

learning
for life

...OR

life is learning?



“Why do they have those strange things in their ears?” asked Jackie. Her six-year-old face was showing her confusion as she looked at a group of deaf children playing on the mat.

Life-skills training is a very broad topic. The content of this topic includes everything that life is about, from the tangible knowledge of opening bank accounts and filling in tax forms, to the less-obvious understandings of tolerance and empathy. In many educational institutions, Life-skills training is also defined as 'life preparation'. I find it misleading that we even consider the concept that you can 'prepare for life'. If I am on a journey, I cannot prepare for the journey as I have already started it. What I can do though, is to keep growing and learning from my direct experiences so I can have a more fulfilling journey as I go along. To keep growing and learning is to embrace these experiences of life as they happen and to integrate them into my understanding of the world.

To embrace life's diversity and complexity, you need a curious nature supported by an inner core of self-confidence. This would imply that a person can go out into the world, be open to new experiences, and will be able engage with these experiences without their fear dominating their emotions. Therefore 'life-skills training' gives people the opportunity to engage in new experiences and find skills that broaden their concepts of tolerance and understanding. Take the following example...

In most cases, children in schools are separated on the basis of their abilities. There are schools for deaf (hearing-challenged), blind (visually-challenged), physically-challenged (special physical needs) etc. Even in a single school, children are further separated into age ranges (grades) and then even further in streaming children who are supposedly more 'intelligent'. The argument is not to justify, nor condemn this process, but to highlight that this may teach children that we are kept apart because of our differences. So this opens up the following questions: how can we support the development and experience of tolerance?

Many years back I organised my pre-school class of five- and six-year-olds to spend a day with a pre-school for the deaf. Their school consisted of four classes with nine children in each and, therefore, I could divide my children up so we could still keep the classes small.

Jackie, one of the children in my class, did

not want to come into the class at first.

She cried and looked very afraid of these other children who had these strange things in their ears and a box hanging from their neck. With a little support and a few reassuring words, she settled in, staying close by my side. She was beginning to make the first steps towards tolerance.

There was a general sense of suspicion from my children. Why couldn't these 'other' children talk properly? When they did, why did they sound so strange? We had talked about this in our theme week but that was just abstract theory. We had looked at our senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. We described what happens if one or many of these senses are not functioning and what the implications of this are. But this does not create an environment of tolerance, understanding, and, most of all, does not give the children the understanding that these 'other' people are also just like them. These 'normal' children in my class were finally grappling with the core issues of diversity, and as a consequence, they had to reformulate their conceptions of 'deaf children'.

However, it was in free-play that this social line was crossed. All the children began to find a common link: having fun. They were finding their own ways to communicate ... a sense of understanding that requires neither words nor signs. They would pretend playing guitars together. Some were throwing balls to each other. There were smiles all around. They found that these deaf children were just like them.

Later that evening, Jackie went home and seemed rather upset by something. She voiced her puzzlement and anger demonstrating her intense emotional involvement. "I hate God! I don't like him. Why does he make children who can't hear! It's just not fair!" This outburst hit hard at her deeply-religious family. In the silence that followed, no-one knew quite how to respond.

Later on her mother burst into tears, not knowing how to give her child an answer to this penetrating question. The mom felt it was vital that these real-life questions be answered but didn't know how to. Jackie was grappling with life's big questions; those which don't seem to have any simple answers. As a result of her experience, Jackie was internalising her experience of that day and was working through these intense emotional feelings. This is authentic life-learning.

She had worked through feelings of rejection (not wanting to be near these 'strange' children) into feelings of sympathy and helplessness (I wish I could help the deaf children). Now, without her having the immediate 'answers', she will make her own meaning of what happened, which demonstrates that she is well on her path to empathy, tolerance and understanding. OR

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