

Speech given at 'La Maison des Associations', Paris, France by KPM model school representatives Mrs. Tarla Nanavati (Principal) and Mr. Edward Shelton-Agar (Development Director for Atma Vidya Educational Foundation) on 8th September 2004, under the auspices of KPM Education (France). (The speech was translated into French by Ms. Caroline Malcolm.)

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The KPM Approach to Children

Mr. President and supporters of Association KPM Education, we thank you for having invited us to give a talk on our experiences of the KPM Approach to Children. We are very happy to be here in Paris. (Monsieur Le Président, ainsi que vos collaborateurs de l'Association KPM, nous vous remercions de nous avoir invités à présenter nos expériences de la "KPM Approach to Children". Nous sommes très heureux d'être ici à Paris.)

The KPM Approach to Children has been put into practice for the past 18 years in a school in Kerala, India. This approach is based on the following paragraph written by its founder Sri K. Padmanabha Menon:

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“There is a latent push in any man which is only a search for perfection. Rightly pursued, one finds this in one’s awakening experience to one’s real nature through the atmosphere between the real teacher and the taught. Education is only an attempt towards this.”

Sri Adwayananda (Sri K. Padmanabha Menon)

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We will give you a brief description of the KPM Approach to Children, and how it is applied at the model school, Sri Atmananda Memorial School, in Kerala, India. Edward – who specializes in the KPM Approach to Children and its application – will now tell you more about the approach.

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What do we want children to gain from their education?

Ladies and gentlemen, I am going start by asking you a question. What do you want children to gain from their education? (Mesdames et Messieurs, pour commencer, je vais vous poser une question. Que voulez-vous que les enfants acquièrent de leur education?)

It is this question, and the answers that you draw from it, that will determine the kind of education your children have. Whatever the background or religion of a child, what do you want the child to gain from his/her education?

I want to start by telling you some of my experiences in education. The journey began after my final examinations at Oxford University. All the work I had done, year after year and day after day, had led up to that point. Now my education was over. But as I walked away from the examination halls, I thought to myself: “I have had what some people call the best education in the world, done everything that was expected of me and more than that, and yet I am still not satisfied and certainly do not feel prepared for life’s challenges. There I was having been given the best education available, and it still wasn't enough. I didn't really feel prepared to meet the world, to think on my feet, to solve problems, to take on responsibilities, to deal with people and so on.”

Thus it is important for us to ask the question ‘What do we want children to gain from their education?’ and to try to answer it, and give it serious consideration. If we do not start out on the right ground, our efforts may not always go in the right direction.

So what do you think children need to prepare them for life’s challenges? What kinds of qualities do we as adults need to help us live satisfying, fulfilling and successful lives?

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Here is a list of some needs that I have suggested for you.

Self-confidence and self-belief: To believe in yourself, your talents and your abilities. We all know how important this is.

Self-motivation: To act from your own motivation rather than according to the expectations of others.

Decision-making skills and problem-solving ability: To take decisions and learn how to solve problems.

An enthusiasm for learning: To develop a love of learning and an enthusiasm for learning can be of benefit both to ourselves and the wider community.

Practical skills: To practically apply what you learn to life situations.

Valuing and working with others: If you are able to get along with others, this is helpful for all spheres of life.

It is helpful for us to have these qualities as adults. Employers today are also looking for these qualities.

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How can we help children get what they need?

So the next question that we need to look at is, having identified what qualities we want our children to have, how we can get children what they need to relate well as adults? How do we approach children to develop these qualities? This is the real question facing us as educators, parents and citizens today.

It is common sense to argue that if you can structure education around these needs, then you can have a very positive impact on the lives of children and society as well.

So now, we will summarize briefly for you how the KPM Approach to Children works and what is done at the KPM model school in India to meet the needs of children.

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Value the child:

When a child is valued, she develops a sense of self-worth that becomes the basis of her entire life.

Children need to feel valued. When a child is unconditionally valued, he develops a sense of value that becomes the background of his entire life.

It is this sense of self-worth, and inner feeling of security that gives the child the strength to successfully face and deal with life's challenges.

The value given to the individual child is fundamental to the KPM Approach to Children and the operations of the model school.

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Valuing the child

From the child's point of view, what makes him or her feel valued? I use the words 'the child's point of view' with special care, since it is the child who needs to feel valued. It is not enough if we think that we are valuing the child if the child in fact does not feel this.

To truly value a child, we need to give value to what the child wants to do, and take her wishes seriously, rather than interpret what we think she should be doing. For example, children have an inherent need to play, which manifests itself in many different ways. The child needs his need to play to be taken seriously. He needs the adult to appreciate his unique individuality. He needs encouragement. He needs a welcome ear. He needs someone on his side to help him. He needs someone to join in his games.

For example, a young child who likes to play chase games, will feel valued when an adult wholeheartedly joins in the chase game. A child looking for insects outside will feel valued if an adult wholeheartedly joins in this activity, shows an interest in what she finds and takes it seriously. A child who is an aggressor will feel valued when an adult tries to understand him and guide him in the right direction. A child who wants to talk about something that happened at home yesterday will feel valued when an adult takes the time to listen and discuss this with her. A child who wants to make something - for example a model car, a card or a story publication - will feel valued when an adult helps him make it and bring his idea to fruition.

When adults value and harness these interests of the children, it really does provide an environment full of learning opportunities that at the same time makes the child feel valued and happy. The best part of valuing a child is that it really is very simple. If our whole education system is structured around valuing the child, and this is continued day in day out, week in week out, the child will grow up with a deep and lasting sense of self-worth and confidence that becomes the background of her entire life.

At Sri Atmananda Memorial School, children are valued for who they are regardless of their background, religion or home environment.

Now I have summarized for you how we value children in the model school. Tarla will now discuss the second and third principles of the KPM Approach to Children for you:

- Guiding children in positive directions, and
- Following the children's interests.

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Children need positive guidance.

So what kind of help do children need?

In our experience, young children relate to their feelings a lot. This is the child's perspective. When they have positive experiences, they feel good about themselves. When young children have negative experiences, they tend to feel negative about themselves. This is how children can develop a negative self-image and, if these feelings occur on a regular basis, the negative self-image can become permanent.

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So how can we give children this guidance?

When young children feel free to express themselves, they express whatever is put into them, all that they absorb. Based on our experience, if their input is negative, the expression is negative, but if the input is positive, the child will have a positive outlook on life. And so the child needs a positive environment of security and love for her well-being.

There are different ways we use to help a child go from negative situations to positive ones. For young children, the adult can use distraction to achieve this. Distraction is easy when you know the child well. What we have seen is that when children are brought up in this way, the older children learn how to distract the younger children and it comes naturally to them.

As the children become older, the adult can discuss alternative ways of dealing with situations, where the child really feels that the adult is on his/her side. The children also learn how to solve problems among themselves, with the help of the teacher, a skill that will be invaluable to them throughout their lives.

As adults you can respond to children in a positive way. You can model good behaviour. Your actions, words and methods of conflict resolution can be a positive model for the child. This is what we strive to practice in the model school. The third principle is following the child's interests.

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Follow the child's interests:

A child will develop a deep love of learning when she learns through her interests. Anybody can make a game of learning, but when it is the child's own game with her own rules to her own liking, the learning remains with her. For example, if a child's main interest is dinosaurs, there are many ways to introduce the basic skills of reading and writing and other subjects such as history, geography and elementary science, through the study of dinosaurs.

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Following the child's interests?

Teachers in the KPM model school plan special activities based on the children's interests. Curriculum is introduced as part of the game. Many activities the children themselves suggest. We especially train teachers in the school to follow these interests and broaden them both through spontaneous activities and planned activities with the children. Examples might include the children giving a science exhibition, running a school bank, running a post office, holding an Olympic Games celebrations, Independence Day celebrations, a special activity for senior children

on a campus and so on. Such activities happen every week at the school, and activities are planned each day according to the children's interests.

When learning takes place through the child's interests, it is self-directed, confidence-building and it is lasting, because the child is genuinely interested.

When this is continued throughout the child's education, from a young age, by the time the child reaches the high school, he is ready to take on challenges and wants more structure and a formal timetable.

We introduce examinations to the children in a fun way through an Examfest where the children and teachers contribute questions and everyone writes the examination together. This helps them to be more confident when they face formal examinations in the high school.

Edward will now summarize for you the approach and the impact that it can have on children.

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Summary

So, we have suggested three things, integral to the KPM Approach to Children, that we can do to help children develop what we want them to from education:

- Value the child
- Give the child positive guidance
- Follow the child's interests

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The KPM Approach to Children

Here is a summary for you of how the KPM Approach to Children helps children get what they need from their education:

Insert diagram on the KPM Approach to Children (the same one that is going in the Web site)

You can see that the trust and confidence between the teacher and child provides the foundation. This trust and confidence will naturally develop when the teacher

- Values the child
- Gives positive guidance
- Follows the interests of the child.

This is the experience of the model school in India.

Self-confidence

The child is always valued and encouraged by the teacher in a way that is pertinent and relevant to her. This allows a child to develop a deep sense of self-worth and provides a firm and enduring foundation for the child's personal, social and academic development.

Self-motivation

The child's feelings and interests are acknowledged and form the basis for learning. The child takes charge of the educational process and decides what and how to learn with the support and involvement of the teacher. Being self-directed becomes the norm for the child.

Decision-making and Problem-solving

From kindergarten, the child chooses which teachers and children to be with, where to go in the school grounds, what to do and how to do it at each moment of the day. The child is empowered to make decisions. The child also develops good problem-solving ability because of the continual interaction with, and example of, the teachers.

Enthusiasm for Learning

The child develops a deep love and enthusiasm for learning. This is because play and learning are seamlessly integrated as the teacher follows the child's interests. When a child equates learning with a happy experience, then he will naturally want to pursue it.

Ability to Apply Learning to Practical Ends

Learning is experiential and based on the child's interests. There is no separation between knowledge and experience for the child. This helps the child automatically apply what she learns to life's experiences.

The Ability to Value and Work with Others

The child's own sense of self-worth and confidence allows him to value others. When the child is confident and feels whole within himself, he is able to try to understand and work well with many different types of people.

You can see that the basis of the approach is the trust and confidence between the teacher and child. It is because of this relationship of trust and confidence that the child develops and grows emotionally, socially and academically.

The school has now had four batches of graduates who started in KG and they have all gone on to do well in their further studies at universities in India, Europe, Singapore and America. The children keep in contact with the school and often come back to volunteer in the school from time to time.

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What do we want children to gain from their education?

We offer a teacher training programme at the model school in Kerala, India for teachers, parents, schools and organizations interested in the KPM Approach to Children.

We also provide assistance, training and advice for managers wishing to set up KPM schools around the world. Already there is a KPM school in Austin, Texas, and there are plans to set up a school in the United Kingdom.

It is useful for us to remember that education for a child is a 24-hour process, and experiences outside school as well as inside school shape and influence the child's development.

When you are with children, whether as a teacher, parent, child-carer, relative, friend or in any other capacity, your actions will have an impact on the child, no matter how small or limited the impact may be, and it is up to us as adults to decide whether the impact is positive or negative.

We will be able to help children more if our organizations and schools recognize more the importance of valuing the child and give this serious consideration. Governments play an important role in setting the environment and the parameters within which schools operate. School managers and principals set the school's underlying approach to children, and have a great influence. In our experience in the model school, the parents have an important role in the child's education, and therefore we work closely with the parents.

If we value children, give them positive guidance and follow their interests, we can help give children what they need to lead satisfying, successful, and fulfilling lives.