

My World Pre-School, Dar es Salaam

Evaluation Report

December 2011

Context:

In my role as an educational consultant, I have been asked by the Head Teacher to review and describe the provision offered by My World Pre-School in comparison with internationally accepted current best practice in early childhood education. I am an educator with 24 years' experience as an early childhood specialist, curriculum developer, international educator, educational leader, trainer and consultant. I am currently employed at the International School of Tanganyika in Dar es Salaam. The evidence for this report was collected by reviewing the school's documentation and during a site visit which included conversations with staff, children and the head teacher, as well as classroom observations.

My World Pre-School was established in 1994 as a Montessori Pre-School and has evolved into a forward thinking early childhood education provider in Dar es Salaam. Its work is based on current educational research into how young children learn best, and the programme is constantly evolving to reflect new understandings about what is developmentally appropriate.

This report focuses on the areas of Philosophy, the Learning Environment, Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Assessment and Parent Partnership. My observations in each area are described, alongside references from documentation published by The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), "the world's largest organization working on behalf of young children... with a growing global alliance of like-minded organizations." NAEYC regularly publishes position statements reflecting current research and understanding in the field of early childhood education, and therefore serves as an excellent benchmark for evaluating the work of early childhood settings.

Philosophy:

My World Preschool has a strong philosophy that is communicated to stakeholders in a variety of ways. The Head Teacher describes the school's philosophy as follows:

"Our basic philosophy is to create thinkers, leaders, creating responsible citizens and nurturing each individual's uniqueness. Everything from using emergent curriculum, to 'process vs product', loose parts in the playground, catering for multiple intelligences etc goes towards supporting that underlying belief."

Also mentioned in documentation and on the website are the school's commitments to the following:

- Developing thinking skills in students
- Fostering creativity and a love of learning
- A strong sense of community – parents, teachers, students and all others involved in My World are seen as making a special and important contribution.
- A commitment to parent partnership and communication
- A commitment to lifelong learning and reflection for students, teachers and parents – 'everything we do is framed by the question *why?*'

Further, they outline the key principles embedded in their holistic, child-centred approach as follows:

- Freedom of time, space and creativity
- Freedom of speech
- Freedom of choice – “free-flow time”
- Freedom of play
- Artistic freedom
- Freedom to be an individual
- Responsibility

All the domains of children's development and learning interrelate. For example, because social factors strongly influence cognitive development and academic competence—and the cognitive domain influences the social domain—teachers must foster learning and development in both, as well as in the emotional and physical domains.

NAEYC – 2009¹

There is an active Facebook page which shares what students are doing, what teachers are learning, and generates discussion on a range of educational issues.

The teachers at My World Pre-School, ably and dynamically led by their passionate and committed head teacher, are all committed to lifelong learning. While they all hold qualifications to teach in early childhood settings, they form a collaborative professional learning community committed to ongoing research, learning, and improvement. The Head Teacher gives frequent workshops, sharing current research and the results of her own study. She also seeks out other opportunities to expose her staff to professional development, and they are highly responsive to these offerings, showing a commitment to acting on what they have learned.

Learning environment

Program Standard – Physical Environment: The program has a safe and healthful environment that provides appropriate and well-maintained indoor and outdoor physical environments. The environment includes facilities, equipment, and materials to facilitate child and staff learning and development.

NAEYC - 2008

The classrooms are attractive, warm and welcoming, and are furnished with child sized tables, chairs and storage. Classrooms have access to a large common area where children from different

classrooms can work together. A range of developmentally appropriate resources are accessible to the children, including blocks & construction, role play, mark-making materials, creativity, music, puzzles & games, tactile materials such as play-dough, and much more. Classrooms include mirrors, photographs of the children in action, a daily routine board with the days of the week and photographs to illustrate each day's main activity. Family photographs are also featured around the rooms, reinforcing the connections between home and school.

An interesting feature of the school is the choice to use tiling on several classroom walls (as well as walls of the playground). This enables children to paint and draw directly onto the walls, exploring creativity without a focus on preserving the end result.

School walls are covered with children's art work, and this is clearly created by children – there is no evidence of what is more appropriately known as “craft” – which involves children following instructions to assemble pre-prepared materials into identical pictures. The artwork on display demonstrates children's creativity and exploration, and is developmentally appropriate. There is also evidence of large, collaborative pieces of artwork, on which children have worked together. Children show ownership of the classroom environment, and are keen to add their work to that displayed around the room.

The other feature of the wall displays is evidence of teacher thinking – much of the work displayed is explained in terms of how it benefits children. The process behind a piece of artwork is described, along with the experiences it involved for the children, and a range of possible learning outcomes. Areas without a “product”, such as sand and water play, are described in a similar way. Thus, learning is evident all around the school, even in cases where there is no tangible end result to display.

The outdoor area is the result of an extensively researched “playground project” undertaken by the Head Teacher. The aim was to change a traditional static playground solely catering to physical development as a place to ‘let off steam’, in to an extension of the school's learning environment, a place that would cater for all aspects of a child's development and creativity. Observing children using the area demonstrates that it indeed caters for individual preference, with children engaged in large and small physical activity, imaginative role play, social interaction, creativity, language, scientific observation, multi-sensory experimentation and exploration.

Curriculum

My World Pre-School has extensively researched and implements an emergent curriculum – an approach developed by the world-renowned schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy. The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education is characterized as “child-centred and emergent”. Many national education systems are now experimenting with this approach, including the English National Curriculum, which has recently begun to advocate a “creative curriculum” in primary schools.

Reggio Curriculum

Curriculum at Reggio is the emergent approach. The educators develop general goals and predict children's responses to activities and projects so that they can prepare the environment. Then the children take over and the curriculum emerges. Much of the curriculum at Reggio takes the form of projects, and those

projects may come from children or teachers. Sometimes, an event or a problem may result in a project, such as a study of shoes that occurred when a child came to school with a new pair of shoes. The children were curious about how shoes were made and wanted to investigate the materials of shoes. Projects are actually intensive constructions of knowledge—studies conducted by children guided by adults or with adult resources.

Driscoll & Nagel, 2008

At My World Pre-School, ideas for areas of study are generated by members of the school community – parents, children or teachers. The stimulus might be a question, an object or an experience. Areas of study are selected based on the children’s interest, and after an initial discussion with the class, teachers generate a topic web with ideas of how to explore the area of study, and specifically, how to link it to various areas of the “traditional” curriculum, including language, maths, science, social studies and the creative arts. These themes take on a life of their own, as children are inspired to explore and discover, find answers to their questions and generate new ones. This approach effectively ties in with the school’s vision of creating thinkers and leaders, by respecting the children’s ideas, and validating these as worthwhile and integral contributions to everyday school life.

The results of these areas of study are extensively documented. Each theme is recorded in a book that includes “how it all started”, the topic web generated, learning experiences, how the learning will be assessed, and student work. Student work demonstrates a high level of independent thinking. Children illustrate their ideas, and explain them to adults, who label their pictures and write down their ideas. Photographs are also used to record learning experiences and are annotated with children’s thoughts and ideas.

This way of documenting learning is different in emphasis than traditional approaches where children generally complete prepared worksheets according to teacher direction. These tend to demonstrate a child’s ability to determine and produce what the adult wants from them, rather than any processing or understanding of ideas and concepts. At My World, the use of photographs, transcripts of children’s comments and questions, their original drawings, diagrams and writing, shifts the emphasis effectively from what the teacher thinks a student should know, to reflecting each student’s personal understanding, and development of new ideas.

Teaching and Learning

Program Standard – Teachers: The program employs and supports a teaching staff that has the educational qualifications, knowledge, and professional commitment necessary to promote children’s learning and development and to support families’ diverse needs and interests.

NAEYC-2008

Teachers at My World Pre-School interact positively with children at all times. There is a good balance of free-flow time where children are able to make choices about their activity from the range of carefully planned opportunities on offer. This choice time is crucial in developing in children the ability to make choices and take responsibility for their learning. It also has a positive impact on children’s concentration span, by enabling them to engage deeply in learning activities. At other times, the teachers guide children to follow routines and take responsibility as

appropriate. Teachers are guided by their understanding of Howard Gardner's work on Multiple Intelligences to help them understand how children with different learning styles can be supported to learn most effectively.

There is a strong commitment to process-orientated learning, rather than a focus on a product such as a picture or completed worksheet. The teachers at My World understand that a child following directions to create a replica picture, or drawing lines to match objects does not best demonstrate that child's thinking or understanding. Rather, it reflects children's strong desire to please adults, regardless of whether they understand the task at hand. The emphasis at the school, is on giving children a wide variety of experiences that encourage them to think, process and verbalise their own ideas, and build understanding about important concepts, ranging from an understanding of how writing conveys meaning, how numerals represent an actual quantity of objects, or that natural materials have changing properties. **This emphasis on understanding and communication, rather than rote learning, makes My World stand out from other pre-school provision in Dar.**

- *Both child-guided and teacher-guided experiences are vital to children's development and learning. Developmentally appropriate programs provide substantial periods of time when children may select activities to pursue from among the rich choices teachers have prepared in various centers in the room. In addition to these activities, children ages 3–8 benefit from planned, teacher-guided, interactive small-group and large-group experiences.*
- *Rather than diminishing children's learning by reducing the time devoted to academic activities, play promotes key abilities that enable children to learn successfully. In high-level dramatic play, for example, the collaborative planning of roles and scenarios and the impulse control required to stay within the play's constraints develop children's self-regulation, symbolic thinking, memory, and language—capacities critical to later learning, social competence, and school success.*

NAEYC – 2009¹

Assessment

Observing, documenting, and assessing

[Early childhood teachers] understand that child observation, documentation, and other forms of assessment are central to the practice of all early childhood professionals. They know about and use systematic observations, documentation, and other effective assessment strategies in a responsible way, in partnership with families and other professionals, to positively influence the development of every child.

NAEYC- 2009²

There is a high level of focus on documenting learning in a variety of ways. Rather than having children complete photocopied worksheets which generally do not demonstrate understanding, evidence of learning is collected by talking to, and listening carefully to children, observing them as they represent their understanding through representational drawings, conferencing with them about what they have done, quoting their direct speech, taking photos of them engaged in active learning, and writing observations of their thinking, speech and action. Each unit is documented extensively in this way, including how the learning demonstrated links to the learning objectives

listed in the reporting document. Units are further documented on CD, and copies are given to each parent at the end of the term, strengthening the school home connection and valuing parents as partners in the learning process.

An individual Developmental Profile is kept for each child. Headings include gross and fine motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language, communication and literacy, mathematics and numeracy, social studies, science and creative arts. Children's progress against learning objectives under each heading are recorded at regular intervals through the year and shared with parents. There is also a narrative comment by the teacher, and a space for parents to respond.

Parent partnership

Program Standard - Families: The program establishes and maintains collaborative relationships with each child's family to foster children's development in all settings. These relationships are sensitive to family composition, language, and culture.

NAEYC- 2008

"We see the parents as the first teachers of the child." There is a high level of commitment to parent partnership. This is demonstrated in a variety of ways.

Communication: Newsletters go home frequently, giving information and reminders, as well as specific detail about what children are learning and how. There is a parent notice board for further reminders, including ways in which parents can be involved. The website includes a description of the school's holistic, child-centred philosophy, photographs of the children in action, and an ongoing blog that reflects the teachers' current areas of interest, research and development. The Facebook page is a further way to keep in touch with parents and other interested members of the community. Current and relevant early childhood research information is posted to provoke thought and discussion. It is also another forum for reminders and a showcase for photos of the children in action. A parent handbook on CD is also imminent, to further improve communication.

Education: Regular parent meetings and workshops are conducted to educate parents on child development, creativity, behaviour and other relevant topics. The blog and Facebook page also enable parents to continue to learn about how young children learn best.

Partnership: Parents are seen as partners in their children's learning. The school offers monthly face-to-face meetings between parents and teachers to discuss children's progress and development. Individual development profiles are kept on each child and are available for parents to review with teachers, and a short written report is completed each term.

School-Home links: Two school-home link programmes are also utilised effectively. The "Read To Me" programme involves children taking a book home daily to share with an adult. This practice supports the numerous research studies that have found that reading daily with a significant adult is a strong indicator of future academic success. The focus in the "Read To Me" programme is not on the child decoding the text, but on sharing the book with an adult as an enjoyable experience.

Talking about the pictures, predicting what will happen next, asking questions and enjoying the story are all more important than reading the words.

The “School-Home Links” programme involves each child taking home a new rhyme or story to share with their parents, along with a related practical activity for parent and child to complete together. There is space for feedback from parents on how the activity went, and each class has an area where the products of this activity can be displayed. This is an effective way to engage parents in meaningful activities that promote discussion, interaction and quality learning time with their child. It serves as a powerful way to demonstrate to parents how learning can occur without formal instruction.

Conclusion

What is developmentally appropriate practice?

- *Developmentally appropriate practice requires both meeting children where they are—which means that teachers must get to know them well—and enabling them to reach goals that are both challenging and achievable.*
- *All teaching practices should be appropriate to children’s age and developmental status, attuned to them as unique individuals, and responsive to the social and cultural contexts in which they live.*
- *Developmentally appropriate practice does not mean making things easier for children. Rather, it means ensuring that goals and experiences are suited to their learning and development and challenging enough to promote their progress and interest.*

NAEYC – 2009¹

My World Pre-School is a forward thinking, developmentally appropriate early childhood education provider in Dar es Salaam. Rather than accepting traditional approaches to education focused on directed teaching and rote learning of academic content such as the alphabet and numbers, the school has committed itself to ongoing research and reflection on how children learn. This commitment is clearly evident in the school’s focus on individuality, thinking skills, understanding, engagement, and self-regulation in their children. Teachers show an ever growing understanding of how children learn and develop, and continually reflect on how their practice best support this. The school is to be commended for creating a centre of excellence in early childhood education with a commitment to child development, research and best practice.

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