Developing Skills for Successful Learning
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Abstract
Many of the teachers in the less advantaged schools in South Africa lack skills, varied teaching techniques and capacity. Multiple changes to the curriculum have left teachers confused about content and application of teaching methods and strategies. Many of these educators are demoralised and confused, which has negatively impacted on their confidence and self-esteem. Many teachers see each support intervention as a new and stand alone entity, and many educators often do not have the skill or experience to either use or integrate the resources that are present in the schools. The focus at Edupeg is to add value to the provincial and national educational endeavour, through facilitating improved curriculum delivery, by increasing material resources, enhancing intellectual capacity and promoting the confidence and self-esteem of both teachers and pupils. Through sensitively exposing teachers to more effective teaching methods and strategies we are able to create opportunities for children to be actively and creatively engaged in their own learning. Our goal is to achieve improved quality of teaching in the classroom, which will lead to improved pupil comprehension, and ultimately, performance.

INTRODUCTION – A practical and interactive session
Many teachers think that “good teaching” consists of a teacher dominating the class proceedings, predominantly through talking, to impart knowledge to the quiet and attentive pupils. A prerequisite for this teaching style, is that pupils pay attention to what the teacher is saying. As often is observed, the outcome of such an approach is that the children become passive and eventually inert to the extent that they are virtually mute – with virtually no participation in their own learning process. Teachers rely on the more skilled and alert pupils, to answer the occasional posed questions. This process actually masks the inadequacies of the weaker learners, who become further withdrawn due to their lack of participation and their growing perception of their lack of skills and competence. A sense of low levels of confidence and self-esteem tends to become the result of this process. “The biggest obstacle standing in the way of the achievement of young people is what they believe about themselves.” Professor Jonathan Jansen, “How to build excellence in a culture of mediocrity”, U.C.T. February 2011.

Children should be seen as thinkers, not empty vessels which need to be filled with knowledge. They are indeed active participants in the construction of their own knowledge. It is during these early years, when the first networks of knowledge based on experiences are formed, that the foundations for all later learning are laid. The environments of home and school enhance and support each other in learning. They provide the context in which learning takes place and the opportunity for learning to be effective. These environments obviously influence the child’s growth and development, and are the foundation for all learning situations. Extensive studies by Piaget concluded that knowledge is created actively and is not received passively. It is thus vital to create and provide an exciting and stimulating learning environment.

The Edupeg programme provides stimulating, interactive opportunities for young learners themselves to interact with learning resources. While practically engaging with Edupeg activities, children learn to recognise, evaluate and cope with educational and developmental challenges. Edupeg activities also help to develop concentration, perseverance, memory skills, social skills, self-confidence self-esteem, and cognitive skills, including thinking and reasoning.

This comprehensive, learner centred educational programme, is fun and challenging, but not threatening. The activities encourage a positive attitude towards learning and the self-corrective aspect promotes self evaluation, immediate access to right or wrong answers and has obvious multiple benefits in a classroom environment.
There are 22 Edupeg workbooks, which are available in English, Afrikaans, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sesotho & Pedi. They have no racial gender or cultural bias. The workbooks contain activities which promote and enhance the development of visual perception. They then incorporate Numeracy, Literacy, Language and Life Skills, which extend the development of the child, and increase mathematical awareness and proficiency, as well as promote and improve literacy and communication skills.

**The realities in less advantaged classrooms**
- Classes are often very large, and many teachers are without assistants, or have assistants who are not effectively used.
- Many classrooms are not big enough to accommodate a mat area, or lack a mat, and so small groups of pupils are not brought forward to work and interact directly with the teacher.
- Pupils have not been trained in routines which keep them actively involved at their tables.
- Classrooms lack sufficient resources, or resources are not used. Also methods of storing, distributing and caring for resources are not taught or practiced.
- There is no differentiation of pupils into ability groups.
- To maintain discipline in the large class, teachers resort to teaching from the front and require all the pupils to be attentive, and not to talk, except for the repetition in unison, required for rote learning.
- Pupils frequently spend long periods of time doing nothing.

The above severely disadvantages the learners because:
- Many learners enter school when they are not school-ready, having inadequately developed perceptual skills. They do not advance easily, until these skills have been developed.
- Educators often do not realise that the children learn skills through “doing”, and the learners are not given sufficient opportunity to be actively engaged.
- Learners often have limited language. Without sufficient encouragements to talk and communicate, language does not develop, self-esteem is low, thinking skills are impeded, and social skills do not develop.
- Learners become very dependent, often copy each other, and do not develop creativity. Thinking skills and problem solving skills are also stunted.
- In many cases, learners adopt survival strategies, which are counterproductive, and difficult to “undo” later.
- In the educator’s haste to “cover” the curriculum, many basic underlying skills are not given the time and attention needed, which then has a follow-on effect of the learners’ battling as they progress, through their schooling.

**Edupeg learning values**
Edupeg understands that learners learn best when they:
- do things
- explore and discover things for themselves
- have fun
- communicate with each other
- are not afraid of failing
- feel good about themselves

Edupeg also helps learners to develop their skills and abilities. Edupeg develops learners who:
- can communicate
- can solve problems
- are confident
- can work with others
- have the skills they need to cope in life
A strong focus of Edupeg activities is on Numeracy.

**Numeracy**
Edupeg:
- draws on the child’s intuitive and acquired knowledge in number as a stimulus for continued learning
- provides stimulation and enjoyment through the varied activities provided
- encourages confidence, understanding and creative individual thought
- consolidates basic number operations
- increases the ability to communicate mathematically
- builds on knowledge and experience and assists in the understanding of the above in the child’s world
- encourages mathematical communication and the correct use of mathematical symbols and terminology
- promotes systematic and accurate written work, including all calculations

Language and Literacy play a crucial role in the acquisition of skills.

**Language & Literacy**
Edupeg:
- encourages familiarity and fluency of language
- supports vocabulary enrichment and extension
- provides exposure to accurate written language, spelling and reading
- creates opportunities for story-telling, including sequencing and ordering of events
- provides practice in and pride of mother tongue
- encourages appreciation of visual stimulation and discussion thereof
- supports interpretation, selection, understanding and processing of given information
- nurtures the development of thinking skills and problem solving techniques
- allows for opportunities to incorporate 2nd/3rd language usage, from the visual stimulation provided

Additionally,

**Life Skills**
Edupeg encourages and promotes:
- communication
- problem solving
- organisation and planning
- decision making
- comparison of methods and options
- discovery and exploring of relationships
- expanding the awareness of mathematics in it’s relationship to human beings
- enjoyment and pleasure

Effective learning resources need to be well conceived and compiled.

**Suitability of Edupeg materials**
- Content written by experienced South African school educators
- All materials have proved to be durable and the majority, re-usable
- Activities are appealing to the target age group
- Approach and content of materials are curriculum appropriate
- The books contain no cultural, racial or gender bias
• Instructions are simple and clearly understood by learners
• The activities are able to satisfy the needs of learners with differing abilities
• Sufficient variety of activities for stimulation
• Adequate repetition of activities for revision and consolidation
• Simple provision for on-going and continual assessment
• Content, including pictures, diagrams and rubrics stimulate learners’ interests and thinking skills, and expand their often limited world
• Activities are enjoyable, varied, challenging and promote independence and self-reliance
• The complexity and depth of activities promote concentration and the active involvement of the learners
• Material available in mother tongue
• Provided with a comprehensive Teacher Resource Book for additional guidance and further ideas

Education needs to be meaningful, and have positive outcomes, where accurate and appropriate teaching resources are utilised.

**Benefits of Edupeg**

• Learners are engaged in challenging tasks, appropriate for their capacity and level of skills
• There is an improvement in responsiveness of pupils – they are active
• The creation of an active, stimulating, learner centred environment which promotes pupil participation
• Methodical recording of set activities, including the method used to attain and determine answers – promotes concentration and thinking skills as well as neat, accurate recording, including spatial concepts
• Learners improve vocabulary, language, sentence construction and communication skills
• Experiences are provided for children to be active through the asking of open questions, where learners can be right. This builds confidence, self-esteem, fosters creativity and promotes individuality.
• Group work encourages and develops critical thinking skills, verbal communication, active involvement, listening skills, tolerance and problem solving strategies
• Gives learners themselves the opportunity to “find answers” utilising their own talents, and to figure it out rather than to “know” i.e. needing to rely on previous knowledge/rote learning
• Working independently promotes self-reliance and the ability of the learners to work without constant teacher intervention
• Many children fall down in assessment due to their lack of experience and exposure to the format of questioning. Edupeg provides such opportunities.
• Pictures offer experiences that children can own and learners can respond to these. They are not the “teacher’s” pictures
• Diminishes the teacher’s need to be prescriptive
• Instructions are clear, simple and easy to follow
• Fine motor control is developed
• Diminishes the need for loud/punitive classroom discipline
• Kinetic, Auditory, Tactile and Visual Learning takes place, NOT just Auditory.
• Utilisation of concrete and semi-concrete equipment to assist learners to develop a sound understanding of concepts
• Assists teachers to use and manage resources

A varied range of appropriate classroom practices need to be utilised, and educators need support to become more effective and proficient in the classroom.
Combatting Talk & Chalk!

- Educators are assisted to promote differentiated, learner-centred activities
- A balance can be created between exposition and learner activity
- Learners are actively engaged in tasks, appropriate for their developmental level
- Dialogue, thinking skills, concentration, vocabulary, communication, and tolerance, are all assisted and developed
- Learning takes on aspects of fun and enjoyment
- Learners become enthusiastic and less inert/passive
- Learners are absorbed in tasks and discipline problems diminish
- The pace and content of the lesson is not dictated by the slowest learners
- A handful of learners will not be responsible to “carry” the class, while a large percentage of the class remains mute/inert
- Educators are able to promote more individual questioning
- Teachers can diminish chanting in unison and rote learning
- Educators are able to fulfil continuous assessment, as they can see and evaluate what learners can do

Competent and prepared teachers promote productive learning environments. All teachers are supported by our sensitive, well qualified trainers.

Learn to plan

- Objectives are clearly defined and then the method to achieve these is decided upon. (The “how”, “with what”, “for how long”, “what next”?)
- Suitable resources are selected to fulfil objectives
- Appropriate activities are selected, suitable for level of learner’s ability (How many teachers tell us that they have a huge differentiation of learners in their class, but teach all the same thing at the same time for the same length of time)
- Concrete equipment can be included. (The lack of concrete teaching is a large contributor to the very low level of maths functioning seen in so many schools)
- Active learning enables students to gain skills and hone skills
- Provision is made for learners to have practice in reading instructions, not having instructions read
- Provision is made for learners to methodically and accurately fulfil written activities (NOT just filling in words/figures/completing sentences on photo-copied sheets)
- Written tasks promote concentration, consolidation of knowledge, logic, critical thinking skills, spatial concepts, pride and self-esteem
- Opportunities are created for the educators to assess the set tasks are created

Educators are assisted and encouraged as they seek to improve their skills and capacity.

Constructive classroom support

- Teachers are given practical support, not theoretical workshops
- Teachers who have a limited knowledge and experience of a subject/concept to be taught, as well as a lack of awareness of how best to achieve the desired outcome/ objective of a lesson, are assisted
- Even when teachers appear to understand the content of workshops/training courses, to implement this, alone, on their return to school, is not easy. Many lose heart and revert to old methods. (Poor system for integrated grade/phase support)
- Teachers become overwhelmed by the task of managing themselves and the learning environment. They need classroom support
- Training is internalised only when it is used in the classroom, in context and teachers need assistance with this. It is a lonely and difficult process and teachers can easily become discouraged
• Only in the classroom, can a real understanding of concepts and principles be reached
• Relationships of trust need to be established, where support and guidance are received without fear of criticism and censure
• Edupeg helps teachers to promote reasoning, observation and deduction
• Patience, persistence and perseverance are needed as trainers penetrate schools through sound educational practice

The HSRC Study shows that the development of children is hampered by poor teacher input. Assisting educators to become more proficient, more actively engaged in their teaching and more aware of teaching outcomes is crucial to improved learning.

Building confidence and self-esteem
• Assisting educators and learners to realise that if they understand concepts and internalise them, they can build on this knowledge, i.e. they do not need to memorise formulae/theories/recipes, etc
• Providing opportunities to “find”/“figure out”/“resolve” a problem using skills, knowledge, reasoning, talents, intelligence and common sense!
• Providing practical experiences to perform tasks that involve using concrete equipment, pictures, data, graphs, etc and allowing time for answers to be found
• Kinetic, auditory, tactile and visual learning must be encouraged, not just auditory
• Relating Maths (and other Learning Areas) to everyday life and real situations
• Reducing the learners’ (and educators’) anxiety and feelings of inadequacy through providing positive learning experiences. Success to be obtained through self-reliance
• Fostering creativity, language development, sentence construction, communication, thinking skills, opinions, self-expression, etc through adapting an “open” question policy, rather than a “closed”, “Yes/No” approach. Children can be right! Educators to enter into dialogue with learners, and to probe the answers given
• Provide opportunities for children to read simple, clear instructions and then to complete the task. Many learners fall down on external assessments due to their lack of experience and exposure to this type of questioning

We all respond to recognition and acknowledgement and teachers are no different.

Addressing low morale
• Encourage teachers who have experienced intervention overload, not to respond with passive resistance
• To develop teachers, who presently feel inadequate
• We need to get teachers “doing”, which will help to promote understanding
• Knowledge and awareness will diminish resistance (to change)
• We need to create opportunities for teamwork, experimentation, investigation and practice
• We need to assist teachers to try new methods, which will eliminate their needing to try to control and teach, large, often multi-grade classes from the front, which is exhausting
• We need to banish fear
• We need to create and promote hope

The above will be covered in an interactive workshop session, where participants will use the Edupeg resources in a simulated classroom environment.