Distribution: Limited

IDRC/UNICEF/UNESCO

Regional Workshop on Early Childhood Education

Bangkok, 1-5 December 1986

*The Learning Environments of Early Childhood: Research Perspectives and Prospects*

**Educational Strategies for Young Children in Asia**

**By**

**Mrs. Mina Swaminathan**

UNESCO REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EDUCATION IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Bangkok, Thailand

BKRM/86/D/711-40

**EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR**

**YOUNG CHILDREN IN ASIA**

**Mina Swaminathan**

An ironic contrast may be observed between theory and practice at different levels of education in Asia. On the one hand, theoretical studies based on researches in the last three decades emphasise the profound and intricate links between play and learning, especially in early childhood. Play is seen to be the most important medium of learning in childhood, being the characteristic style in which the young child interacts with the surrounding environment that provides the materials for learning. In later childhood, adolescence and adulthood, play, manifested in different forms, continues to be important, though now supplemented by other strategies. So education based on play and games is deeply significant at all levels of education from the preschool stage to adult education.

On the other hand, in most Asian countries today, education at the preschool and elementary stages is characterised by a very formal atmosphere, from which play is almost totally absent. A vast storehouse of traditional games and folk toys no doubt exists, but has yet to be widely used in education. This is a generalization applicable to systems of education in Asia, though as elsewhere, many distinguished exceptions to the rule can be found. Secondary education is still more formal in nature, while education and training for adults make little pedagogic use of play or games. The divorce between what is known to be necessary and what is practised seems complete.

The reasons for this state of conflict, which is heading towards a crisis, are not far to seek. They can be found in the historical origins and development of current systems of education in Asia. There is great diversity between Asian countries today in regard to quantitative achievement, education structures and models, and predominant approaches, the sharpest divide being between those committed to Socialism and the rest. Yet they all have this much in common – almost all systems are based on earlier colonial or imported models, and have rapidly expanded in the last thirty years in a linear fashion, almost as they were, with little response to new theoretical insights. Educational systems historically set up for the development of small and highly motivated elites were suddenly required to turn themselves into systems of mass education, catering to vast populations of previously unlettered peoples. In the course of this explosion of size, conflicts appeared between the traditional Asian values and norms, and what were perceived as the more ‘modern’ values emanating from alien models of formal education.

**Some Value Conflicts**

In the popular view, formal education is seen as relating to the cognitive domain alone rather than as a holistic process. It is valued chiefly for its intellectual gains and as leading to material advantage; the development of values and morals, the formation of personality, the acceptance of social responsibility, and the acquisition of vocational skills are all largely left to other agencies, in this view. This does not, of course, correspond exactly to reality, which moreover, is rapidly changing, as educational systems tend to take on more and more of these other tasks; but this is the dominant perception. On the other hand, the traditional holistic view of learning is considered to be applicable to the acquisition of life skills and tasks and social roles rather than to the conquest of subject matter divided into specific intellectual disciplines.

At the affective level, modern formal education stresses individual achievement, sometimes at the cost of others, and severe, often stressful competition between individuals; traditional approaches stress the primacy of the group, and the subordination of the individual to it and favour group solidarity and cooperation, sometimes even at the expense of the individual. In the popular perception, formal education requires endurance, being difficult or even painful to acquire; play, being innately pleasurable is not seen as a valid educational strategy even for the very young, since the model of education relevant to oldest children is being here applied to all ages. In another area, that of method, modern education stresses visual aids to learning, a strategy derived from literacy; while the traditional methods, which are part of oral cultures, stress aural aids. More such illustrations could be given of these deep dichotomies.

**The Meeting Point of Concepts**

The crowning irony, however, is that perceptions based on recent advances in developmental psychology, linguistics, cognitive anthropology and other “new” disciplines are coming closer and closer to some of the most ancient concepts of Asian metaphysics and world views. For example, the stages of psycho-social development delineated by Erikson, or the stages of cognitive development described by Piaget, tend towards the description of the four stages of life according to Hindu thought, a parallel which has been lucidly described by at least one Freudian psychoanalyst.

Cybernetics, from which are derived concepts of self-learning, programmed learning and highly individualised approaches, combined with psychological theories which stress group reinforcement, group process, informal peer learning, and role modelling return to older concepts of prolonged apprenticeships, one-to-one teaching/ learning, and close teacher-taught relationships. The growing understanding of the need for simultaneous learning in cognitive, motor and effective domains for mutual reinforcement itself signifies a return to a more integrated view of the learning process.

The wheel is coming full circle in concept but not in the application, which is still found only in isolated patches and examples. Yet in this growing congruence, there is a ray of hope for the future. Exciting new vistas are opened by the possibility of exploiting new educational approaches which draw strength from their rootedness in antiquity. Some of these are already illustrated in the existence of numerous small-scale experiments. A study of early childhood education from the standpoint will help to elaborate the hypothesis suggested in the previous paragraph, illuminate some of the issues, and suggest possible directions for the future.

**An acceptable model of child education**

To define the characteristics of a well-designed programme for learning in early childhood, it is first necessary to look at the nature of child learning. For convenience, a mass of features may be grouped under three significant attributes: activity, individuality, and holism.

To consider each in turn, the young child learns by actively operating upon his immediate environment, in a spontaneous fashion termed “play”. The development of intellectual structures during this period proceeds on this basis. Educational strategies must therefore rest upon the child’s own activity, whether more or less structured or spontaneous. Second, learning is a highly individual process, with the pace, direction and nature of learning related to the child’s developmental stage and interests. Participation in group activities is an essential element in both cognitive growth and social development but the actual learning is highly individualised. Third, the child functions as a whole and has to be treated as such. Planning for different areas of learning is necessary but related to the adult’s own perception and convenience. Learning grows from the child’s personalised interactions, with or without guidance, with the environment and often appears to be incidental or unplanned.

A good learning environment for a young child must then

* permit, if not actively encourage, stimulate and support child activity (both spontaneous and structured)
* provide an environment structured so as to provide learning opportunities of a seemingly incidental type and
* provide skilled adult interaction which can guide and direct so as to make the most of the available opportunities.

Clearly, no particular type of environment can be considered specifically necessary or desirable. Almost any environment is potentially rich in opportunities for child learning, requiring only adequacy of quantity and quality of skilled adult interaction to draw out this potential. Equally, such opportunities could be provided in both home and institutional settings, through a variety of auspices and with a range of material inputs. Awareness and skills in the adults responsible for early childhood education are however of the utmost importance. Without this component, even the richest material environment would be sterile in the educational sense.

**The situation as it is**

These requirements may now be compared with what is actually available in most Asian situations. In quantitative terms, about 6.1% of children aged 3-5 years in Asia (excluding China) are enrolled in some form of preschool education (compared to a world enrolment of 17.1% of the age group, 73% of the age-group in Europe and USSR and 49% in North America). This figure, of course, masks a tremendous variety within Asia itself, ranging from 35% of the age-group in Vietnam to less than 1% in some of the poorest countries of the region.

But in terms of quality or nature of the curriculum, there is far less variability. Almost everywhere, preschool education is formal in nature. Classes are large, ranging 20 to 40 in size. Even the lower limit is too large for individual attention, leave along individualised teaching. Materials are usually limited and space confined. Teachers most often are poorly trained, and of low educational qualifications. Children spend a great deal of their time in group activities like singing, recitation and games, often with everyone doing the same thing at the same time, with little scope for creativity, spontaneity of free activity. Free play, if not actively discouraged, is often impossible in the circumstances. Sometimes it is offered as a relaxation between more structured activities. Early introduction to the three rupees in the name of preparation for primary school is almost universal. Drilling in the basics of literacy and numeracy takes up a considerable proportion of the time. The Asian pre-school is best described as a downward extension of the primary school of a formal kind. Parental aspiration, which sees this kind of early preparation as necessary to face the competitive ladder of academic education, exerts further pressure in the same direction.

While this picture may seem unduly discouraging, it must be remembered that it applies to the generality of situations. In every country there are outstanding examples of a very different sort of practice and excellent models of early childhood education structured according to the principles of child learning. However, these are usually centred around individuals or institutions and cater to relatively small groups. Regrettably, often such educational facilities are available only to the most affluent urban sections of the community. In some cases, small regions or sub-systems are permeated by such healthy influences. But in no country, can the system as a whole or the majority of preschool institutions be described as adopting play as the organising principle of the curriculum.

**Reasons for the Divergence**

The reasons for this state of affairs have already been commented upon in the first section. In a sense, it represents the failure of theory to arrest the momentum of a growth powered by quite other forces. In the non-socialist countries, preschool education is not the responsibility of the State and has resulted from the efforts of a variety of individuals, each responding to what they perceive to be the demand or the need of society. In many cases they are not guided by a clear understanding of a principles of child education; in others, even if they are so inspired, they are defeated by circumstances. What is significant, however, is that a similar discouraging situation prevails even in the Socialist countries of the region where the preschool environment can be and is, planned in accordance with State policy. The probable causes for this gulf are discussed later.

Two examples will next be described in detail. Both relate to the earliest period of childhood, (birth to three years of age). The first is from a Socialist country which is explicitly using the crèche as an instrument of policy; and the second, from South Asia, describes a small-scale integrated programme for the children of the poorest.

**Creches in Vietnam**

In Vietnam, the extensive network of crèches developed in the North during the war years in response to the need to liberate women for participation in the war force and war effort, have spread since 1975 into the southern part of the country as well. Today there are about 43,000 creches in the country as a whole, catering to 1.3 million children aged 0-3, or about 25% of the age-group, though 90% of the crèches (and the children) are still to be found in the North. The corresponding proportion for children aged 3-6 in kindergardens is 35%. This crèche network is the largest and best organized centrally-directed system of institutional child care for such young children in Asia. It merits study as one of the most significant experiments in human development ever undertaken. In Asia, only China has made comparable efforts and exact figures about crèches in China are not available now. There are indications that more emphasis is currently being given to kindergardens for the age-groups 3-6, and that institutional crèche facilities are found only in large factories and establishments and in some large urban settlements.

**The stated purposes**

Crèches in Vietnam are stated to fulfil two purposes; the first is to liberate women for full participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the community and the second is to mould children early into the accepted human ideal of socialist society, referred to as New Man or Socialist Man (perhaps for merely linguistic reasons, one rarely hears about New or Socialist Woman.) The first purpose appears to be excellently fulfilled. In the towns, almost all the large establishments, offices and factories maintain crèches to serve the needs of the women workers; “street” crèches serve the women of the locality who work in small scattered work places, or shops. About 70% of all women workers employed by the State in urban areas have their children taken care of in this way. In the rural areas, the institution is not so widespread. Women still take their children to the fields with them, or leave them in the care of siblings or older members of the family. Crèches are found mainly in the larger villages, or may be seasonal, operating only during the busiest agricultural seasons.

It is not so clear how well the second purpose of socialisation in a set direction, is served. Though the goal is clear and accepted, and procedures have been developed to attain them, the consequences are ambiguous. The procedures themselves do not stand up to close scrutiny for their ability to attain the desired ends. Analysis of first-hand impressions points towards consequences other than those stated as desired.

Crèches are administratively large units, ranging in size from 50 children to more than 300 in some of the largest urban examples. They are divided into operating units of about 25 children of similar age, each handled by a three or four attendants. These workers are mostly girls aged 17 to 25, of middle or high school education. About half have received no training at all, while the rest have varying amounts of training, some no more than a “crash” course of a few weeks duration. Training courses tend to be theoretical in nature with carefully controlled “practical” sessions of a laboratory type. The worker-child ratio is excellent, ranging from 1:5 to 1:8 in the most and least favoured situations, with a national average of 1:7. This is the most outstanding positive feature, allowing as it does a very close bond of affection to develop between worker and child over a three year period, and close individual attention to the needs of each child.

**The child’s developmental needs**

The child’s needs for affection, security and warmth appear to be adequately met, and there are no evident signs of deprivation in this regard. The attendants seem uniformly cheerful, affectionate and industrious and provide constant loving care. The affective component seems to be adequately taken care of and the building of basic trust, an Eriksonian task in the first year of life, achieved through close interaction with a “mothering” adult. The pervasive Asian phenomenon of “multiple mothering” has been successfully borrowed from the extended family. The second Eriksonian stage of will, in which the dichotomy is between autonomy and doubt, appears less well served. Equally, cognitive development in this sensori-motor stage and the first part of the pre-operational stage, may suffer from lack of stimulus and free exploration of the environment.

For reasons of safety and hygiene, little exploration or individual activity is encouraged. Space is plentiful in most places with large airy rooms, but often filled with cumbersome Western-style cribs, and free movement and restricted. Children appear to spend long periods of time sitting still in small chairs, or waiting for their turn to do something. Regular periods of structured activities are provided in which children perform the same actions one by one. Children were not observed to play with earth, mud, clay, sand or water, or to use the garden and open spaces freely. Sensory exploration is minimal, except on fixed occasions with specified equipment, and these are limited in number and variety. A low level of individual activity, with some group drills appear to be the norm.

Careful longitudinal studies would be needed to determine if motor development is adversely affected in consequence. Long periods are also spent by children in the better-equipped urban crèches on sitting on the ‘potty’ and being persuaded to function on them. It is difficult to say without further study whether or not this has deleterious consequences. Certainly it contrasts strongly with the relaxed attitude to toilet training usually found in the Asian family, even in the same country. Hygiene, nutrition and sanitation are maintained at a high level in the best urban crèches, but conditions may be less than ideal in the smaller and rural ones. This has a positive side in providing a more natural attitude to functions like toilet training. The heart of the curriculum is socialisation to Socialist norms and values, through habit formation, example and percept. Children learn to share, to wait, to take turns, to attend to other’s needs, to be orderly, quiet and well-behaved, by these means.

**Grouping by age**

A disturbing feature from the pedagogical standpoint is the rigid division of children into age-groups very narrowly defined. In the large crèches, children are divided into six month age-sets – 8-12 months, 13-18 months, 19 to 24 months and 25-26 months are typical. The number of children below one year observed in crèches is disproportionately low. The child spends the entire day, almost 11 hours, in the company of his close age-mates, and one or two attendants, and with few others. These are the constant companions, role models and play mates. Peer conformity and peer example are constantly used as disciplinary and educative measures.

As a result, the child is cut off from opportunities to learn from the example of older and younger children. People of other age-groups, who would normally be available as role models, guides and teachers in the family or community setting are also absent. In view of this deprivation, the quality of the substitute becomes of utmost importance, as it is clearly inadequate. Most crèche attendants are not at present able even to provide a sufficient variety of sensory and developmental experiences, leave alone to act out a variety of role models.

**Cognitive learning**

In terms of cognitive learning, too, the losses may be greater than the gains. The child spends all his waking hours in the crèches and thus misses the chance to be exposed to, watch or later participate in the ordinary activities of production, labour, consumption, leisure and craft and the interactions which normally take place in the family and community. The activities and the quantity and quality of interaction available in the crèche are far from enough to make up for this loss. Language models also are limited – age-mates and crèche attendants are all that is available. The rich diversity of language in the ordinary home is missing. The media for language development are formal – songs, rhymes, games and stories. Story-telling with aids and puppet plays are frequently found in the better crèches, and Socialist values are sought to be taught through these means. The children are constantly exhorted to love each other, their parents, country and teachers, and all the stories have moral values. But it is doubtful how much children at this age learn by exhortation, but memory learning is utilised and much is reproduced because of constant repetition.

Holistic learning strategies used in the family – role modelling, observation, exploration, unsupervised practice – are absent, and the subtle interplay between cognitive and attitudinal learning cannot altogether be recaptured by formal means. Further, there are few indications of a positive spirit of wanting to imitate family or community. On the contrary, parents seem to be often considered ignorant and backward and in need of being told how to rear their children.

What has been described so far applies to the best organised large professionally-directed crèches with trained staff, mostly found in urban areas, and catering to prestigious sectors of the population. It is far from clear whether all this holds good in the smaller and less organised or remote and less supervised rural crèches. Play materials and equipment are in very short supply even in the best equipped centres. Improvised play materials, natural materials and folk toys are conspicuous by their absence. The available equipment tends to be used at fixed times, in turn, and significantly, in predetermined ways. In places where even this is not available, even greater dependence is placed on group activities like games, songs and stories of periods of inactivity. In such situations, formal learning’s may not be achieved, but on the other hand, the possible negative consequences of formalisation may be avoided too.

**Design and Implementation**

The actual practice, then, suggests a rather simplistic view of child development, one which is perhaps natural and all that is feasible for the immediate practitioners, who are young girls with little education or training. Perhaps the underlying environmentalist theory has not been given a fair trial. It does not seem to have been broken down into a serious of steps leading from the starting point to the goal. Nor do the designers appear to have taken into account the characteristics of child learning in developing procedures. It appears that developmental theories and learning strategies based on play have not been, or perhaps cannot be, properly integrated into the Marxist ideological framework here.

To a certain extent, however, the failure may be of implementation rather than of design, dependent as it is on the capacities of the staff. It is not clear whether the gap between theory and practice is perceived as such by the designers. A cynical view might even go so far as to conclude that it is intentional, since it is difficult to see such an environment nurturing initiative, exploration or enquiry; but such a view would be difficult to substantiate. The evidence indicates a lack of awareness and drift rather than sinister intention. The point is raised only to indicate how far the reality is from the desired ideal.

A contrasting experience comes from a modest voluntary effort from India. Though small in scale, this venture is worth studying for its relative success in identifying and applying the principles of child learning. The possibilities for replication will be assessed in the context of the hypothesis suggested concerning the meeting point of the old and the new.

**The background and the task**

Mobile crèches is the name of a small voluntary agency which has been for fifteen years running centres for the care and education of young children of unskilled construction workers in the large cities of Delhi and Bombay. Rural migrants from chronically depressed areas, who flock to the cities in search of work, both man and wife in such situations must work at manual labour to make both ends meet. Migrating as they do in nuclear family units, there are no adults left to care for young children, who are exposed to the hazards of the elements and of the construction site. Poverty-stricken, illiterate, transients in the city, living in the flimsiest of temporary huts, deprived of access to civic amenities such as water and electricity and of health services, often unaware of their rights, they make up one of the most exploited urban groups. Their children are doubly deprived, first by poverty, and their parent’s constant mobility and marginal existence and second by their enforced neglect by mothers who often have to return to work a few weeks after the birth of a child. Most child care is done by older children, in turn deprived of the chance to go to school.

The agency, moved by the plight of these children and a desire to do something about it, but no fixed plan in mind, proceeded by a series of exploratory steps. It was soon discovered that labour laws lay down that employers are obliged to provide a crèche where more than a certain number of women are employed. But the law is honoured more in the breach than in the observance, it being relatively simple to take evasive measures. Enforcement is not the prerogative of a voluntary agency, and confrontation would have been both futile and counterproductive. Entry to the work site could only be had by overcoming the suspicions of the employers, as well as by winning the confidence of the labourers, who were naturally loath to entrust their children, particularly the very young to strangers.

**Family grouping**

The agency thus faced a multi-faceted task: to win support by demonstrating the possibility of a viable child care service on the worksite itself, to do this in a manner culturally acceptable to the labourers and yet consistent with standards of hygiene and care, to set all this up at minimal cost, and at the same time raise the necessary funds. It found itself inevitably catering to children of all ages on the worksite, since it was impossible to separate the family groups. The sibling group, the primary child caretaker and emotional prop, thus became the central pillar of the programme and “family grouping” in the classroom was invented under pressure of necessity.

From the beginning, the programme was comprehensive in including all ages from birth to twelve or thirteen years old, and integrated in attempting to meet physical, nutritional, medical and educational needs all at once. Today, the institution has developed into a chain of centres providing care and education through a competent band of staff trained on-the-job. Housed in very rough, often primitive, structures, the accommodation meets the minimal needs for security, hygiene and protection from the elements. For convenience, the children are divided into groups age-wise – the crèche for infants below three, the nursery for the preschoolers aged 3-6 and the informal primary class for the 6+. The different groups, however, are never rigidly seperated, sometimes occupying only different corners of a large hall, and during the day, there is considerable movement among them. Suitable schedules are devised for each group. In all cases, the basis of the curriculum is play, and the materials used are inexpensive, locally available and familiar.

**The crèche as a surrogate home**

The physical surroundings of the crèche reflect the child’s home. Space is limited and furnishing nominal. The floors properly covered are used extensively, and infants put to sleep indigenous cloth cradles. Unlike many other institutionalized child care centres, infants from about three months of age are found in large numbers here. Play materials and toys are adequate though not abundant, indigenous and inexpensive and freely within reach of children at all times.

The crèche is brightly decorated with indigenous craft and objects and there are plenty of visual and other stimuli available. Strict attention is paid to standards of hygiene both personal and environmental, and this demonstrates the possibilities inherent even in a poor home.

The ratio of workers to infants attempted is 1:8 and hopefully never lower than 1:10; but this is not always attained. The workers are typically young women in their early twenties, with high school education, and older married women of lower educational qualifications, who often have children of their own. Personal experience thus can be drawn upon and lessons taught to future mothers. Intimate and enduring relationships can be built up between the infant and the worker a substitute mother.

Interaction in the crèche, however, is not only with these workers. Older children are often present. Siblings usually respond when infants show distress and either stay in the crèche or carry off their charges to keep beside them in whatever activity they are engaged in. Toddlers roam freely about, and watch or attempt to participate in activities of the older ones, for example, outdoor games during the afternoon games period. The infants also accompany the older children on short outings. On the work-site, mothers of the infants come in twice a day, with the permission of the employers, to breastfeed. In faces where this is not possible or allowed, one can often see siblings carrying infants to mothers for this purpose. There is thus constant and varied human interaction as in a family setting. The “multiple mothering” characteristic of the family with members of several ages is here adapted to an institutional setting.

Routines are laid down but timings are rigidly observed only for major events of the day such as feeding and bathing schedules. Structured educational activities have been worked out but may sometimes not be carried out due to the heavy physical demands of caretaking, involving washing of linen and utensils, sweeping and mopping, toileting, etc. toilet training, using indigenous methods and style is attempted but not insisted upon, so there is a constant need to wash soiled linen.

**Home/ family as a paradigm for learning**

Most of the educational activities in the crèche take place in an informal relaxed one-to-one manner and are related to daily tasks and routines, such as eating, dressing, going out, as in a home. Workers have, and are helped to enlarge, a store of traditional songs, rhymes, finger games and stories. These are frequently drawn upon, but most often incidental to some activity. Such sessions may last for a few minutes at most with each child, one to one, again in a home. Group games and activities are attempted with toddlers, not rarely according to a fixed schedule. Unexpected events such as the arrival of visitor are utilized to the maximum for such learning, and so are seasonal and regular events. Sensory exploration by children is encouraged, and materials and opportunities are provided to the extent possible. Folk toys and artifacts made by older children are also used to entertain the toddlers.

The programme for all age-groups and not merely for the crèche, is modelled on that of a home. The older children spend only a part of their day in formal education, and the rest in free play, sports, crafts, gardening and recreation and a good deal in housekeeping chores. A detailed description of a totality is not possible here. However, in the crèche, the attempt is to stimulate the family setting, or rather, to emulate those aspects that promote child development. Thus interaction is continuous, informal and individual, with a variety of people. Role models are provided, daily life routines and objects provide stimulus for exploration and discovery, holistic strategies and incidental learning are made use of to the fullest. This design was arrived at partly by conscious intention, partly by force of circumstance and partly by accident.

**Paradigm for training**

The success of such a design depends on the competence and awareness of the staff. Here too the attempt to emulate approaches found in the home have made the goal easier to attain. People may not know how to set up an elaborate educational institution, but most have learnt through their own experience what constitutes a good home, and how children are handled in the family. Thus experience becomes the foundation of the training process, and further training need only concentrate on removing and counteracting negative elements wrongly learned, and judiciously introducing developmental elements whenever possible.

The training methodology itself is one of apprenticeship or internship, with newcomers learning by imitating and observing the older workers and being drilled under their guidance. Theoretical supplementation follows much later. Two important pedagogical principles, teaching by demonstration and example and learning by doing have been drawn upon at one stroke. Thus both programme and training are in harmony with the cultural framework and background of both parents and staff. Staff-parent interaction is two-way – much informal teaching about nutrition, child rearing and child care goes on in this dialogue, but the strengths of the family are also drawn upon.

**Learning from exceptions**

It should be pointed out that this programme is not typical of crèches in India. Outside the socialist countries, India has the most extensive network of child care facilities for the children of working women. Most of these institutions are organised differently, providing merely custodial care or at best formal preschool education for 3-6. Infants below three are rarely found, nor are there many attempts to provide suitably for their needs.

Can small-scale experiments such as this ever be replicated or are they too dependent on a lucky combination of factors coming together at a given time and place? Replication depends on the ability to train large numbers of people in the right approaches. It is essential to study the training process carefully and isolate the pedagogic elements that can be applied to set up training programmes in different situations. Seeing that learning by apprenticeship is one of the most ancient and well tried forms of training in Asia, it may actually be easier, once this is understood, to create such programmes for rapid replication of trained workers than to set up formal and heavily theoretical courses, often to be taught in languages and with materials with which neither trainer nor taught is familiar.

The pedagogic elements present in satisfactory homes and family relationships when isolated/ analysed may turn out to be long present in the learning styles of traditional Asian cultures, though overlooked by ‘modern’ systems of education. They can become the foundation for a new curriculum which is in harmony with an older approach.

It is worth going back to the congruence at the theoretical level. According to the Hindu world view initiation into formal learning properly begins at the age of seven. The years before belong to the realm of play, spontaneity, informality – to the home. It is remarkable how well this corresponds to the first three Eriksonian stages (hope, will and purpose) and the first two Piagetian stages (sensori-motor and pre-operational). Play itself, in this view, termed “Leela” is considered a manifestation of divine non-purposive activity. There is thus no conflict whatsoever in trying to derive educational strategies based on play from the most traditional of institutions in Asia – the home.

**Extension to older age-groups**

Illustrations from other levels of education can be found to illuminate this thesis. Elementary education broadly covers the six or seven years starting from approximately age six, while secondary education goes forward right into the mid-teens. This period corresponds in Eriksonian terms first to the stages of latency, where the task is competence and the crisis is between industry and inferiority and next to the stage of puberty with the task of fidelity and conflict between identity and diffusion. In terms of the stages of cognitive development delineated by Piaget, the first corresponds to the stage of concrete operations and the second to that of formal operations. In terms of the Hindu life-cycle, this period, roughly seven to sixteen years, is called “brahmacharya” or initiation, devoted to study and apprenticeship for life.

It is possible to devise a mix of learning strategies for this age-groups, drawing on the strengths of the home and the culture as well as the insights of research. Learning by discovery, a continuation of early childhood play, can be combined with group instruction of the formal educational system, as well as the traditional strategies of apprenticeship, skill practice, peer and self-teaching, role modelling and role play. At the affective level, all of this can be reinforced by games of skill, imitation and drama, team games both competitive and cooperative and self-learning challenge games. Learning is strengthened when it is holistic, involving both the affective and cognitive domain, and when it leads to group harmony. Pedagogical elements are already present and have only to be rediscovered and put to work. Examples of educational institutions based on such principles exist, but cannot be described here. However, such approaches have not permeated the system as a whole.

**Adult education and training**

The adult is in the second stage of the Hindu life cycle – a productive citizen, responsible householder and member of society, parent. In Eriksonian terms, this corresponds to the sixth and seventh stages of love and care. The adult undoubtedly needs to be treated differently from the child. The weakness of many well-meaning programmes of literacy and the cause of their failure lie precisely in their having treated adults like children in a primary classroom. Yet games and play and their reflection in traditional norms and practices have a significant role in the education of adults.

Their most important contribution perhaps lies in their restoration of a holistic perspective. At the cognitive level, a motivated adult can acquire, through application, anybody of formal knowledge in any subject matter or discipline of choice. But at the attitudinal level, change is not only slow but cannot be attained so directly. It takes considerable time for learnings to be sufficiently internalized to show themselves in behavioural change. In the teaching profession particularly, people tend to teach as they were taught; experience dictates practice. Hence the common spectacle of the newly-trained, who may often repeat the most advanced of modern theories and even be convinced of them, but continue to act in a manner which is unconsciously dictated by their own earlier training. An experiential curriculum therefore is the fundamental base for all kinds of adult education; role modelling, role-playing and simulation, and real-life apprenticeship the most powerful tools of training for specific tasks, while educational games in the more structured sense are also important.

Space does not permit further elaboration, but almost all the success stories of adult education and training will be found to make use of these strategies. Examples range from the training of health volunteers in India and several other countries, to community organisation volunteers in the Philippines; ‘barefoot doctors’ in China, preschool teachers in Sri Lanka, development workers in Bangladesh and educational camps for labourers, women, tribal peoples and other minorities in several countries. All of them make use of simulation, experiential training and educational games.

The two cases described in depth and the extensions hinted at are sufficient to draw attention to the vast potential for educational strategies based on play at all levels and particularly in early childhood. Ironically, it also draws attention to the relatively infrequency of their use in Asia. This dissonance calls for a closer and more sustained study of such pedagogies, hopefully leading to their rediscovery as elements of cultural heritages that go far back into history. In social terms, the home implies some form of the extended family in all Asian cultures. In philosophical terms, the primacy of freedom and play in early childhood is reiterated in all the great streams of thought – Hindu and Islamic, Buddhist and Taoist – which have shaped values in Asia. Educational strategies must grow from the centre of the matrix formed by these coordinates. Drawing on the roots of the past will help nourish the flowers of the present.