

Lesson Study in Early Years Education: Collaborations through Freedom

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Abstract

The purpose of the lesson study was to give teachers, school administrators and parents a practical understanding that collaborations in early years immerse when given freedom. Through lesson study we hope for the teachers, school administrators and parents to gain a greater understanding of freedom in the early years education and to recognize the importance of freedom and how it enables collaborations among young children. Participants in the study included mixed-age groups of children ages 2-8 years old, teachers, school administrators, and parents. The project spanned over a period of nine weeks in nine thematic summer camp programs during April-May 2017. The results of the lesson study came from the analyzation of detailed photos taken of the students working on their projects and the reflections of the parents on those photos. The results were: (1) In free and relaxing outdoor environment students became motivated, independent and joyful learners, (2) In mixed age groupings, where students were given freedom, collaborations among children occurred naturally, (3) Children learn best from each other; they became self-motivated, independent, confident, obtained higher self-esteem, and were enthusiastic learners. The lesson learned in this Lesson Study Project for the teachers, school administrators and parents were a practical understanding that through freedom of movement, exploration, social interactions, choice, as well as freedom from the interference of others, children became motivated, independent, confident, enthusiastic, joyful learners, who also obtained higher self-esteem and that collaborations in early years immerse naturally when given freedom.

Keywords: Early Years, Collaboration, Freedom, Lesson Study

Introduction

Preparing children for the world that not yet exist is not an easy task for teachers. Collaboration is one of the essential 21st century skills needed for every child to be able to survive and succeed in the future world and for life beyond the classroom. Through lesson study we hope

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for the teachers, school administrators and parents to gain a greater understanding of freedom in the early years education and to recognize the importance of freedom and how it enables collaborations among young children.

Collaborative learning models collaborate living. Dr. Maria Montessori (1870-1952) facilitates collaborative learning from peers by mixed age groupings; facilitate imitative learning, peer tutoring, and collaboration all around. The Montessori multi-tiered prepared environment offers children daily opportunities to teach a skill or share information with others. Further, because every child is particularly good at something, the opportunity exists for every child, every day.

Freedom was one of Dr. Maria Montessori's most important findings in early years education. This includes freedom of choice, movement, exploration, social interaction, as well as freedom of interference from others.

For parents who are new to Montessori and non-Montessori teachers, the concept of freedom within limits seem contradictory. This is because limits and rules are opposite from freedom. It is therefore frequently misunderstood; many people take it to mean that freedom means children can do whatever they want, while some parents and even teachers may be concerned that the absence of rules will lead to inappropriate behaviors.

Freedom and discipline are two words that are not usually used together, at least in regard to children. It seems counter-intuitive—how can you give children freedom and still have discipline, or be disciplined and have freedom? It is generally understood that children can only behave when strict discipline is imposed on them, meaning their freedom taken away. But Dr. Maria Montessori discovered that the two, freedom and discipline, indeed go hand in hand.

Dr. Maria Montessori recognized that when allowed freedom of choice within clear, firm and reasonable boundaries, children act in positive ways that further their development. She believed that freedom without boundaries was abandonment. In Montessori environments, expectations are therefore clear; children experience the natural and logical consequences of their choices. This freedom within limits allows for the natural development of self-regulation within the society of the classroom, as well as mirroring behaviors expected by society in general.

Dr. Maria Montessori wrote about freedom in the *Absorbent Mind*:

“To let the child do as he likes when he has not yet developed any power of control is to betray the idea of freedom.” Maria Montessori, the Absorbent Mind.

She also wrote in Dr. Montessori's *Own Handbook*:

“Let us leave the life free to develop within the limits of the goods, and let us observe this inner life developing. This is the whole of our mission.” Maria Montessori, Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook.

Freedom within limits is therefore a core Montessori concept. It is an empowering concept in which embraces the notion of the child as an explorer who is capable of learning and doing for themselves. Freedom within limits encourage children to become respectful members of their classroom community. There is no focal center to the classroom; this reflects that the teacher is not the focus of the children's attention, but that they are all one community together.

Through real life experience, children learn that freedom is choosing to do what is best for themselves and others. They learn how to become independent and confident learners who respect the rules of their freedom. Through freedom within limits, children can develop independence and self-confidence as well as respect for both him- or herself and others.

Dr. Maria Montessori identified that children possess a strong passion to become independent. She determined that independence and the child's desire to: *"Help me to do it myself"* was the key driver behind their developmental progress. According to Montessori theory, the child's journey towards independence begins from the moment they are born, and progresses as children learn to become fully functioning, empowered individuals in our world. Nurturing independence is therefore important for young children as they are in the stages of developing the ability to participate, change, and collaborate in their environment. Hands-on exploration in the Montessori learning environments is therefore not only encouraged, it is necessary. By using the mind, the body, and the senses, learning becomes an activity that engages the whole self.

Method

The purpose of this lesson study is therefore to give teachers, school administrators and parents a practical understanding that collaborations in early years immerse when given freedom. Through lesson study we hope for the teachers, school administrators and parents to gain a greater understanding of freedom in the early years education and to recognize the importance of freedom and how it enables collaborations among young children.

Participants

Participants in the lesson study included three school administrators, eight teachers and fifty-four parents of Kornkaew Montessori School; a Montessori school in the Thai context, founded in 1984. One-hundred-and-thirty students in mixed-age groups of 2-8 years old were involved in this lesson study.

Procedure

The project spanned over a period of nine weeks in nine thematic summer camp programs during April-May 2017. These included S.T.E.A.M (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics) Camp, Color Wars Camp, RC Car Camp, Songkran Camp, Harry Potter Camp, Wellness Camp, English Alphabet Camp, Frozen Camp and Music Camp.



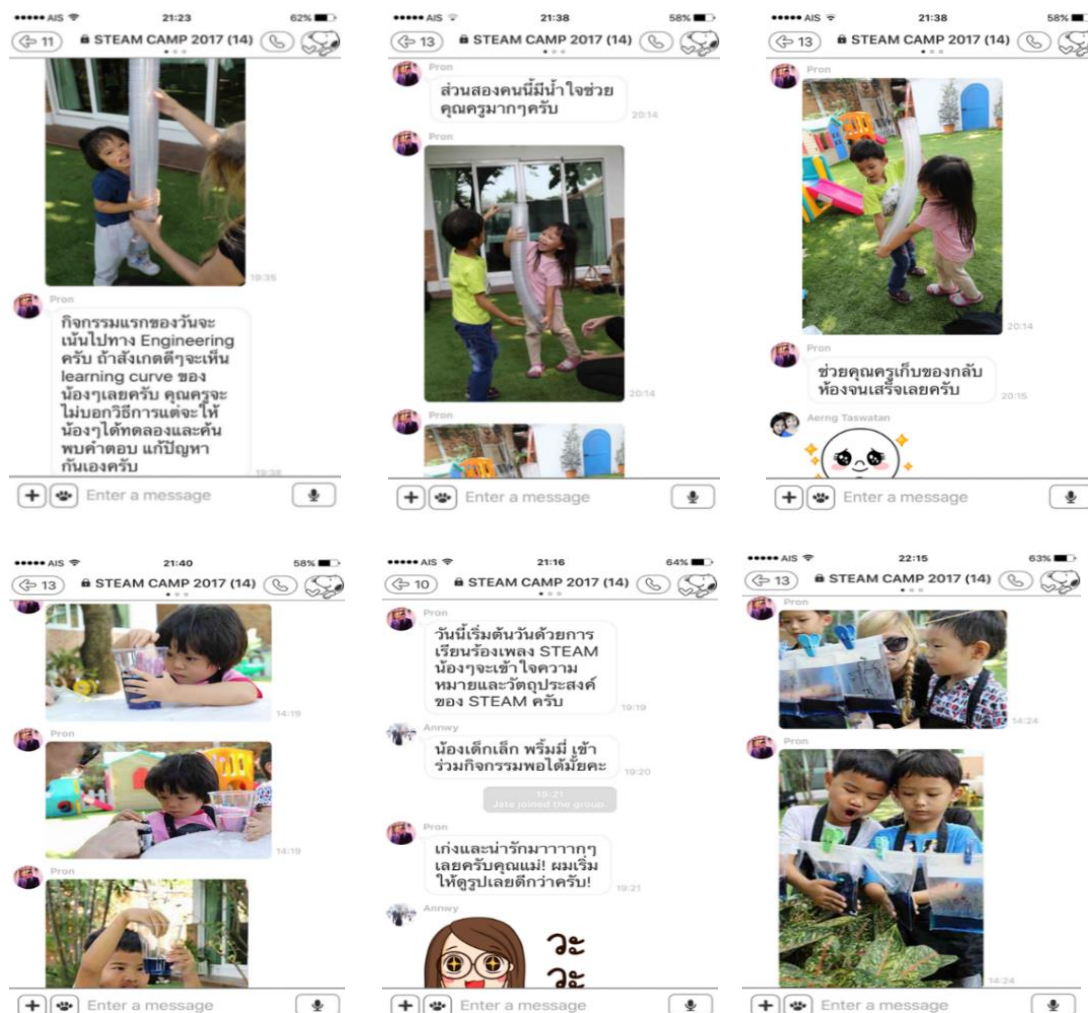
Picture 1: Nine Thematic Summer Camp

The activities were all based on hands-on. Children work in groups and individually to discover and explore knowledge of the world and to develop their maximum potential. The activities facilitate collaborative learning from peers in part by using mixed age groupings. This encouraged older children to take on leadership roles, and the younger children to learn through imitation. In addition, children learn how to engage socially with both younger and older children. In effect, mixed age groupings lead to imitative learning, peer tutoring, and mixed-age team work.

The process of the lesson study included the planning of the themes and the designing of the activities for the nine summer camp projects. Then the preparation of materials needed for those activities including the trial run of all experiments.

Data Collection

During the nine camps, detailed photos were taken of the children conducting the activities and their relationships with peers and teachers. The photos were then posted and discussed with the parents in the School LINE Group each day.



Picture 2: the School LINE Group

Reflections from the parents' feedback and comments of the photos were most valuable and were used by the teachers and administrators for the purpose of reviewing and adjusting the activities for improvements and to be most beneficial for the children. The activities were then adjusted based on the knowledge gained via discussions by the teachers and the school administrators during the pre-and post-lessons.

Results

During the project, children were given the experience of discovering the answer for themselves. This leads to a much deeper learning experience, and creates a lifelong love of learning as self-directed process of problem-solving and discovery.

The activities conducted encourage the development of imagination and creativity at every stage of learning. The open-ended activities allow children to explore new ideas and relations, providing a foundation for self-expression and innovation. In which for the early years, the building blocks of imagination are firmly established through sensory exploration of the world, launching both imagination and creative self-expression.

In effect, parents' collaborations and reflections on the photos of the activities in the School LINE Group were most valuable lesson studied by both the school and the parents. The parents could follow-up each day what their child learned, how they learned, and with whom they learned by seeing the evidence of those lessons in action through the photos. At the same time, the school was able to get feedback from the parents, both from their personal point of view on the activities conducted by the school, and on how the students felt about their activities, friends and teachers.

Conclusion

To conclude, lesson learned from this Lesson Study Project for the teachers, school administrators and parents were a practical understanding that collaborations in early years immerse naturally when given freedom. In free and relaxing outdoor environment children became motivated, independent and joyful learners. In mixed age groupings, where children were given freedom, collaborations among children occurred naturally; and children learned best from each other. Through freedom of movement, exploration, social interactions, choice, as well as freedom from the interference of others, children became motivated, independent, confident, enthusiastic, joyful learners, who also obtained higher self-esteem.

HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1927-2016), King Rama IX of the Chakri Dynasty and the world's longest-serving monarch, who passed away on 13th October 2016 at the age of 88. He left behind a legacy that will be remembered by the Thai people; the Words of Wisdom on what education meant to him. One of his most inspiring quotes on learning were:

“Education means guiding and promoting persons to progress in learning, thinking, and performing according to their own ability. The ultimate aim should be for each individual to be able to make the best use of his/her potential, to benefit oneself and others in harmony and without conflict or harassment...”

First...the teacher loves the students and the students love the teacher.

Second...teach your student to be compassionate with his/her friend; not to compete with one's friend but to compete with oneself...let the better learner help teaching a friend who is slower.

Third... the teacher organizes activities for the students in such a way that the students can work together and at the same time appreciate the value of harmony.” HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej

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