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RESEARCH ARTICLE

TEACHING PRACTICES THAT FACILITATE LEARNING AT THE ELEMENTARY LEVEL – A CASE STUDY

***Saminah Khan and Dr. Sarat. Kr. Rout**

Department of Education, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, India

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ABSTRACT

As was noted by Lachman (1997), most textbook definitions of learning refer to learning as a change in behaviour that is due to experience. This is essentially a very basic functional definition of learning in that learning is seen as a function that maps experience onto behaviour. In other words, learning is defined as an effect of experience on behaviour. In the present study; the researcher does an in-depth study of a private English medium school in Kolkata, West Bengal. The Elementary section of the school is selected for the study. To study what facilitates learning among the elementary school learners, the researcher utilises various Observation techniques, interview schedules, focus group discussions, field notes and various forms of formative and summative evaluation techniques. The main purpose of the study was to identify the different teaching practices present in the school. The factors facilitating and obstructing learning. The investigator concludes that there is no fixed practice that facilitates learning. Though experiential learning was found to be the most effective of all, various other factors other than the teaching practices also affect learning in a child.

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INTRODUCTION

Dictionary.com defines learning as the acquisition of knowledge or skills through study, experience, or being taught. Learning is a process that happens naturally amongst humans and animals. It is contextual but not compulsory. It takes time and happens due to the experiences and interactions that take place in a man's life. It is not a collection of factual and procedural knowledge. Learning may be conscious or unconscious. In humans, learning may occur as part of education, training, personal development, schooling or any kind of personal experience or interaction. At the elementary level learning involves motivation, attention and willingness. It cannot be enforced on the learners. So if a child learns willingly then he finds interest in it which will lead to a better learning. Whatever a child learns if s/he is able to apply it in his life, then his learning becomes permanent. Through various activities and experiences that a child goes through in the activities in school or outside it, if the child becomes a receptor to attract knowledge spontaneously and unknowingly then learning becomes pleasurable and permanent for him/her. The elementary stage in a child's life is the prime time to make learning permanent. Whatever s/he learns at this stage helps her/him to construct knowledge and concretize it in her/his future.

Research questions

1. What teaching practices are adopted by the teacher/s in the classroom/s?
2. What practices adopted by the teacher/s are enjoyed the most by the learners?
3. Which teaching practice is the most effective in facilitating learning among the students at the elementary level?
4. What assessment techniques are adopted by the teacher/s to assess the learning of the learners?

Objectives

1. To make an in-depth study of the various teaching practices adopted by the teacher/s in the teaching – learning process classroom/s.
2. To study which practices adopted by the teacher/s are enjoyed the most by the learners.
3. To study which teaching practice is the most effective in facilitating learning among students at the elementary level.
4. To study what assessment techniques are adopted by the teacher/s to assess the learning of the learners.

METHODOLOGY

Relevant Site

Elementary section of Saifee Golden Jubilee English public school, a private English medium school in Kolkata, affiliated

*Corresponding author: Saminah Khan,
Department of Education, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, India.

to the Council for Indian school Certificate Examinations was chosen for the case study.

Tools and techniques

Observation of various activities and teaching practices, interview schedule for teachers, students and parents, Focus group discussions, field notes, photographs and video clippings were used by the researcher for the study.

Procedure of collection of data

First, the researcher sought permission from the school authorities for conducting the case study. Then she was introduced by the principal of the school to the students and teachers in the school assembly. Then the researcher made an in-depth study of all the activities and teaching –learning practices conducted in the school. She observed and noted the different practices and classroom interactions taking place in the school. The teachers, students and parents were interviewed by the researcher. Focus group discussions were also conducted. The groups were small in number consisting of teachers (5 from each class)/ students (8 to 10 from each section)/ Parents (5 to 6). The researcher keenly observed and recorded the different strategies adopted by the teacher/s in the classrooms. The learners were assessed formatively and summatively after a specific time period in order to assess the effectiveness of the strategies adopted for teaching. Relevant photographs were taken and video recordings of various classroom interactions were also done.

Major findings of the study:

After making an in–depth study of the different activities conducted in the school, the researcher found the following teaching – learning practices adopted by the teacher/s in the classroom/s:

Hands – on activities

The learner experiences a firsthand experience of the concept. All the students do and learn on their own. E.g. To understand the concept of odd and even numbers, the learners take a handful of kidney beans in a bowl and divide them in pairs. If none of the beans are left, then the total number of beans is an even number, and if a single bean is left the total number is an odd number. After this the child marks the number written on a chart with red color for even and green color for odd number.

Play – way method:

The most pleasurable experience for a learner is playing. A child learns best through playing. E.g. Prepositions can be taught to children by having an outdoor activity where the children have to follow the teacher’s instruction. The teacher instructs them to jump in and out of a hoop, or stand on the chair or hide under the table.

Curiosity:

Every child is curious to know if there is a secret. The teacher starts the day with an interesting opening of the lesson which makes the learners curious to know. E.g. to teach the edible parts of a plant the teacher first makes a fruit salad with fruits

brought by the learners. Then she discusses about which part of the plant is the fruit used for the salad.

Discussion method

Often the teacher discusses various concepts with the learners and accepts their views.

Trial and Error: many concepts are taught to the children through trial and error. Especially the concepts in science are taught through this method. E.g. multiplication of different numbers is taught to the learners by asking them to collect different sets of an object and add, then do permutation and combination to see how many different forms of sets form the total number of objects.

Lecture method: sometimes the teacher also uses this traditional form of teaching to explain a particular concept.

Circle – time: It is the time at the end of the day/period when all the learners along with the teacher reflect and recapitulate everything that had happened in the class. This way the learners are free to share their likes and dislikes about the class. They also reflect upon the concept they have learned. This helps in the concretization of the knowledge they have learnt.

Use of ICT: it was seen that the use of ICT helped in the better learning of the concepts. Children took a lot of interest in the use of smart boards and other technologies used by the teacher while teaching. But they turned out to be boring and meaningless when they were used for the same purpose and same activity on and on. The children seemed to have learned the next instructions, dialogues or scenes to be shown. This resulted in disorder and indiscipline in the class.

Problem solving method: in this method the learners are given to solve problems and the teacher gives the solution later. This method is mostly practiced in higher elementary classes.

Project –based activity: in this kind of activity the learners are asked to do different projects. E.g. Children of class I are asked to do an activity on healthy and unhealthy food. They are asked to collect pictures and paste them in a paper plate.

Assessment techniques: The assessment techniques are both formative as well as summative. In some classes the formative assessments are in the form of unit tests taken after completion of some concepts and the summative assessments are only in the form of Terminal examinations. In the lower elementary level, the formative assessment is different from the higher elementary level. The learners are assessed daily through recapitulation, application and skill based activities after the completion of one chapter. Then they are formatively assessed after a single sub concept is completed. Finally, the summative assessment takes place after the entire concept is completed. E.g. children are assessed formatively after they learn addition of two digit numbers but they are summatively assessed after they learn all the different methods and types of addition.

DISCUSSION

The teachers use various methodologies to facilitate learning, but it was also seen that there are various other factors that affect learning. The researcher identified them as:

Maturation – mental and physical maturity helps the learners in learning. A matured child can follow instructions clearly and can actively participate in the activities.

Health – both the mental and physical health of the learners affects their learning. The healthier a child is, the better is his learning.

Environment – the classroom environment or environment at home affects their learning. Classes having a congenial and a democratic atmosphere facilitate better learning. Learning is also affected when the environment at home is not congenial. The children coming from broken families or some having single parents were found to learn at a slower pace. Some parents who were indifferent to their wards performance or neglected the child also become a cause affecting learning in their child.

Seating arrangement - the seating plan required for the learners for individual activities affects their learning. Uncomfortable seating arrangement creates chaos and confusion.

Discipline - a classroom having clearly stated rules and regulations is a disciplined classroom. The teacher has good control over the students. Everybody gets a chance to speak and listen. The procedures of the activities take place in an organized manner. If this happens then the learning is better.

Language barrier – often it was observed by the researcher that some children did not follow instructions in English or find difficulty in communicating in English, this again became a hindrance in their learning of the concept. Activities where bilingual or multilingual approach was used helped in fostering learning.

Willingness – the activities in which the learners were willing and interested helped them to learn better.

Regularity – children who are regular to school are found to learn better than the ones who are irregular to school.

Practices enjoyed the most by the learners

The researcher after making an in –depth study found that the same practices are not enjoyed by all the learners. The choice of practices enjoyed, varies from one learner to another. But after making an analysis of choices made by the learners, the researcher found that play-way method and hands –on activities are enjoyed the most by the learners. Some children also enjoy the trial and error method as well as curiosity. The interviews and focus group discussions that the researcher conducted yielded the following result:

Teachers' views: the teachers were of the opinion that the children enjoyed all the practices, but it is the concept that matters. Some concepts are easy, so it is easy to learn whereas some concepts are difficult and confusing; therefore it takes time for the learners to learn them. They also opine that even the intelligence level which they term as 'smartness' is a factor that affects their learning.

Parents' views: after interviewing and having a focus group discussion with the parents, the researcher found that the opinion of the parents about the learners' most enjoyable teaching practice was almost the same. They all felt that the learners enjoyed the play- way method the most. The learners at the higher elementary level enjoyed activities like curiosity and trial and error method. Very few parents considered teaching practice responsible for facilitating learning. Whereas most of them considered the teacher and her skill to be responsible for their child's better learning. Some educated and high profile parents also supported that environment at home was also a key factor responsible for their child's better learning. A mother who is a doctor herself said that though she was busy most of the time but she and her husband always spent quality time with their child. He was also going for extra-curricular activity classes, which helped him to concentrate more on his studies and home assignments than on irrelevant distractions.

Students' views: the students have their own way of expressing their views on learning. Though most of them admitted they enjoyed the play-way method but the older ones in upper elementary level confessed they learnt better through project –based activities and ICT used while teaching. Some children also mentioned lecture and discussion method used by the teacher as enjoyable. They said they learnt better when they explored on their own on the topic.

Conclusion

From the study conducted, the researcher concludes that there is no fixed teaching- learning practice that facilitates learning. Various other factors also affect it. Though any one practice cannot be called the most effective one but definitely the practices where the child is actively involved and the learning is experience- based is found to be the most effective. Children doing any activity in group were observed to have learnt better. Their power of critical thinking seemed to have been activated through the group activities. Another distinctive thing that was observed was the skill of using open- ended questions while teaching or post teaching. The teacher's skill of using open ended questions also facilitated learning in the learners. The assessment technique where the children are assessed at shorter intervals of teaching and on the completion of a smaller part of the concept helped in better learning. Unconscious assessment in the form of daily assessment was also found helpful to teachers who could specifically locate the area/s of lag in the learner. Since children enjoy playing, so wherever the child learns in the form of play, his/her learning was found better. Along with the practices and other factors affecting learning, it was also observed that the bonding of the teacher and the learner also facilitates learning. A teacher is responsible for creating interest and love for the subject. Until and unless there is interest in anything that is done there is no success. So it is

seen that learning is a process that modifies with time and experience.

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