

A 'Play-Love-Faith' Learning Program for Children with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties

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Abstract

Caritas Jockey Club Lok Yan School is a special school for severely mental handicapped children living in an attached hospital. In addition to low cognitive function and poor health condition, our students also present various physical disabilities, sensory impairments, as well as profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). Most of our students are unable to speak, low in basic comprehension skills, wheelchair-bounded, and totally dependent on others. Some of them may also have behavioral problems, such as self-injury, acting aggressively, withdrawing from others, or stereotyped repetitive and purposeless behaviors. This paper aims to introduce a learning program for students with PMLD through interactive play and illustrated with a case from our school.

This 'Play-Love-Faith' Learning Program named as Love Yield Program. It integrates the elements from the Intensive Interaction approach from U.K. and the Son-Rise Program in the US. The essence of the program is to have 'Play-Love-Faith' in children's learning and teachers' teaching. The teacher was keen in interacting with the child with fun as well as having faith in the advancement of the program. Instead of the traditional behavioral approach, we introduce play and intensive interaction in our learning program to meet the special needs of our students with PMLD. We use various play activities as catalyst for creating frequent social interactions in a natural context. It is not only a fun process, but also aims at developing their pre-verbal communication skills and sociability in order to maximize their learning opportunities and capability.

A case study of a student with PMLD would be presented. Student A living in the hospital ward attached to our school. He presented uncooperative behaviors and showed very little response to adults and surrounding objects. He would suck his fingers whenever he liked. Teachers conducted Love Yield Program with an enjoyable learning time through play activities on one-to-one basis. Directional learning objectives were set according to his individual needs. The program consisted of four play sessions weekly for a total duration of sixteen weeks. Significant changes were recorded. The communication skills of the student had been improved. He had less hand-mouthing behaviors. Moreover,

he actively interacted with people. This study found that the program is beneficial in the learning of a severely mental handicapped child with PMLD.

1. Introduction

Caritas Jockey Club Lok Yan School is a special school for severely intellectually disabled (SID) children. The school is a government subsidized school under Education Bureau of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, People Republic of China. Students in school are having substantial deficits in one or more areas of adaptive functioning such as communication, social adaptation, perceptual motor functioning and distractibility of emotion as well as profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). Moreover, they may exhibit serious problems or stereotypic behaviors such as self-injury or extreme tantrums. The combination of the above represents a severe disadvantage that limits their participation in many aspects of daily life at home, school and community.

The school provides a tailor-made school-based curriculum for students with individual educational needs. The school is well supported by professionals including teachers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists social worker, educational psychologist and nurses who work as a team to plan a structured individual learning program for the PMLD students in order to help them to achieve a greater independence and adjustment as well as maximize their potential.

Teacher-centered mode of teaching such as Behavioral Modification is the traditional teaching method that widely used in special schools. Learning becomes mechanistic and students' potentials, especially social and communicative skills are limitedly developed. Students' attention and motivation of learning are always the major concerns in our school. (Nind and Hewett,1994 ; Ware,1994)

In the light of that, a new learning project was launched in Year 2000, namely, 'Love Yield Program'. It integrates the elements from the Son-Rise Program® in the United States and the Intensive Interaction in England. The Love Yield Program aims to improve the quality of life and learning outcomes of children with severe learning difficulties and autism features and to strengthen the knowledge and teaching skills of staff and parents.

The Son-Rise Program® was originated by Mr. and Mrs. Kaufman in the early 1970's. The aim of this program is to help autistic children with multiple disabilities by providing a child-centered and home-based environment, with emphasis on love and acceptance to the child. Adult helps the child to maximize his/her greatest potential. This program has given our teachers

much insight in helping our students to advance their social skills and also maximize their learning potential.

According to the Intensive Interaction Programme from Harperbury Hospital School in U.K., teachers made use of a range of interactive games to attract and hold the attention of the students with emphasis on pleasure. Through the reciprocity process in which the students had become active and eventually they could lead the interactive games. The approach involved students in the kind of learning experiences and processes through which sociability and communication were slowly developed. (Nind and Hewett,1994,1998 ; Watson and Fisher,1997 ; Ofsted report, 2001,Ref:102070))

The essence of the Love Yield Program is to have Play-Love-Faith during interaction with children. Play and intensive interaction were introduced in the individual sessions to meet the special needs of our students with severe learning difficulties and autistic features. Various play activities were used for creating social interactions in a natural context. The results indicated that the playroom sessions had facilitated the children's development in different areas. The positive changes of behavior of the child in our case study were encouraging.

This program has successfully motivated and inspired staff and also parents of the children to apply the skills in fostering the students' development. Throughout the years, staff had gained a lot of experience with the Intensive Interactive Approach had become the major teaching method in Caritas Jockey Club Lok Yan School.

2. Program Mission

The philosophy of the program: The rapport between children and adults is the foundation for promoting effective teaching and learning. This philosophy aims to share a broad and balanced knowledge in enabling individuals, team and entire school to collectively and systematically to create, share and apply knowledge to better achieve the educational objectives for children with special educational needs (SEN).

3. Objectives

3.1 To improve quality of life and learning outcomes of children with severe learning difficulties and autistic features:

- a. To extend attention span
- b. To develop social skills and communication abilities

- c. To enhance emotional well-being
- d. To increase eye contact
- e. To promote stronger desire for interaction with people
- f. To assist children to explore their environment
- g. To decrease self-stimulatory behaviors

3.2 To establish a well organized innovative programme.

3.3 To strengthen the knowledge of staff, parents and siblings of children with SEN by providing necessary support and focus on knowledge usage and sharing.

4. Scope of Activity

The Love Yield Program is a client-centered program, advocating a loving, humane and respectful approach for helping children with SEN to maximize their potential. Instead of the traditional behavioral approach, we introduce play and intensive interaction to meet the special needs of our students with severe learning difficulties and autistic features. By using various play activities as catalyst, frequent social interactions in a natural context were created. It is not only a fun process, but also aims at developing fundamental communication and sociability abilities of the students in order to maximize their learning opportunities and capability. An 'Experiencing Room' was set up for individual sessions on one to one basis. The playroom sessions were video taped and the children's performance as well as the adults' behavior and attitude were being observed and evaluated. Positive changes of behavior such increasing eye contact with others, paying attention to activities, willing to socialize others like sharing toys and holding hands were recorded. There was also a reduction in the frequency of unacceptable behaviors in most of our cases.

5. Case Illustration

This study was a single-case design. The subject was a 10-year-old boy with PMLD. He had been living in a hospital ward attached to our school and undergone series of educational, physical as well as psychological assessment prior to placement in our school. Besides delayed physical development, he presented some maladaptive behaviors which affected his psychomotor performance and learning effectiveness. These included short attention span with and little response to objects or adults, hand-mouthing and spitting behaviors, pulling out his Ryle's tube, being uncooperative with adults during class activities.

Before the program, an Affective Communication Assessment (ACA) was conducted by the class teacher. In addition, directional learning objectives were set according to his individual needs as follows:

1. To participate in activity led by adult for 5 minutes
2. To use appropriate expressive communication skills
3. To play with adult involving turn taking
4. To decrease his undesirable behaviors, such as hand-mouthing, spitting, and pulling out his Ryle's tube

The Love-Yield Program was conducted on one-to-one basis. Each session consisted of one hour. The subject received four sessions weekly for a total duration of sixteen weeks. After each session, the facilitator recorded his performance and wrote a summary of the responses and behavior of the subject.

In order to maximize their learning opportunities and capability, the facilitator conducted Love Yield Program with an enjoyable learning time through play activities on one-to-one basis. During the session, the facilitator will use sight, sound, tactile accompanied by toys to start the interactive play. The facilitator will often use techniques of parent-child interaction, including touching the student, getting contact and using a significant toy. A combination of these techniques to get student's attention was used.

Hence, the facilitator would spot and note the student's response when an interaction was likely to be successful. For example, when the student's hand was up and looking into the facilitator's face, the facilitator would consider that he is available for interaction. The facilitator would continue with various play activities as catalyst for creating frequent social interactions in a natural context. It is process-based learning. The facilitator responded with creativity to all movement, expression and sound given by the student. The facilitator would give student both opportunities to initiate and allow him to lead. The play session would enhance communicative relationship between the facilitator and the student. Eye-contact, turn taking, understanding of cause and effect by the student were being promoted.

With the video recording, rich data and significant changes were recorded. Regarding the directional learning objectives, Student A showed willingness to take part in the activity led by the facilitator for longer duration than initial sessions sometimes. His behavior in hand-mouthing and spitting still occurred, yet with lower frequency especially at the last few sessions. Moreover, his communication skills had been improved with initiative to request things by hand reaching or vocalization. His emotional response to adult such as laughing and making sounds were increased.

Highlights from the case reflected that Student A presented positive attitude towards learning. Other staff also opined on Student A making progress since starting out on his Intensive Interaction journey:

- Stimulating and challenging lessons encouraged student A to achieve his best;
- Student A had more active participation in learning process and in a more responsive environment;
- Student A's attention span had been extended. He was more willing to make eye-contact.
- His concentration in class was lengthened
- Student A was able to make documented progress in terms of attentiveness and teacher-student interaction.
- Student A was more willing and active to express his needs.
- Student A had become a much happier student.

6. Conclusion

In Hong Kong, we are the first organization introducing Son-Rise Program® and Intensive Interaction Approach in educating SID students. During play activities, both teachers and students experienced that beside love, fun and acceptance, intensive interaction was also the important element to motivate the student to learn and to communicate. The developed skills and experience gained from the Love Yield Program in our school were shared with the community via talks and workshops for professionals and parents groups. Through action research presentations at international, regional conferences, public, inter-school or rehabilitation settings, collaboration among staff teams were enhanced. The culture of action research in school has been promoted. In the future, we would continue to share our experiences in every opportunity so as to enable more children with special educational needs benefit from this effective learning approach. Our project evaluation will be ongoing and seek further in-depth study and research for the betterment of the parties involved.

7. References

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(Paper presented at the 17th International Play Association World Conference in Hong Kong 8th Jan., 2008)