

Monday July 29, 2013

## Q & A

### The power of early childhood education

Apart from training Fiji's primary and secondary school teachers, the Fiji National University also provides training in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and runs childcare centres in Suva and Lautoka. The FNU newsletter team talked with the head of FNU's Early Childhood Education Department, Ufemia Camaitoga, on aspects of early childhood education. The following are excerpts:

**1. There is a school of thought that intelligent children will mostly do well in school and that children who have supposedly had a head start with kindergarten exposure tend to level out during primary school because other children will also pick up learning skills as they go through school and be as good as or better. What is your view?**

Our ECE programme provides a welcoming, familiar and motivating environment, which makes young children's transition from home to school very smooth, exciting and encouraging. ECE teachers are specially trained to handle young children like their mothers handle them, so that these young children find comfort, pleasure and peace in school. Children who attend kindergarten learn to adjust to the school atmosphere through playful experiences and are given the opportunity to learn the way they prefer. So when children who attend kindergarten go to Class 1, they often adjust to the Class 1 program faster than children who have not been to kindergarten.

**2. So exactly what advantages does kindergarten give a child?**

The best thing about kindergarten is that it provides unlimited opportunities for young children to learn, grow and develop skills. Children are able to interact with other children from different social and economic backgrounds which teaches them about the world around them and how they can be successful in their relationships with the people around them. This is a lifelong skill which children can apply wherever they go and whatever they do. Here children also become independent learners as they explore, investigate and observe to learn about the things around them.

**3. Is there a place in the ECE curriculum for more formal teaching/learning?**

The vision of the kindergarten curriculum "*Na Noda Mataniciva*" is: "That the children of Fiji develop into healthy, happy and responsible individuals, with reverence for God. We want them to have a strong sense of identity, appreciate their own as well as others' cultures, have respect for the environment and become lifelong learners who will contribute to the peace and prosperity of our nation Fiji." On this note, it is important for young children to learn through play as they will find answers to their questions through doing things and at the same time master the process of learning. Children love to wonder and imagine things, so introducing them to formal teaching too early may impact upon their thinking capability and limit their creativity.

**4. Many primary schools select Class 1 students on criteria that includes their knowledge of numbers and alphabets. Is it appropriate to test for entry to primary school?**

Looking at our program, I think there is no place for such interviews. Children have just started their education and categorizing them means, depriving them of their rights to education as they may draw a negative picture of themselves that they are not capable of learning.

**What about children in isolated areas or impoverished circumstances who have no access to ECE? How can parents who probably have had limited education themselves and no exposure to the ideas of ECE help their little ones to prepare for learning and school?**

Perhaps workshops can be conducted to equip these parents and play groups can be conducted twice a week to give these children some exposure to ECE. They can seek help from NGOs and the Ministry of Education and operate a playgroup in their areas.

**6. There are advertisements online and sometimes on TV about teaching babies to read, apparently with phenomenal results. Is this really possible and is it really necessary or desirable for parents to teach the very young to read?**

In these advertisements, parents are not teaching babies to read but are reading to babies to give them the exposure to basic communication skills such as listening, speaking and later on reading and writing. Literacy is not just about reading and writing. It includes talking, listening, visual literacy practices such as viewing and drawing as well as critical thinking. Babies learn communication skills from adults around them so if we are good role models, babies and young children will imitate us and also make sense of the things around them. This will give babies confidence to speak and express their feelings as they grow and develop.

**7. What does this mean for early childhood teachers?**

EC teachers need to understand and be able to build on the literacy practices of children's homes. They must also be able to work collaboratively with families in developing children's early literacy skills.

For more information please contact the Communications Office on 3393110.