

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Research Centre for Early Childhood and Primary Education
2005

Deep-level-learning and the Experiential Approach in Early Childhood and Primary Education.

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Introduction

What constitutes ‘quality’ in care and education? From the point of view of the parent, the counsellor, the head teacher, the curriculum developer the question is very often answered by expressing expectations with regard to educational context and teachers’ actions: infrastructure and equipment, the content of activities, teaching methods, teacher style... From the point of view of policy and government – and sometimes of parents - there is a more direct reference to the expected outcomes of education. With regular assessments the system of care and education is, in a sense, ‘forced’ to get better results. In the middle of this stands the practitioner, living and working with children. Wanting the best for them. Accepting sensible guidelines and accepting at the same time the fact that education has to be effective. But how to combine all those things and get the two ends - context and outcome - together? The framework developed within the Experiential Education (EXE) project addresses this question and covers three categories or dimensions of quality: context, process and outcomes.

The experiential view on educational outcomes

In the EXE-theoretical framework, a lot of attention is paid to the effects or outcomes of education. The concept of ‘deep level learning’ expresses the concern for a critical approach to educational evaluation. Central to this is the questioning of superficial learning, learning that does not affect the basic competencies of the child and which has little transfer to real life situations. In line with a constructivist tradition, we don’t see the process of development as a mere addition of discrete elements of knowledge or aptitudes to an existing repertoire. On the contrary: every performance depends on an underlying structure of fundamental schemes. These operate as basic programmes that regulate the way we process incoming stimuli and construct reality. We rely on them to interpret new situations and to act competently - or not. They determine which and how many dimensions of reality can be articulated in ones perception and cognition (Laevers, 1995 & 1998).

The ongoing research programme in which instruments are being developed to assess levels of development, covers different areas of development.

Emotional health

This dimension can be seen as a condition for the full realisation of a person’s potential. The Rogerian tradition of research, has contributed a great deal to its clarification through the concept of the ‘fully functioning person’. In practice ‘self-confidence’ and the quality labelled as ‘resilience’ represent interesting aspects of this fundamental goal.

Curiosity and the exploratory drive

A lot of effort within the area of education is content based. That explains why, generally, the disposition of curiosity or, in a broader sense, the exploratory drive, doesn't get as much attention as it deserves. Investing in the preservation or even strengthening of the exploratory drive can be seen as most rewarding in so far as it guarantees lifelong learning. An exploratory attitude, defined by openness for, and alertness to the wide variety of stimuli that form our surroundings, makes a person accessible, lowers the threshold for getting into the state of 'arousal' that brings a person to the most intense forms of concentration and involvement. That person will never stop developing. The challenge for education is not only to keep this intrinsic source of motivation alive, but also to make it encompass all domains that belong to reality.

Expression and communicative skills

Language receives a lot of attention in education. But what seems crucial here is the necessity to push the boundaries forward and redefine our goals. Because formal teaching tends to take competencies apart and to focus on separate elements, the full competency is not enhanced as much as it could be. In the area of (verbal) expression one can observe how an extensive vocabulary doesn't guarantee effective communication. Besides the social skill aspect - which we discuss further – communication depends on the capability to be intensely aware of felt senses and to use words or symbols that interact with these meanings in ways which make these 'felt senses' more defined and articulated. This is the core of any form of expression, artistic and other forms, as defined in Gendlin's brilliant analysis of the experiential process (Gendlin, 1964).

Imagination and creativity

In the description of the process of expression, the role of imagination has already been mentioned: it is the disposition to (re)produce felt senses or meaning. It refers to the intensity with which meanings are sensed. A strong imagination, as such, makes the impact of a story more profound because one is able to sense the represented reality thoroughly. One is fully impressed. Creativity goes beyond this. It is defined as the 'disposition to produce many unique ideas appropriate to a simple problem requirement'. In further analysis the component of 'ideational fluency' is decisive: the easiness with which associations are made which link distant elements to one another. These combinations are original and at the same time purposeful. Associated with this disposition is the continuing tendency to look at things from different angles, to be flexible, to be humorous (as a way to 'play' with reality)... and to risk getting into conflict with ones surroundings, because new ideas can mean a threat to the existing order.

The competence of self-organisation

Many of our case-studies show us children having a lot of difficulties in living harmoniously with others and taking advantage of the environment offered by the adult. Sometimes emotional problems are the main cause, while in other cases the mismatch between the activities on offer and the child's interests or level of development could be identified as the key to the solution. Gradually a third factor caught our attention: the competence of self-organisation. We define it as 'the managerial capacity to organise ones life in a way that makes the best possible use of the available resources, in oneself (own competencies, limitations and strengths) and in ones human and physical environment. We discern four components: will-power or the capacity to be determined and commit oneself to something, the capability to make choices and to sort out what one really wants, the capability to reproduce scenario's for action and develop them further while the activity is going on and the capability to step back and reassess the situation in view of ones goals.

Observing children – and adults – makes it very obvious that the competence of self-organisation is far more than being disciplined and planned. In fact it is all about the ‘art of living’. The interesting thing about self-organisation is that it can make the difference between quality of life or its absence, to a certain extent in spite of ones talents and opportunities. It is about the use of these talents and opportunities: crossing the street to walk in the shadow on a hot summer day doesn’t cost anything, but leads to greater comfort.

Self-organisation combined with creativity gives us the powerful quality which any society badly needs to secure its future: entrepreneurship.

Understanding of the world of objects and people

The core of the curriculum is about the acquisition of knowledge about both the world of objects and the world of people. Here the basic schemes determine which dimensions of reality are captured. Deep level learning leads to a kind of paradigm shift through which more of the complexities of the world (in whatever domain) can be experienced and become meaningful. In our reflection on the essence of the process of cognition a form of intelligence based on intuitive faculties, as opposed to the logical-mathematical intelligence, came to the foreground. We see intuition as the basis for real understanding of the world, while logical-mathematical intelligence can help to conceptualise what is perceived and to speed up the process of assimilation. Intuition is ‘the faculty to mentally represent reality, making use of ones imagination, by which meanings are (re)constructed, enabling one to get the ‘feel’ of the real thing.’ Intuition is not a pre-scientific level of cognition. It is indispensable for understanding the world around us. Consequently, the difference in competence between people, in any profession that requires a certain level of understanding, is in the end determined by the level of development of their intuitive insight. This is the case for physicists, medical doctors, biologists, geologists, engineers... but also in any craft where routine and technique must be transcended and interpretations have to be made. This also holds for the field of psycho-social cognition. Intuition is at the core of expertise in professions where dealing with people plays an important role, such as, child care, teaching, all kinds of therapies, human resources management, advertising and of course in all the sciences connected to these. But also in the pre- and non-professional context - in children and adults, in parents and persons and any form of leisure - intuition is part of the developing mind.

Value education

Within the EXE-project the concept of ‘linkedness’ is the expression of a deep concern for the development of a positive orientation towards reality. It offers a point of reference for the whole of value education.

Linkedness with the eco-system in its entirety is essentially a religious concept, in the broadest sense of the word. Etymologically, ‘re-ligion’ (re-liare) means ‘linking again’. As “de-linquency” means “the lack of being linked”, the basic sense of ‘connectedness’ can be seen as the cornerstone of prevention of criminal behaviour or of any action that brings damage to things and people. One who feels connected with something would not act as a vandal.

When the concept is elaborated at the level of early childhood, primary and secondary education, children are helped to develop this attitude of linkedness with (1) themselves, (2) the other(s), (3) the material world, (4) society and (5) the ultimate unity of the entire eco-system.

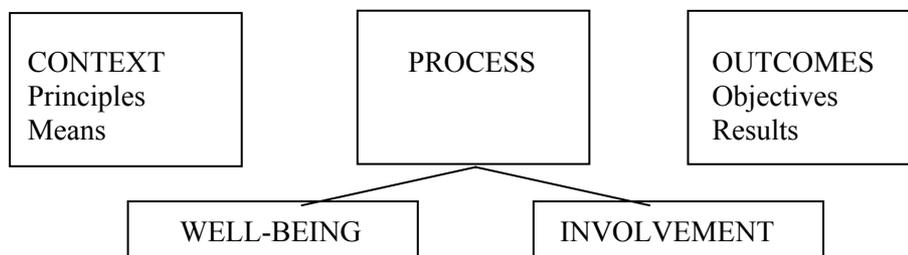
What kind of educational context is needed?

This selection of ‘desirable goals’ represents a huge challenge for the whole of the educational system (from birth to lifelong learning). How can the development of these outcomes be supported in children (and in adults)?

Focusing on the process

The Experiential Education project’s most important contribution answers exactly this question, by identifying indicators for quality which are situated in the middle of the context-outcome framework. It points to the missing link: the concept that helps us to sense whether what we are doing (the context) is leading somewhere (the outcome)!

The basic insight within the EXE-theory is that the most economic and conclusive way to assess the quality of any educational setting (from the pre-school level to adult education) is to focus on two dimensions: the degree of ‘emotional well-being’ and the level of ‘involvement’.



When we want to know how each of the children is doing in a setting, we first have to explore the degree to which children feel at ease, act spontaneously, and show vitality and self-confidence. All this indicates that their emotional well-being is OK. and that their physical needs, the need for tenderness and affection, the need for safety and clarity, the need for social recognition, the need to feel competent and the need for meaning and moral value in life are satisfied. Interventions that secure the well-being of children make them stronger and keep them in touch with their feelings and emotions.

The concept of involvement refers to a dimension of human activity. Involvement is linked neither to specific types of behaviour nor to specific levels of development. Both the baby in the cradle playing with his voice and the adult trying to formulate a definition, both the (mentally) handicapped child and the gifted student, can share that quality. Csikszentmihayli (1979) speaks of “the state of flow”.

One of the most predominant characteristics of this flow state is concentration. An involved person narrows his attention to one limited circle. Involvement goes along with strong motivation, fascination and total implication: there is no distance between person and activity, no calculation of possible benefits. Furthermore there is an openness to (relevant) stimuli and the perceptual and cognitive functioning has an intensity which is lacking in other kinds of activity. The meanings of words and ideas are felt more strongly and deeply. Further analysis reveals a manifest feeling of satisfaction and a stream of energy felt through the body. People actively seek this ‘state of flow’. Young children usually find it in play.

Involvement is not, however, the state of arousal easily obtained by the entertainer. The crucial point is that the satisfaction that goes along with involvement stems from one source: the exploratory drive, the need to get a better grip on reality, the intrinsic interest in how things and people are, the urge to experience and figure out. Finally, involvement only occurs in the small area

in which the activity matches the capabilities of the person, that is in the ‘zone of proximal development’.

One couldn’t imagine any condition more favourable to real development. If we want deep level learning, we cannot do without involvement.

Measuring involvement

However much involvement may seem to be a subjective property, it is indeed possible to assess the levels of involvement in children and adults in a reliable way. The “Leuven Involvement Scale” (LIS) has been developed for this purpose, encompassing seven variants for different settings, ranging from childcare to adult education. The LIS is a 5-point rating scale. At level 1, there is no activity. At level 5 there is total concentration and absolute implication. Any disturbance or interruption would be experienced as a frustrating rupture of a smoothly running activity.

Research with the Leuven Involvement Scale has shown that the levels of involvement within a setting tend to be more or less stable (Laevers, 1994). They are the result of the interactions between the context (including the way teachers handle their group) and the characteristics of the children. We can expect that the more competent the teacher, the higher the level of involvement can be, given a particularly composed group of children. We find indications for this in our own research, but also in the large scale Effective Early Learning project in the UK, where more than 12,000 adults learned to use the scale which has been used to observe more than 60,000 children at the pre-primary age level (Pascal & Bertram, 1995; Pascal et al., 1998).

Raising the levels of well-being and involvement

The concepts of well-being and involvement are useful not only for research purposes, but at least as much for practitioners who want to improve the quality of their work.

Capitalising on a myriad of experiences by teachers in early childhood education, a body of expertise has been gathered and systematised in *The Ten Action Points*, an inventory of ten types of initiative that favour well-being and involvement (Laevers & Moons, 1997).

The action points (AP) cover a wide range of interventions. In AP1, 2 and 3 the organisation of the space and the provision of interesting materials and activities is at stake. With AP4, the teacher is invited to observe carefully how children interact with all that they encounter in their environment in order to identify interests that can be met by a more targeted offer of activities. It is on this track that open projects come to life. They gradually take shape building upon children’s points of interest, indicated by their responses to a former offer of activity.

The creation of a rich environment doesn’t stop with the provision of a wide variety of potentially interesting materials and activities. A decisive element in the occurrence of involvement is the way the adult supports the ongoing activities with stimulating interventions (AP5) which are associated with an effective adult style.

Using children’s dynamics and their exploratory drive requires an open form of organisation that stimulates children to take the initiative (AP6). That is why in EXE-settings, children are free to choose between a wide range of activities (up to about 65 % of the available time). This point includes the setting of rules that guarantee a smoothly running class organisation and a maximum of freedom for every child (and not only for the most able or the most assertive). It takes months to get this far with a group of children. But the effort to implement this open form is rewarded. Research indicates that - given a rich offer - the more children can choose their activities, the higher will be the level of their involvement.

In AP7 the field of social relations is addressed. The adult not only explores the relations between the children, but also tries to be aware of how she/he is experienced by children. Guidelines in this area encompass qualities already defined by Carl Rogers (empathy and authenticity). At the group level explicit attention is given to the creation of opportunities to share experiences and build a positive group climate.

In AP8 activities are generated that support the exploration of feelings, thoughts and values. In a sense it is a promotion of psychology as a field of competence, but of course at the level of young children. One of the materials supporting the development of social cognition, is the *Box Full of Feelings*. The series of open ended activities linked to the set, helps children to develop emotional intelligence and social competence. The effect has been reported by Nanette Smith, who is finishing a dissertation on this subject, on a BBC programme for practitioners: “We’ve only used the *Box Full of Feelings* for seven weeks. Already we’ve seen a big, significant difference. (-) we can sense a general feeling of protectiveness, awareness, friendship and empathy in the children which wasn’t there before.” (Kog, Moons & Depondt, 1997).

For the primary education level and beyond, *five factors* have been identified as most influencing in realising well-being and involvement. For any lesson or part of the curriculum one can check (1) how the planned activity affects the class climate and the relations with and between the participants, (2) if the offer is challenging enough and not too easy or too difficult, (3) if the content can be enriched by more documentation, more lively brought information or concrete material, (4) if the organisation allows enough action and (5) how much opportunity is given to the participants to make personal choices.

In the process of implementation, the five factors evolve towards 5 basic work forms that can be considered as the building bricks of a model that offers enormous opportunities for "wellbeing" and "involvement". These work forms are: (1) "circle times" and "reunions", (2) contract-work, (3) project-work, (4) workshops and (5) activity on the basis of free initiative.

Children who need special attention

AP1 to 8 have a general character: they lay the foundations. The two remaining action points turn our attention to children needing special attention because they do not reach the levels of well-being and involvement that we strive for. In the first (AP9) we deal with behavioural and emotional problems: children who, through all kinds of circumstances, do not succeed in realising a satisfying interaction with their environment, who come under pressure and lose contact with their inner stream of experiences. On the basis of a large number of case-studies, an experiential strategy has been developed to help them. Interventions that have proved effective range from “giving positive attention and support” to “giving security by structuring time and space”.

The last action point (AP10) is about children with special developmental needs. We define them as children who fail to demonstrate the quality of ‘involvement’ in one or more areas of competence. This means that their development is endangered and there is a real chance that they will not develop their potential.

An experiential teacher style

Teacher interventions can vary a lot, depending on the nature of activities or on the responses and initiatives of children. Nevertheless, we can discern individual patterns in the way teachers intervene in a wide variety of situations. The notion of ‘style’ is used to grasp this pattern.

The ‘Adult Style Observation Schedule’ (ASOS) is built around three dimensions: stimulation, sensitivity and giving autonomy (Laevers, Bogaerts & Moons, 1997).

Stimulating interventions are open impulses that engender a chain of actions in children and make the difference between low and high involvement. They include: suggesting activities to children who wander around; offering materials that fit in an ongoing activity; inviting children to

communicate; confronting them with thought-provoking questions and giving them information that can capture their mind.

Sensitivity is evidenced in responses which demonstrate empathic understanding of the basic needs of the child, such as the need for security, for affection, for attention, for affirmation, for clarity and for emotional support.

Giving autonomy is not only realised in an open form of organisation but also has to be implemented at the level of interventions. It means: respecting children's sense of initiative by acknowledging their interests; giving them room for experimentation; letting them decide how an activity is performed and when a product is finished and implicating them in the setting of rules and the solution of conflicts.

Once we begin to look at the way adults interact with children we realise how powerful these dimensions are. The personality of the teacher is even more important than other dimensions of the context, such as the space, the materials and the activities on offer, when it comes to achieving high levels of well-being and involvement

The Process-Oriented Child Monitoring System

To identify children who need special attention, both systematic observation and some kind of monitoring system are necessary. Although the traditional product-oriented systems have their value, especially for diagnostic purposes, they also have serious limitations. Totally in accordance with the EXE-framework, the Process-oriented Monitoring System (the POMS) focuses on the two major indicators of the quality of the educational process: well-being and involvement. These answer the essential question: how is each child doing? Are the efforts we make sufficient to secure emotional health and real development in all important areas and for each of the children? In a first step, children are screened, with a five point scale for each of the dimensions. For children falling below level 4, teachers proceed with further observations and analysis. A periodic assessment (3 or 4 times a year) of these levels has proved both practicable and effective. In contrast to other systems, the POMS gives a sense of purpose: teachers get immediate feedback about the quality of their work and can take action without delay. The aim is to promote enjoyment and more intrinsic motivated action within the relevant fields of development (Laevers, 1997).

The agenda for the 21st Century

Experiences accumulated in the EXE project support the conclusion that well-being and involvement, are welcomed by teachers as most stimulating and helpful in improving the quality of their work. The concepts of well-being and involvement match the intuitions of many teachers and give them a scientifically-based confirmation of what they knew already: when we can get children into that 'flow state', development must and will take place within the area(s) addressed by the activity. In contrast to effect variables – the real outcomes of which are only seen in the longer run – process variables give immediate feedback about the quality of (planned) interventions and tell us, on the spot, something about their potential impact. Furthermore, putting forward involvement as a key indicator of quality, engenders a lot of positive energy and synergy: the enthusiastic responses of children, when the adult's efforts are successful, are very empowering and give the teacher deep satisfaction both at the professional and personal level. Finally, taking involvement as a point of reference in professional development makes it possible to respect the actual level of functioning of the teacher and the setting.

When implementing experiential education one starts where one stands, with the room, the children, the material, the books, the methods and all the limitations linked to the actual situation.

The curriculum and all developmental domains are part of this environment. Then a field of action is chosen focussing on areas or (groups of) children showing low levels of involvement in systematic observations. Within the area(s) chosen, initiatives are taken which have the potential to bring about an increase in well-being and/or involvement. This increase – however small it may be - is experienced as a success and drives one towards new initiatives.

That is what experiential education is about: exploiting and enhancing the energy in people and drawing them into a positive spiral which engenders deep level learning. Only in this way can we make schools more effective and strong enough to meet the challenge of education: the development of adults who are self-confident and mentally healthy, curious and exploratory, expressive and communicative, imaginative and creative, full of initiative, well-organised, with articulated intuitions about the social and physical world and with a feeling of being connected to the universe and all its creatures.

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ABSTRACT

In the conceptual framework of the project "Experiential Education" educational outcomes get a lot of attention. The concept of 'deep-level-learning' - based on a constructivist tradition - catches the essence of an alternative view on learning and development: real learning affects the deeper structures on which competencies and dispositions are based. This line of thought is made more tangible through an analysis of several domains: the understanding of the physical world, social competence, communicative skills, curiosity, intuition, imagination and creativity and self-management. They play a key role in the way persons function in school and in life. To develop them an educational context must be constructed that brings children into the highest levels of 'involvement': that is where deep-level-learning is taking place.

Key-words:

Experiential education
Educational outcomes

Instruments for observation

Intrinsic motivation

Creativity

Emotional well-being