

OMEP FORUM

Some Notes on Early Education in Three Selected Countries: India, Singapore, and Thailand

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We welcome new OMEP members: India (full membership, 1986), Singapore and Thailand (preparatory status, 1986). Jane Hodges-Caballero, Ph.D. and Anne Christenberry, Ph.D. were Fulbright Scholars who went to India to study women's and children's rights. Dr. Hodges spoke at the World Aerospace Education Congress in Singapore in 1987 on aerospace education for pre-schoolers based on her recent book on the subject. Other OMEP members travelling to S. E. Asia during the summer were Dr. Alma David, Ms. Linda Pruitt-Hardie and Dr. Barbara Stevens.

know it in the United States has only recently emerged. Students originally studied with one *guru* (teacher) for a number of years. Later, the Muslim educational system emerged emphasizing its scripture, the Koran. When the British arrived in the eighteenth century, schools were established for the children of their employees. Today, in independent India, there are free public schools for everyone through to least the sixth standard (grade). The overall educational pattern is 10+2+3 with the creche and Balwadi (garden of children) provided in many communities. The creche is for children from birth to three years; the Balwadi for children aged three to four.

Standard One begins when the child is about five years old and continues until he or she is approximately fourteen years old when he or she completes Standard Ten. The student may then go to post-secondary school for two years. After

India has had a long history of education but public education as we

this, three more years in college will enable him or her to obtain a Bachelor's degree. Advanced graduate training is also offered by a number of colleges and universities throughout India.

Early Childhood Teacher-Training in India

The Balasivika Training Program is a very intense program aimed at meeting the comprehensive needs of preschool children. The Balwadi teacher who emerges from this program is expected to carry out the following functions as well as teach the young children:

1. Coordinate available services in areas of health, nutrition, education, and social welfare at the field level for the total development of the preschool child.
2. Maintain contact with parents and give them basic knowledge on health and nutrition as well as child development and related topics
3. Involve the community in the program so there may be maximum community participation.

The Balwadi teacher is often expected to go beyond these demanding goals to such tasks as gathering up the children in the morning, providing their meals while they are at school, providing classes for the mothers on various subjects, particularly child development and child raising, and answering questions about health and nutrition. Since about 85% of India is rural, and illiteracy is at least 50%, the Balwadi is an important

vehicle for intervention. It is beneficial, not only for the children in rural and urban slums who may not have another chance at literacy, but also for their families, particularly their mothers.

The Balasivika Training Program for the Balwadi teachers includes a curriculum which is comprehensive and includes practical, field and community work throughout the training. Subjects in the curriculum include:

1. Preschool education
2. Child development
3. Social welfare
4. Nutrition
5. Family planning
6. Creative activities
7. Record keeping
8. Creation of teaching aids

The theoretical knowledge gained in the training classes is put into immediate practice in the field, including visits to slum projects where trainees actively participate with the people.

During her training period each student is expected to develop her own training materials such as language experience books, flash cards, charts, posters, simple classification and matching games, musical instruments, art projects, nutritional menus, and so on. In addition, she is provided with a basic set of educational toys. The training is provided by qualified staff and extensive outside resource persons through expert lectures and demonstrations, as well as field trips to supportive institutions. The 1980-81 Balasivika training course was

the nineteenth such course offered to young women in the state of Tamilnadu, with each "batch" of students numbering about 50. When one realizes that this number of Balwadi teachers spreads out to many villages (usually their own) and urban slum areas, one wishes for the trainers that each teacher may fulfill the competencies expected of her.

When one considers the relatively brief period of time during which Indians have had input into their own educational system (since independence in 1947), it is impressive to see the progress that has been made in the area of education of the very young. Particularly impressive is the fact that much of this work has been, and is still being coordinated and directed by unpaid volunteers, women interested in the welfare and education of young children. All Balasivika training institutes are run under the auspices of the Indian Council for Child Welfare, a volunteer organization.

We salute all those involved in early childhood education in India.

Early Childhood Education in Singapore

Singapore is an island at the crossroads of Southeast Asia, separated from Thailand by Malaysia. Singapore is a forward thinking and progressive commercial and industrial centre supported by excellent modern facilities. This island republic maintains a unique combination of past British tradition and modern growth. It is the second busiest port in the world and achieved full international self-government in 1957 and was separated from Malaysia and became a fully independent sovereign nation on August 9, 1965.

There are many different cultures in Singapore. Little India, China Town, and Arab Street demonstrate the cultural diversity found in the schools. The schools in Singapore have adequate facilities and materials. Most of the teachers are young women who lecture in front of the classes.

Uniforms are the common dress, even for the very young. Religious schools are available since ethnic foods of the students must be available and religion influences food consumption. Depending on the means of the family, children attend private or public schools. Although school is not compulsory, 97% attend. English is the primary language in Singapore, but Malay is also taught. Kindergarten is available for ages 4 to 6; then primary attendance for 4 years, then an exam is required prior to high school. An exit exam is also required after two years of high school before university acceptance.

The arts are beautifully demonstrated in this fascinating country with emphasis on the cultural heritage and dance in the elementary schools. Again, we salute the tremendous strides Singapore has made in education in the brief period of time since their independence.

Early Childhood Education in Thailand

Many people (75%) in Thailand live somewhere along the water and 80% of the Thai people are farmers. Children's education is emphasized throughout the country. Primary school is mandatory, starting at age 7.

Kindergarten is available privately. Many attend if their families can afford to send them. Many schools separate the boys and girls since Buddhist monks

teach some classes and they are not allowed close contact with the girls. Each temple (no temple can ever be destroyed) has a school for boys.

The children wear uniforms, depending on their grade level and school. English, just as in India and Singapore, is taught as a second language. Students, from 7 to 12 years of age attend, and then enter higher education which includes two years for a certificate, four for a diploma and two more years for a Masters degree. Outdoor play and field trips to the beautiful sights Thailand has to offer are encouraged to the young children in the Thai schools.

We welcome opportunities to visit schools around the world and look forward to early childhood educators becoming a part of OMEP and sharing the educational experiences in their countries.