



The Smart-School Revolution

By

Dr. Christopher Reynolds

Over the past ten years, significant advances have been made in the understanding of learning development of children. Indeed, there is a slow but sure revolution occurring in education to move the emphasis in teaching beyond 'what' we learn and 'why' we learn, to appreciate 'how' we learn.

Learning is a rational process but it is also a biological, perceptual and emotional process and 'smart-school' education now seeks to develop learning capabilities through stimulating all these sensors.

Full of energy, young Robert Wilson, a pupil at the British Institute for Learning Development (BILD), files into class at the start of the day and gets ready for a game of balloon tennis. He lines up for a serve, the balloon goes high, his opponent slams it back, but it drops short of the net.

Every morning, the children in Robert's class spend half an hour doing an SI (Sensory Integration) exercise programme designed to enhance their learning development. Beanbag rugby, commando crawling and parachute ball are among the games Robert and his class mates look forward to each day.

The SI exercise programme has been designed by BILD to help the children increase their attention levels, become calm and able to focus before their day's class work begins. The SI programme is a basic movement programme to develop sensory skills and each day the teachers chose a set of activities for three areas of sensory motor development: vestibular stimulation, proprioceptive stimulation and bilateral integration.

When Janet Brown first started as a teacher at the British Institute and was introduced to the SI exercise programme by the Occupational Therapists, she was very sceptical. "I have worked as a teacher in South Africa and here in the Middle East for 8 years" says Janet, "and I did not believe that you could effectively increase a child's learning capabilities through mind-body stimulation. But this programme is great. The children are so much more open to learning once lessons begin".

After SI, its straight into Maths and English for young Robert. “I now have them doing Maths and English at the beginning of the day because they are much more able to handle the work”, says Janet. “Before coming to the Institute, I had no previous training in learning difficulties and how to identify a child with a learning problem or to understand what could be done to help them. I sort of knew that the programmes by the OTs help the children's development, but as a teacher in the classroom, I can see improvements in postural control, attention levels, eye tracking, concentration, writing skills and reading skills.”

Robert comes to school with high energy and good intensions but he has trouble focusing and paying attention to his work. His body-mind couldn't modulate his energy levels and his attention span was short. The SI programme has been marvellous for him. He even earned a special prize at assembly recently for improved behaviour.

While Robert has high energy, others in Robert's class, like Mohamed, suffer from low arousal levels. Mohamed, like Robert, before coming to the Institute was not doing well with his school work. Mohamed was unfocused, lethargic, needed to be told to do things twice and seemed to his teachers like he was half asleep. As part of the SI exercise programme, Mohamed, first thing in the morning, gets specific movements as part of the sensory diet to stimulate the body and mind for concentration and attention. “We seek to stimulate arousal levels and thereby effect their ability to pay attention”, say Robyn Taylor, an OT working with the children. “Most children with learning difficulties actually have low muscle tone. The activities in the SI exercise programme are designed to stimulate muscle tone and thereby body awareness”, says Robyn.

For kindergarten children, the therapists and teachers use the Jump Ahead programme, designed by a team in West Sussex in Britain, to improve motor skills and develop motor co-ordination. The objective is to help with attention and listening skills, concentration, social skills and self-esteem. There are 3 stages to the programme and each stage is designed to last a term and focuses on 5 areas of development. Because each stage builds on the one before, the programme is progressive. Jayne Lucas, the Institute's kindergarten

teacher, says; “the children are enjoying the programme very much and I can see real progress in their abilities since we started Jump Ahead”.

The British Institute is the first centre of its kind in the Middle East but is part of the world-wide trend in education to change the approach to learning and child development that has dominated the schooling systems of last century. In the UK, for example, schools are looking to improve learning potentials and trying a number of new ideas. St Gilbert's primary school in Glasgow, Scotland uses 'brain exercises' each day, while at Town Farm primary school in Stanwell, Surry, 400 children undergo daily exercises of deep breathing, neck massage and slow hand movement designed to stimulate the brain. Then there is Prince William School in Oundle, Northhamptonshire seeking to stimulate blood flow to the brain to alleviate stress and increase concentration, and Aylsham High School in Norfolk uses colour tinted glasses to help children with their reading abilities.

While there have been quite a number of experimental programmes in brain stimulation and bio-education, but moving to bring neuro-science together with education to accelerate learning capabilities is not only profound but revolutionary. Efforts to make the most of children's intelligence have until now been focused mainly on teaching methods. An appreciation of neurological development and motor development as fundamental to development of intelligence has, however, been neglected in the education debates over traditional versus progressive teaching. Now neuro-science is taking over the classroom.

The Institute has introduced the 'smart-school' concept to describe its accelerated learning programme approach. In recognising that children's intellectual and learning aptitude exist over a spectrum of capability, the objective is to advance children's capabilities throughout the range of development.

Sheena Reynolds, the Therapy Manager at the British Institute, suggests that; “The brain, as the most complex organ in the body, with some 100 billion cells and has an infinite capacity to learn.” Indeed, intelligence is something we learn as the brain is given both opportunity and stimulation. Bringing neurology together with education may sound

trendy but it is a step forward and is the basis of what the British Institute are calling the 'smart school' approach”.

Sheena has a Masters degree in Occupational Therapy from Exeter University in the UK and has some 17 years experience in neurology. She started working with children with learning difficulties here in Dubai some 4 years ago and with the services of the British Institute believes that real progress can be made to help children improve their learning potentials.

The primary focus of the Institutes school programme is to first create a school environment that enables children to get the variety of physical activities necessary to develop their sensory systems and learning capacities. This is particularly important for children under 8 years of age. Second, by assessing children's development capabilities, therapists will be able to work with children to improve their learning potentials.

Children with learning difficulties can have average to above average intelligence but display a gap between their ability and their achievement. When a child has a neurological processing delay, developmental and learning problems result. Classroom-based OT is inductive to learning as it seeks to coordinate therapy with a child's academic curriculum.

At the Institute, each child will receive individual attention to track and stimulate their learning potential. In order to advance a child's capabilities, and in consideration of their individual abilities, children will be given coaching on a daily basis. The objective to this neuro-development approach is to give a child a 'just-right challenge' within their reach and thereby allow the child to succeed, with a direct effect upon their self confidence and self esteem. The issue of 'how' we learn is that much more important for children with learning difficulties.

Creating the right environment for learning, and appreciating the importance of movement to neurological development, raising the question of whether there is something that parents can do to help their children to be more receptive and perceptive. “They can certainly take steps to help prepare them for class”, says Sheena. “First,

children need their rest. Getting about 10 hours sleep each night, doing some reading or creative activities before bed, all help children get the rest they need. Second, appreciating that movement is good for children. Lots of play, as well as getting children to do as many things as possible and avoid others doing things for them will develop both fine motor skills and levels of self reliance. And, third, getting children to eat nutritious food and low sugar content foods and drinks before bed and before going to school.”

While the Institute runs a school programme, most of the Institute's services are provided to children who are in other schools and come to the Institute in the afternoons for coaching. The Institute provides detailed assessments of children's learning and development capabilities and is able to then prepare individualised programmes to help develop function and learning.

While services to help children with learning difficulties are increasing in Britain and many other parts of the world, the combination of education and therapy makes the British Institute quite unique. Indeed, as one parent put it, “I can better services for my children here in Dubai at the Institute than I can get back in the UK”.

Post Script.

Sheena Reynolds and Dr Chris Reynolds are the Managers of the British Institute and have been in Dubai working with children with learning difficulties for some 4 years. The Institute is a new venture to combine education with therapy services. Sheena Reynolds has a Masters degree in Occupational Therapy from Exeter University in the UK and 19 years experience as an Occupational Therapist. Dr Chris Reynolds has degrees from both Australia and America and has over 20 years experience in education.

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