1 Principles into practice: early childhood education

Children can fully demonstrate their abilities, and their possibilities for development become the biggest, when they do something voluntarily. And good educational aims will be achieved more easily if they are based on clear principles and are linked to children's daily activities.

In this chapter, the principles of 'Child-Centered Education', which attaches crucial importance to the *voluntariness* of children's actvities to promote their development, will be discussed. In addition, how the theories can be put into practice will be suggested.

1 Principles of 'Child-Centered Education'

(1) Principles of 'Child-Centered Education' that develops independence and self-reliance

One of the educational aims during early childhood is to develop independence and self-reliance. In this context, 'independence' refers to the ability to think without needing to follow instructions. Therefore, independent children can make their own judgments and achieve tasks after a continuous process of trial and error. However this does not mean that they simply behave selfishly without considering others in any way. Independent children are able to make their own decisions after considering many relevant factors, such as other people or the surrounding situation, but they are not controlled by any 'authority'. So, how should early childhood educators behave towards children in order to develop independence? Firstly, they have to attach importance to the *voluntariness* of children (e.g. their own ideas, will and plans). However, if teachers leave children to do as they like, they will not develop. The task of teachers is to see whether children can achieve self-realization. Teachers have to discuss and drop hints to help children when they are stuck or lose interest in their play. In other words, well-thought-out educational interventions are necessary.

(2) Respect the pace of development of each child

It seems that the crucial point in early childhood education is that it is rooted in, and also fulfills the life of, the children. It is fundamental that teachers to prepare for a variety of possible activities so that children can get started on what they are most interested in doing, and can develop that activity. In other words, children themselves decide what they do - teachers do not just introduce "activities of the day" based on detailed plans. Therefore, there will be as many curricula and timetables of activities as there are children. Teachers should keep a close watch on each child, join in their play, and assist or make an educational intervention when necessary. They should assess the development stage of each child and give assistance so that s/he can take a new step forward.

(3) 'Zone of Proximal Development'

Vygotsky's concept, 'Zone of Proximal Development'(ZPD) can assist the teacher to recognize individual differences in development and identify the development level of a particular child. The zone of proximal development refers to the 'possible level' that children can achieve under adult guidance. This shows the distance between the actual developmental level that children have already achieved, and the level of potential development. The teacher should act as a 'scaffold', providing the minimum support necessary for a child to succeed and take a step up to the next level. So, how can teachers identify the zone of proximal development of each child?

Three points are important: teachers' previous experiences, the child's ability to imitate, and his/her life history.

1. Teachers' previous experiences help teachers them to assess how they should speak to, and to what extent they should help, a child. For instance, they may think, "This boy is just like the one I took care of before. It takes some time for him to get started, but once he starts, I'm sure he can accomplish this task by himself because he has ability to concentrate, like a boy I helped last year". Teachers can assume the zone of proximal development of the child based on such previous experience. It is better to avoid giving too many hints or instructions to a child. Drop a small hint at the beginning of a task, and change the way you speak to the child until s/he can go to the next step.

2. Imitation is another aspect of the zone of proximal development. If children are able to imitate how teachers and/or peers achieve a task, they will nearly be able to complete the same task on their own. Taken together, a teacher's previous experience and a child's ability to imitate provide a stronger indication of the zone of proximal development.

3. Life History helps a teacher to assess developmental potential and think about how to behave towards particular children. But do not compare one child's life history directly with that of another child. Compare a child's present situation with similar situations in their own past experience. All children can take a step forward if the teacher knows their life histories and strong/weak points, and then acts as a scaffold.

(4) Develop child independence

Early childhood educators have the following roles.

Firstly, to evaluate the development level of each child, and decide how to aid and understand what he/she desires or thinks immediately. Secondly, to provide a physical and psychological environment appropriate for child development. Thirdly, to help children widen their activities and develop their ideas and the ability to think. In order to fulfill those roles, teachers should consider carefully: (1) how they provide a good environment (i.e. prepare appropriate materials so that children can develop through daily activities), (2) how they establish human relationships in the class (i.e. develop a reciprocal and cooperative relationship), (3) how they speak to children (i.e.

use words and expressions appropriate for their development level and give small hints rather than give instructions).

2 How to put the principles into practice

As mentioned above, one of the most important aims of early childhood education is to develop independence and self-reliance. We have also explained the importance of working on the 'zone of proximal development' in order to achieve this aim. Then how should teachers behave toward children in a practical context?

Important points
1: Make children think

Teachers should leave space for children to think. Adults should avoid giving all the answers and imposing them on children.

Example

In the second term, a 4-year-old boy cannot understand the meaning of the Hiragana [Japanese script] letters written on the blackboard because he reads them from the right (he should read from the left). He asks a question to his teacher.

Child: What is 'KU CHI KA'?

Teacher: This is 'KA CHI KU'. Read from the left. (Show<u>s</u> the direction to read).

Child: What is 'KA CHI KU'?

Teacher: That's, domestic animals, which live in people's homes.

Child: (After <u>thinking a little</u>, he looked satisfied with the teacher's explanation and nodded.)

Point: Answer just what children ask. If they are not satisfied with the answer, they can ask questions one after another. It is better not to give extra explanations or give answers immediately without waiting for them to think.

2   Make them think from various viewpoint<u>s</u>

It is desirable to suggest, rather than order or prohibit. For example, it is better to say 'How about doing ***?' 'Why don't you do this in this way?' or 'I think this is ***. What do you think?' rather than saying 'Do ***!' 'Don't do ***'. Offering suggestions makes children think by themselves, which stimulates the cerebrum. In addition, teachers should put other children's thoughts into words for a particular child, which will help that child to understand that there are various views and that other children might have different idea<u>s</u>.

3: Do not stick to your ideas or suggestions

Children sometimes cannot make a decision, in spite of teachers' suggestion<u>s</u>. In that case, teachers should not stick to their suggestion. They should not give too many hints, instruct too much, or impose their opinions upon a child. In other words, they have to restrain themselves - but this is difficult.

Example:
(In November, the second semester, in the class of 4-year-old children)

The following is a good example of a teacher who did not stick to her idea. She was making a unicorn, an imaginary animal with a horn, which has two wings.

Child: 'Make a horse, please'.
Teacher: (Begins to draw a horse)
Child: 'Draw a horse with a horn'.
Teacher: 'Eh? (Silence for a while) Not this? A horse with a horn?
Child: 'A unicorn. It's like a normal horse, but it has a horn and it doesn't have a mane. And it has a mysterious power.'
Teacher: 'I don't know about it. Tell me more.' (After helping other child in need of urgent help.)
Teacher: 'I don't know how to draw the horse you have explained. Draw the picture of it on this paper.'
         (Passing her the paper that a normal horse was half drawn.)
Teacher: I wish I could find a unicorn in a book. (As if she talks to herself)
Child: 'No, you cannot find it in any book. It's an imaginary animal.'
Teacher: Then draw a horn on the head of this horse, and I can see what it's like.'
Child: 'It doesn't have ears, like a bald head.' (Just continuing to explain without drawing)
Teacher: 'Oh that's interesting. Like this? What about this?' (As the child cannot draw, the teacher tries to draw for her, following the child's explanation.)
Child: (Just watching what the teacher is drawing without a word.)
Teacher: 'Like this, horns?' (Drawing two horns)
Child: 'It doesn't have two horns.'
Teacher: 'Only one horn?'
Child: 'Yes' (Nodding)
Teacher: 'One horn. Is this O.K.?' (Drawing another horse with a horn whose legs are open.)
Child: 'It isn't running. I said that it just stands, didn't I?'
Teacher: 'This isn't O.K.?' (Adding a horn to the first horse whose legs are closed.)
Child: 'It has wings'
Teacher: 'Oh, I see. Is that the Pegasus?'
Child: (Silence. It seems that she does not to know about Pegasus. After considering for a while.) 'It has a furrow when it closes his eyes,'
Teacher: 'You have observed very carefully.' (Drawing another horse whose legs are closed, leaving a space for wings)
Child: (Goes to her toolbox to pick up crayons and disposable chopsticks, comes back to the teacher and tries to hurry her up a little) 'How about the unicorn?'
Teacher: 'I have drawn it. How is it?'
         (It's a newly drawn horse but it does not have wings yet).
Child: 'Hum?' (Look hard at it) 'Then wings.'
[Should this part be bold?]
Teacher: 'Will you attach the wings later on?'   She thinks that it might be a good idea to make two wings using, separate paper, and attach them to the trunk of the unicorn.
Child: (After thinking for a while, she refuses flatly) 'No,'
Teacher: (Draws two wings quickly)   She did not stick to her own idea.
Child: (She looked satisfied to see what the teacher has drawn. She gets the paper from the teacher, cuts it with scissors and attaches the disposable chopsticks to the trunk using adhesive tape.

Point: The teacher suggested that the child could make a three-dimensional horse whose wings flatter if she attaches wings later on. However, the child did not have the same image in her mind, as the teacher. So the teacher did not stick to her idea and responded to the child's request immediately.

Three months later: This is an episode in November. Later in February, the hint given by the teacher ('Would you like to attach wings later on?') expands her image of the horse and she can produce three-dimensional objects.

  As the 'Zone of Proximal Development' is not visible, first give a small hint to children to change the nature or extent of their imagination, and then check their reactions. When they cannot understand or accept your hint, you have to realize that their development level is not high as you thought. It is essential not to stick to your own idea/hint. In short, you should 'wait & see', 'be patient and not hurry up', and 'not rush children'.