



Grow and Learn from Investing in Early Learning: Timing, Economics, and Efficiency

Pacific Early Childhood Education
Research Association

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TIMING, ECONOMICS, AND EFFICIENCY**

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Roong Aroon Kindergarten of the Mindful-Mix-aged Classroom

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Background and Rationale

Roong Aroon School (RAS) is a private school established in 1997, on 19.7 acres in Bangkhunthien, a sub-district of Bangkok, Thailand. In 2000, it was registered as a foundation for the purpose of being a not for profit organization. The school of 1,200 students with 140 teachers has been operating through 3 sub schools; kindergarten, primary and secondary, each having a principal in order to cope with the appropriate number of students and teachers. In 2007, Roong Aroon School Foundation contributed to the expansion of the higher education institution of the same conceptual direction, "Arsomsilp Institute of the Arts." It provides 3 major programs of study; Holistic Education, Architecture for Community and Environmental Development and Social Entrepreneurship. RAS and Arsomsilp Institute have adopted the concepts of Buddhism to be the main direction for teaching and learning, academically in the curriculum and pedagogy as well as in its school culture.

Methodological context

According to Buddha's teaching, the most powerful of human values is the learning capacity cultivated through proper practices particularly the main concept of 'life is learning or learning is (right function of human) life'. RAS has applied some major Buddhist principles which are actually the heart of all Buddha's teachings to be the main concept of learning at the school. In doing so, RAS preferred to adapt the basic standard curriculum to be rearranged and redesigned into the value oriented school based curriculum and pedagogy in order to enlarge and deepen its goals of learning achievement beyond being merely content or subject based. The development of the whole child, especially the spiritual wisdom needs a holistic learning system and process which can be obtained by special learning spaces, practices and key factors and mindful parents and teachers to comprehend learning corresponding to the Buddhist principles.

The objective of holistic learning was interpreted into the mindset of "life is learning" or "learning is human life". This principle helps create the added objectives out of the contents and skills; the value out-comes such as right view, right intention, right livelihood, right action, right speech, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. In other words, according to the 4 aspects of development described by Phra Bhrammagunabhorn, the most recognized monk scholar of Thailand. The value outcomes of 4 major developments should be expected; firstly, the physical development (mindful seeing,

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hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and feeling), secondly, the moral development (social development or the proper interpersonal and environmental relationship), thirdly, emotional development (higher mentality, such as compassion, kindness, respect to others, generosity, appreciation with others' achievement), fourthly, wisdom development (such as self awareness and reflection, learning how to solve problems, etc.). These profound characteristics of students are practiced and nurtured through both routine activities and guided learning activities integrated by subject matters.

Roong Aroon Kindergarten: The Mix-aged Classroom for Holistic Learning

Considering the importance of this initial age of learning, as a critical opportunity of building crucial characteristics of a well-rounded good citizen, the early childhood learning at RA's kindergarten was developed to create critical learning opportunities. With the conditions that their parents and teachers are guided to be inspiring and initiative facilitators, the children themselves are able to learn by doing, considering and wholeheartedly touching.

Basing on its school based curriculum, the RA Kindergarten of 300 students has been arranged in three main clusters, each consisting of 4 classrooms with 25 mix-aged students and 2 teachers in each. The mix-aged (4-5-6 year olds) classroom is selected to be the learning platform of sharing and learning together. This kind of platform has automatically created the proper relationship, especially of "give and take" among the different age groups. The elder were challenged to proudly behave as the coach to the younger one while the younger tried to bring about their capacities to equally share with the elder as much as possible. Moreover, this mix-aged classroom opens up the opportunity to learn by project-based units for the children to help each other in different activities and perspectives.

What and how do they learn together? The lesson plans were designed and integrated into the 5 major learning activities, described as followed.

1. Outdoor learning and free play including swimming allow the children to practice by themselves as well as share with others through exploration, observation and physical movement thorough listening and communicating the specific issues such as "climbing up the big tree together". They will experience the natural diversity or the unity of environment as well as the teamwork to achieve a common goal. Furthermore, the teachers can easily bring them to the deeper link of the valuable relationship between the tree and the kids themselves or its impact to the environment. In addition to the language skill or communicative literacy, mathematical literacy and body strength, the kids will be able to improve their understanding of the interrelationship between nature and themselves and gradually develop the consciousness of caring for Mother Nature through arts' interpretation.

2. Tales and story-telling including puppet performances, which are also favorite activities of every child. They practice and learn to interpret meaningful messages from inside out through the verbal and non-verbal language or body language, the basic skills of

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communication literacy. Imagination and creative presentation skills are particularly well nurtured by these activities.

3. Music and movement and role-play activities integrated with English practice are the special opportunities for the children to naturally learn the second language. The English teachers for kindergarten need to have the unique capability of integrating music, songs and phonics with movement or play. Sometimes the English teacher relates their lesson with the main theme of the term or project, which allows the children to easily recognize that the words of a different language refer to the same meaningful communication. Considering that music, songs, visual arts and performing arts are the different ways of communication of the small children, they learn to communicate or present their inner feelings and perceptions through many kinds of media. Learning a different language at the early ages can be perceived as encouraging and imaginative interpretation. Especially, when the children can have a friendly association and communication with the artistic native tongue teachers.

4. Cooking and table setting incorporate personal routine and volunteering for the benefit of others. These are the basic work and social skills appropriate for children of these ages. They are able to understand how to take responsibility for others and the environment. They are trained to cook using the vegetables they have planted. It is found they easily eat all of the vegetable dishes with pride. As well with the recycling of the milk cartons, they are trained to wash and dry them before taking them to the school recycling center or 'Zero-Waste' center. The elder children proudly take responsibility for the lunch table setting and service. They are also trained to arrange them correctly from helping to arrange the tables and chairs and bringing the plates, bowls, fork and spoon and cups with the exact quantity for the members of each table. They arrange the utensils onto the table space properly. Once there were some students who recognized the bad smell from their toilet and bathrooms. They raised this issue in their classroom circle and the teacher had them discuss how to solve the problem. Finally, the activity of cleaning toilets has become a favorite voluntary routine activity as much as cooking.

5. Term or seasonal projects are designed according to the different weather changes and the specific issues related to the climate. Certainly, such amazing and wondrous things such as trees, insects or small animals and their habitats, or the cooking of a special menu are interesting to the children as they discover their different aspects. For instance, a group of students found an old sick goose left lying alone from its flock. The children all agreed to bring it to the veterinary clinic in front of the school. Even though it was refused, the students didn't give up trying to help the poor goose by negotiating with the doctor. They asked why dogs, cats and even rabbits are always accepted as patients but not a goose. They confirmed their determination through a fund raising activity for the payment by helping to bake cookies for sale. They received enough money in only one week and informed the doctor. Finally the veterinarian accepted the goose with the condition that the children had to bathe it before bringing it into the clinic. They organized to have it

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bathed and carried it to the clinic a few days later. Even though it was clean but accidentally, when they brought it into the clinic, the goose burst out, ran and made a mess. The children then understood why the clinic tried not to have a goose inside. However the doctor gave it an injection and cured its wounded legs. He also asked the children to help prevent bedsores. Amazingly, they helped tie a stretcher with an opening of 2 holes so the legs could drop down to prevent sores. Through this project of many weeks the children learned such complicated knowledge and developed much more sophisticated teamwork and organizing skills than merely reading and writing in class. The most important lesson learned here was the development of their grit on the basis of generosity towards the suffering creature.

According to the thematic design lesson plan, the teachers select inspiring issues, which allow the content and skills to be easily matched and integrated into the small projects. During each trimester, the small project-based learning units have always been welcomed with eagerness by all of the students.

Factors of Success

In addition to the value oriented curriculum and pedagogy, the other two major factors of mindful parents and teachers are a primary concern. Even though it's not easy to achieve, RAS has continued to provide contemplative practices to inspire proper guides.

The necessary practicum platforms were created and systematically settled into the work schedule or annual school calendar. The 30 hours of parents' classroom are arranged for the parents of the first year students to prepare their mindset of being good guides for their children. Further more, the mindfulness practices are formally provided for all teachers to participate in by their own choice, during the school holidays. Therefore, the mindful teachers manage their classroom to be a pleasant space to learn for their students.

Moreover, the mindful teachers are able to integrate the right view of 'life is learning' into the process of teaching and learning and evaluation. The kindergarten teachers are trained to be able to design the value oriented lesson plans ranging from the annual roadmap, term plan and weekly schedule. They recognize the ultimate goal and identify the value objectives as much as the other learning skills necessary in early childhood. They also have the right imagination of the required learning process corresponding to those learning objectives. The evaluation processes are arranged in the form of formative assessments observing through each learning activity. Furthermore, the most essential practicing platforms for teachers are designed as the After Action Review (AAR) weekly meeting. In this special platform, the teachers share and learn from each other on the basis of trust among themselves for they can easily reflect the critical situation from their classroom, both successes and failures. The important result from this platform is that the teachers can see their own performances in the real classroom situation and are eager to find the better ways of learning opportunities for their students. The school principal has to be a supervisor as well as a coach to train teachers for critical reflection at every AAR meeting and bring them to the moment of BAR "Before Action Review" and readiness for

the next class. All of these value oriented systems are our regular operating platform which have actually turned the routine to research of the classrooms which can be a well rounded child development center.

The Result of 20 Years of Development at RA Kindergarten

Throughout the 20 years of developing the contemplative learning community at RA school, the kindergarten has been the most explicit in building a warm and generous family. The teachers, parents and children always learn side by side. They share their roles as learning partners with trust and understanding. Most students move on to RA primary and the secondary schools. Our graduates are distinguished. Most are accepted by the best higher education institutions, both in Thailand and abroad. The responding feedback from these institutes reflects the common characteristics of RA students, which we expect. In addition to the ability to learn and steadily work hard towards the achievement of their goals and the skills of teamwork, the RA students have the unique mindset to focus on the value thinking approach and the ability to self reflect. Most of them were asked the same question, which school did you study at?

The foundation laid in kindergarten provides the essential base for the development of the reflective, insightful and caring adult.

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