

# A RECORD OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION THEME AT A PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOL

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This paper describes the implementation of a programme to develop environmental awareness, with special reference to the built environment, at the pre-primary level.

## Introduction

Learning at a pre-primary school takes place primarily through self-discovery and play. Children learn through being active, exploring what they can do with their own bodies and by discovering the potential of materials and equipment available to them. Their perceptions are important elements of their observation of the world around them and the construction of their sense of reality over time. Children at the pre-primary level also constantly ask questions relating to their environment. Many of the answers can be provided by offering the opportunity for firsthand investigation or through games, pictures or books. Observing the nature of children's play can help a teacher gauge how much of an experience they actually understand. Further experiences can then be planned to increase the children's comprehension of what they have perceived in their environment.

The flexibility of most pre-primary programmes lends itself to the discovery of new concepts and ideas. The following ideas are based on experience gained at a multi-cultural pre-primary school in Mmabatho, Bophuthatswana. The theme described was one of several explored over a period of two years with four and five year olds.

## The development of an environmental education theme

Most 'projects' or 'themes' were initiated by displays of pictures, models, books and by the telling of stories. Observation of children at play and discussions with individuals or groups prompted many ideas for environmental activities which suited the framework of the pre-primary school programme. Because Mmabatho is a young and rapidly expanding centre, most children were familiar with construction sites with tall cranes and heavy machinery. Houses, roads and a variety of other buildings have mushroomed in an area which was open ground only a few years ago. Discussions with the children revealed that many of them had forgotten what the area had looked like before development, and were unaware of the purpose of some of the larger buildings under construction in the area e.g. the new parliament buildings, the University of Bophuthatswana and the water tower – now prominent landmarks.

## Buildings

Observing the principle of moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar and the fact that most small children can draw on their experiences of visits to other buildings such as the supermarket or clinic, it was decided to take a group on a walk around the immediate vicinity of the school to observe the different types of buildings and what their uses were. They saw houses, a high school and a café nearby, and were able to see the water tower and parliament buildings not far away. During the walk children were also encouraged to compare building styles, sizes of buildings and the materials used in their construction. Information gathered by the children was later presented visually, by them, in the form of pictures or models. A new dimension in the games they played with each other was also observed.



GETTING TO GRIP WITH NATURE

## A vacant plot

Follow-up discussions soon turned to what the land had looked like before it was built on and what it had previously been used for. Many cattle and goats still grazed in the area and several children were able to obtain information from their parents. 'Before and after' photographs generated much interest and so a second outing was planned to a vacant plot near the school.

None of the acacia trees indigenous to the area had survived the development, but the children collected samples or drew pictures of the grass, flowers, insects and weeds (an interesting discussion – 'what makes a 'weed' a weed?'). A note was made of the heaps of garden refuse dumped there and of the litter. (As a direct result of these observations a theme on litter was subsequently initiated by the children themselves).

## Construction of houses

Firsthand experiences tend to open the way to a variety of new questions. Obviously not all avenues can be explored immediately, but one's plan must be flexible in order to sustain the children's interest and enthusiasm. An interesting question which arose from the second outing was "How are houses built?" Fortunately a new housing estate was being developed across the road from the school. The children were thus able to observe the transformation, over several months, of open ground to completed houses, roads and gardens.

Samples of building materials were collected to be used later in a variety of activities from weighing and measuring to the construction of 'mini-houses' in the sandpit. The children watched the houses at each stage of their construction. During 'free play' many were observed experimenting with their own structures; others built walls with real bricks, wooden blocks or Lego, eventually discovering for themselves why a wall should be built with alternating joints.

On subsequent visits to the building sites children were encouraged to examine the buildings more closely; to look at different colours, patterns, windows etc. and to feel the different texture of bricks, plaster and corrugated iron. They later illustrated their experiences using a variety of mediums.

## Conclusion

Experience has shown that to get the most from an outing it has to serve a specific purpose. Other topics of interest arising from these experiences were followed up when appropriate, either in small groups or with the class as a whole. All outings were followed up by activities in the classroom such as drawings, paintings, stories, role-playing and discussions. Some topics lasted only a few days and others much longer, depending on the interest of the children and the availability of resources.

The activities described are given as an example of what can be done at the pre-primary school level to encourage children to be more aware of their environment and to be more caring about it.

## References

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LOOKING AT BUILDING STYLES AND MATERIALS IN AN ESTATE NEXT TO THE SCHOOL



THE CHILDREN TALKING TO THE BUILDING SITE FOREMAN



LOOKING AT THE SHAPE AND STRUCTURE OF BRICKS



LOOKING AT GRASSES ON A VACANT PLOT NEAR THE SCHOOL