggest that the thinking of young children is tied to concrete direct first hand experiences. As suggested by Kammii and DeVries (1978) education in the early years needs to be strongly based in the representation of experience if it is to meet the needs of young children. However, when planning for change, it is necessary to be aware that countries and cultures view children and childhood from different perspectives and have different constructs of effective practice. The cultural context of Brunei was a significant consideration in the planning of this research project.

The Study - Background Information

The research was conducted at a primary school, selected by the Ministry of Education, as a research venue for the Faculty of Education at the university. The intervention was conducted in one of the three preschool classes at the school. Prior to commencing the project the researcher arranged with the Ministry for a volunteer graduate from the early childhood education course at the university to be posted to the school. A preparatory year was spent, working with the teacher, to organise the physical environment before beginning intervention strategies in the classroom. The preparation included assessing needs, ordering and obtaining materials and planning the focus of the intervention. The teacher was involved in all stages of the planning and ordering of the resources and many things such as buying material for curtains and plastic covers for tables were done at her suggestion.

Participants

The class consisted of sixteen children, nine boys and seven girls. The age of the children, at the beginning of the year, ranged from four years nine months to five years and eleven months. The children were all Brunei Malay citizens and registered as being of the Islamic faith.

Duration

The research was conducted over period of one school year commencing four weeks after the children began school, to allow for a smooth transition to school. This was at the request of the teacher, so that the children could familiarize themselves with the routine of the school
day. At the beginning of the year the teacher advised the parents that the class would be involved in an experimental program with the university. Parents did not see this as a problem as long as children ‘got their work done’.

In the early stages the researcher spent a considerable amount of time at the school, with the teacher, observing progress of the children as well as having regular meetings with the teacher for planning and discussion. For the first term of the year the researcher worked with the teacher three times a week in sessions lasting from one to one and a half hours. During the second and third terms of the year the amount of time spent by the researcher in the classroom decreased to one session a week. As the teacher became increasingly confident in implementing the strategies involved in the project, the necessity for a high level of support from the researcher lessened. However, it was important for regular visits to continue, both to observe and record progress and to provide continued support for the research.

Method

Two main sources were used for gathering data, the teacher and the children. The sources were observations in the classroom, by the researcher, of the teacher and the children working in their natural setting and unstructured interviews with the teacher, usually held during morning break time after the intervention session. These were combined with the collection of dated work samples and photographs. During the post activity discussion with the teacher time was spent talking and reflecting on the classroom activities, the children's reaction and the reaction of the teacher. Interpreting and analyzing the data was an ongoing part of the process and was used as basis for further discussions and planning as the year progressed.

The Culture of Brunei

Brunei is the only surviving politically independent Malay Islamic Monarchy in South East Asia (Braighlinn, 1992 p.18). One ethnic group, the Brunei Malays, is dominant in the society. The unique culture of this country was recognised and the intervention strategies for the research were planned to accommodate the culture, religion and the philosophy of Brunei, continuity and tradition being important aspects of the culture. As cited by King (1994) the major consideration of social articulation, that permeates life in the sultanate, is rank status, the main distinctions being between nobles and non-nobles and between those who are considered Bruneian and those who are non-Bruneian. This distinction is reflected in citizenship status. Bruneian Islamic Malays are automatically citizens of the country, the majority of the Chinese and indigenous people of Brunei are classed as permanent residents and citizenship is difficult to obtain.

Malay traditions and the Islamic religion have been interwoven into the national ideology of Brunei, articulated as Melayu Islam Beraja - Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB). "The guiding principle in the progressive development of the [nation] is, and will continue to be, the perpetuation of the reality and the continuity of the national philosophy of Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB)." (Idris, 1996). This doctrine dominates all aspects of life in the country and is central to educational theory and practice. Hence it is an important consideration when planning for change.

* Muslim followers must continue to uphold the nation's concept of Melayu Islam Beraja or Malay Islamic Monarchy (as long as it stays within Islamic teaching) that forms the
foundation of the country's social and political system" (Borneo Bulletin 18 July 1998).

Pedagogy from the West needs to be adapted to the culture of Brunei and the strong Islamic tradition in which the culture is grounded. Bearing this in mind the strategies that were implemented were adapted to avoid conflict with the cultural mores of the country. Gammage (1996), citing the analysis of Gammage and Little (1994) for the OECD, refers to cultural traditions being one of eight areas of concern in countries revising their early years policy. At all stages in planning we observed the religious and cultural requirements of the curriculum, as defined in the 'Syllabus for Prasekolah', issued by the Ministry of Education.

The education system of Brunei emphasizes cognitive outcomes rather than social ones and this has an effect on the community's perception of quality in education. Therefore it was important to record and document progress as it occurred so that progress made by the children could be observed and observations recorded. This was done by keeping assessment portfolios of children's work as well as a photographic record, which could be use for display along with samples of the children's achievements and identified growth areas.

**Educational Policy in Brunei**

The government school system of Brunei provides free education for Brunei citizens. The strong emphasis on religion, culture and tradition of the education system is reflected in the National Education Policy and the stated aims and objectives of education in Brunei. The National Education Policy states that:

"...its intention [is] to establish an effective and equitable education system that will reinforce the National Philosophy of a Malay Islamic Monarchy. This philosophy aims to develop a progressive and peaceful nation within which the Malay Language and Culture, the Islamic faith and values, and loyalty and allegiance to the Monarch and the State are paramount."


The ideology of the national policy statement is reflected in the aims of the policy and in the objectives of the education system.

Malay is the official language of Brunei with English being used as the language of education and of business. The country has a bilingual educational policy, *dwi bahasa*, (two languages). In practice this policy means that children are taught in Malay until Primary Four, with English a subject of the curriculum. From Primary Four, Mathematics, Science, and Geography are taught in English, other subjects are taught in Malay and English is a subject of the curriculum. This system presents problems for students who do not have contact with English outside of the school environment. Many of these students are not sufficiently fluent in English by Primary Four, to cope with learning in a second language.

The education system faces some significant challenges. As suggested by Attwood and Bray (1989 p.74) education in Brunei "suffers from a severe qualitative malaise in the midst of material luxury". They reported that examination results show low scores, particularly in English and mathematics. Attwood and Bray also stress high repetition rates and the style of teaching and learning as factors that cause concern within the system. Bruneian teachers
traditionally use didactic methods with strong emphasis on rote learning. Typical lessons are book-based and teacher centred (p.75). "In 1986, some 800 children over the age of fourteen were still in primary school and 34% of Form Five students were over the age of eighteen. More recent figures are not available from the Ministry, but there is little evidence to believe that the situation has improved.

**Preschools in Brunei**

The Brunei Government uses the term pre-school (prasekolah) for the first year of compulsory education. Children who turn five by the end of March commence their education in January, at the beginning of the school year. "Preschools in Brunei Darussalam form a part of the mainstream educational system and are located within the same premises as the primary school" (Chandraseagran, Aisah and Khairiah p. 10).

**The National Curriculum**

Brunei has a national curriculum, which is centralised and prescribed by the Ministry of Education. Most classrooms are academically oriented and the syllabus is grounded in a behaviorist approach to learning, based on direct instruction. Educational practice relies heavily on workbooks, ‘learning by worksheet’, and whole class instruction is at the core of current practice. The curriculum development department supplies seven textbooks for preschool and parents are expected to pay for them.

According to Chandraseagran, Aisah and Khairiah (1993) the curriculum for pre-school is a prescribed set of experiences to prepare the children for primary school. Children are introduced to basic language and number concepts to provide the foundation for further study in lower primary. The syllabus is based on the following areas, courteous behaviour and moral development, skill development (reading, writing and mathematics) Islamic religious education, health and safety, movement and games and the development of talents (special skills). "Islamic religious knowledge is an explicit component of the curriculum beginning with pre-school and children are taught the ritual ceremonies associated with Islamic prayer and memorize verses from the Koran" (Noori, 1996). These subjects are intended to be taught through informal methods, however, the widespread use of workbooks means that this does not always happen. Play is interpreted as an adjunct to learning and children are allowed to play when 'their work' is done.

Parents, teachers and principals, who were interviewed by the researcher, all made specific reference to the fact that pre-school is a preparatory year for primary one and the focus of learning should be on an academic approach. One pre-school parent said that "there is no need to play at school because if there is too much play the children will only think about play rather than thinking about their work and concentrating on learning".

In the typical classroom one finds highly regimented activities taking place, children spend their time at pencil and paper tasks, including coloring in, tracing and copying. Classroom displays depend mainly on commercially produced or teacher made materials. Workbooks and the learning and reciting of facts are dominant and children are reinforced for paraphrasing what has been taught. The use of discrete materials is not considered to be important in the learning process and from my observations of preschool classrooms they are rarely used. My intention was to demonstrate that integrating learning and using ‘real objects’ facilitates the development of true understanding. Cooking, was one activity used to introduce integrated experiences, providing the basis for reading and writing activities as children studied recipes and drew and wrote about their experiences. Measuring, weighing
and associated changes observed because of heat and temperature were integrated into
science and mathematics.

Implementing a developmental perspective was approached with care. Powell, (1987 p.195)
cited in Katz (1993) suggests "it is not possible to manipulate teaching techniques without
modifying program content". With this in mind and being aware of differences in focus
between the pre-school syllabus and the approach being advocated, change was introduced
slowly, starting with a daily session of one hour, which was increased over time. This was to
give the teacher, the children and their parents the opportunity to adapt to the different
approach to learning.

The Successful Implementation of Change

Successful change is a continuous process, it takes time for teachers to absorb the need for
change, to participate in planning for change and to work to facilitate change (Marsh, 1988).
With this in mind close consultation was maintained with the teacher at all stages during
planning and implementation. So that the teacher could assimilate teaching strategies and
subsume them to her individual style different strategies were introduced one by one.
Accepting the premise that "teachers must be knowledgeable about child development
before they can implement a program based on child development principles" (Bredekamp,
1990) the teacher invited to participate was a graduate of the early childhood education
program at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam. As such, she had an understanding of the
theoretical framework and pedagogy of early childhood education and she was willing to
implement the learning strategies central to a developmental perspective.

Bredekamp, (1987) cited by Meador, (1996) suggested two criteria that were crucial in the
implementation of developmentally appropriate practice, age appropriateness relating to
curriculum and practice, and individual appropriateness to meet the unique needs of each
individual. A significant issue, in the transition to developmentally appropriate learning, was
how to implement the Ministry of Education syllabus, in a way that met these two critically
important dimensions of a developmentalist perspective.

The researcher worked with the teacher, modeling strategies and appropriate ways in which
to interact with the children. Advantage was taken of opportunities to link learning activities
to the syllabus, in a way that conformed to developmentally appropriate practice. A topic of
the preschool syllabus 'My School' was used as a starting point and we asked the children:

• "What can you tell us about school?"
• "What things do we want to know?"
• "How can we find out?"

From these questions activities involving discussion, decision making, social interaction,
visits to places in the school such as the library, the clinic and the canteen, and writing,
drawing, measuring and counting evolved. These experiences were both individual and age
appropriate.
Learning Centres, Exploration and Play

Constructing the learning environment was a joint effort. Working with the teacher we planned learning centres for socio-dramatic play, language and literacy development, art, mathematics and science. The children adapted readily to the changed physical environment. Discussion and example dealt with problems that were perceived as being an issue, such as sharing equipment, moving from one activity to another and packing away.

The children readily accepted the need for rules and understood that various areas in the room were designated for specific purposes. Together, the children and the teacher developed a list of rules based on the research of Heins, (1996) which suggested an optimal number of four or five rules, presented as positive rather than negative statements. The rules compiled by the teacher and the class and displayed prominently in the classroom are:

1. Share with friends.
2. Pack away equipment you have used.
3. Help others to keep the classroom tidy.
4. When making something you are the only one who has the right to mess it up.
5. People can be hurt if you throw things.

Understanding Mathematics

The researcher and the teacher began working together at the beginning of the school year with periods of exploration and free play to familiarize the children with the newly acquired resources and the new approach. Materials that were used included wooden blocks, pattern blocks, multi-link cubes, cuisenaire rods, puzzles and geoboards. The teacher was encouraged to supplement these with a range of ‘found’ materials, such as shells, seeds, buttons, bottle tops and recycled containers, for activities such as sorting, classifying, one to one correspondence and making patterns. As the children became familiar with the materials, exploration and free play experiences were used to establish mathematical concepts.

Exploration and play were used to extend the mathematics syllabus, which focuses mainly on learning the numbers 1-10 and addition and subtraction, colour and basic shapes, to develop a more diversified approach including measurement and spatial awareness activities. Pattern blocks and construction materials were very popular with the children.

Concrete materials were used to help the children establish their concept of number. Developing an understanding of number concepts is essential in preschool as the majority of the primary school mathematics syllabus is devoted to ‘teaching number’. Complex operations such as multiplication, numbers in the 100s, and two and three digit vertical addition and subtraction are taught in year one.

Asking the children to draw or write about their experiences during free play and exploration integrated literacy development with mathematics. The teacher was encouraged to provide models of words and to scribe words or sentences for the children to copy as they drew and wrote about their experiences.
Developing Language and Literacy

Developing the connection between spoken and written language was important. During my time in early childhood classrooms I had observed very little spoken language taking place. Interaction between the children was limited and there was very little discussion or dialogue relating to work. During exploration and free choice time it was observed that the children tended to play alongside each other, in parallel play. Joint projects involving discussion and planning had to be deliberately encouraged by asking the children to share the materials and to work in flexible groups. This reflected the culture of Bruneian schools were a quiet classroom is seen to be an effective classroom. With appropriate intervention and modelling from the teacher the children came to enjoy working cooperatively, initiating activities with others, being involved in joint projects and recording their activities by writing or drawing. Discussion occurred as the children worked together and in the sharing sessions we held at the end of activity time. Within two weeks of commencement of the research the children were happily interacting with each other on joint projects.

To help the children learn to use language more effectively and to understand the conventions of language, they were encouraged to share their recording of the activities, which they had participated in during exploration or free choice time. Drawing and writing were used as scaffolding to give focus to the discussion. Children were encouraged to talk about their work and to present their ideas in language. They were asked to recount or describe what they had been doing or what they discovered during the session. Initially this was difficult since the children were not accustomed to discussing or sharing ideas. A large amount of teacher input and modelling was required before they were willing to do this with confidence.

Writing

In the early stages of the research the children were given models of their names to copy. Within a few days of the commencement of the project all children could attempt to write their names, with varying levels of skill. Normally writing their names would not have been introduced until the middle of the year when a majority of the letters of the alphabet had been sequentially taught. The belief permeates the Brunei education system that children cannot write until they have been specifically taught the letter shapes and had the opportunity for extensive practice of the letters in their workbooks. And so a deliberate attempt was made to use drawing and writing as a basis for literacy development using the children's own language. This can be seen in the following work sample, which the teacher has annotated to show that it includes letters the children had not been taught:

"Faishal pergi ke _rumah neneknya" (Faishal went to his grandmother's house).

Oral Narratives

Oral story telling has a significant role in Malay culture and it was decided to introduce News-time to provide the children with opportunities to share personal narratives. This provided an occasion in which children could tell stories about their lives and their experiences and build their confidence as competent users of language. Recognition was given to the need to develop a participatory role for the audience and students were encouraged to interact with the storyteller and ask 'open ended questions'. The children
were encouraged to recount personal stories and these were selected for use as modelled writing. They began with simple sentences such as:


Teacher interaction with the children and the asking of open-ended questions has proved to be a useful strategy for developing discussion in the classroom. The children were encouraged to formulate their own questions and to answer the questions of others. As the year progressed the children became more willing to discuss ideas with their peers as they learnt to solve problems, in consultation with others, rather than relying on the teacher to provide an answer or solution.

To help the children construct meaning from text and develop their concepts about print, the teacher was assisted to develop a print rich environment, with objects and equipment being labeled and print displayed. The reading corner was supplied with a range of books in Malay and English and children were given a quiet time each day for independent reading, in which they interacted with books. The making of class books and the shared reading of ‘Big Books’ were encouraged. Drawing and writing about experiences became an integral aspect of learning.

Social Interaction

Reciprocal social interaction between the children and between the teacher and the children is an important aspect of a developmentally appropriate learning environment and, as such, it was encouraged. During the year, in my observations of the class, I noted an increase in teacher interaction with the children, both on an individual basis and in the whole class setting. The culture of Brunei encourages the use of titles and teachers are universally addressed as "Chikgu" (teacher), never by their names and the children's names are not used very often. However, during my visits to the classroom I observed that as the year progressed the teacher used the names of children more often and she made more individual and relevant comments to the children about their work. It became apparent that the teacher was becoming more aware of the children as individuals. There was also an observable increase in social interaction between the children as they worked on activities that involved co-operation.

Reflectivity and Teaching

The teacher was encouraged to reflect upon her teaching and regular discussions were held to review progress and to encourage reflectivity. As the year progressed she recognized and appreciated the value of what was happening in the classroom. The teacher gradually became aware of how concrete materials could be used to assist in meeting the formal workbook based requirements of the syllabus, in a way that helped the children to develop their understanding and consolidate their learning. The progress made by the children, especially in their literacy development, was marked.

As she became accustomed to putting her thoughts into words the teacher revealed a growing awareness of the benefits of an approach to learning which focuses on individual needs and development. However, she was more aware of change within the children and the work they were producing than she was with the observable changes in her own teaching strategies and methodology.
Parent Participation and Education

Strong evidence supports the position that positive relationships between school and home contribute to student achievement and attitudes (Brand 1996). At present parents are not involved in the schools, even in the early years. To develop a more active role for parents it has been suggested that regular letters be sent home reporting on daily happenings in the classroom, children's work be displayed and parents be invited to help in the classroom.

Interviews conducted with parents have revealed that there is a need for parent programs if acceptance of new ways is to be understood, and accepted by the parents of Brunei. A program of workshops, and parenting programs has been suggested to the school. The intention is to build parent awareness of the benefits of change and to encourage involvement in a system based on parents and teachers working together. Fourteen parents, interviewed by the author as part of ongoing research into early childhood education, said they would like to help in the classroom, but no parent had been asked to help in the classroom.

Summary

Work samples collected by the teacher, as a part of the process of portfolio assessment, and observation records have shown evidence of the progress made by the children. They have developed their ability to initiate activities, produce original written work and interact with others in joint activities and discussions. An observable outcome is a marked shift in focus from coloring in prepared worksheets to the producing of the children's own drawings. As one parent observed during an interview "my child gets bored in school because of so much coloring in". The teacher was aware of specific rewards and gains from the program. These include an observable positive change in the development of the children, an increase in communication skills, social interaction and developing literacy ability. The children exhibited an eagerness to participate in sharing oral narratives, to discuss ideas and report on activities.

Interest shown by peers, the school hierarchy and the Ministry of Education, and the acquisition of special funding, served to motivate the teacher and increase her feeling of achievement. However, despite being able to see the advantages of teaching from a developmental perspective the teacher still felt a strong commitment to completing the set workbooks, as required by the school administration and to fulfil parent expectations. Workbooks are handed to the Principal or the Deputy Principal for checking at regular intervals and all pages must be marked and work corrected. Until the Ministry of Education officially amends the syllabus, some procedures and the guidelines for teachers, it will be difficult to gain widespread recognition of developmentally appropriate teaching strategies.

The Results of the Study

A significant outcome of this research has been the implementation of news telling or sharing time in three more preschool classrooms in Brunei. Faculty members from the university are working with teachers to develop regular sessions in the classrooms when children can recount experiences in their lives. The children's stories are used for modelled writing and reading and children are encouraged to draw and or write about their own stories.
and the stories of others. "Pada hari Jumaat lalu Md. Firdaus Ilham sembanyang di Masjid" (Last Friday Md Firdaus Ilham prayed at the Mosque) is an example of the work now being done in some classrooms in Brunei.

This research has been introduced into the classrooms in a similar manner to that previously explicated. Teachers from schools selected by the Ministry of Education were invited to the university to discuss the possibility of involvement. Workshops were held for teachers who were interested in being involved. The teacher mentioned as the participant in the initial stage of the research demonstrated the processes of news telling, modelled writing and ways to help the children with writing.

Members of the early childhood education department worked with the teachers in the classroom, on a regular basis, initially once a week, modelling teaching strategies and assisting the teacher by working with children. As the teachers became confident with the process, visits from faculty members at the university became less frequent, once every two to three weeks. Samples of the children’s work were collected early in the year, in March and six months later in October. This data is in the process of being analysed. It is anticipate that this will be completed early in 1999.

As recognition of the significance of early childhood education grows in Brunei, educators are recognizing that there is a need for a more child centred syllabus for the first years of school. Progress has been made in providing an alternative paradigm, which presents a viable possibility for the future direction of early childhood education in Brunei. This project has highlighted an alternative approach that is available and which would bring early education in Brunei in line with current thinking in the field of early childhood education, while remaining culturally appropriate. To guide theory and practice Brunei needs teachers, with specialist training, practical experience, and a knowledge base grounded in a strong theoretical framework. This project has served to provide a model for a program that moves towards fulfilling this need.

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