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# UNIT 1 THE LEARNER AT THE PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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Any good teacher must

- feel the need to think seriously about her learner
- recognize the varied nature of the learner at primary elementary school level
- see the learner in all his/her various dimensions — emotional, physical, social, and intellectual
- recognize that the learner is at a formative stage and therefore the teacher has a special responsibility
- recognize the special needs of the majority of learners in India

Through this unit it is also hoped that the primary elementary teacher will

- develop the habit of systematic observation of the learner and of introspection and reflection about her instructional methods
- develop an interest in knowing more about her learner through relevant books, periodicals, discussions
- use her knowledge and observation to guide and inspire her teaching practice.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Do you remember how you learnt to walk? And how you learnt to talk? Who taught you your ABC? When did you understand what 'zero' actually meant?

Chances are that all these questions meet with a somewhat blank look, for we as adults are so far removed from the world of childhood. We don't or perhaps can't easily remember most of our early learning experiences. So we need to think, read, observe and reflect

And there are no short-cuts. Every time a child learns to walk s/he has to go through the evolution of the human race — from a four-legged to a two-legged creature. In the same way, when Ramu learns 'short' multiplication and 'long' multiplication, and Sonia learns that C-A-T reads cat, Ramu has to learn for himself and Sonia has to learn for herself. Which bring us to a very fundamental question: How does a child learn? If we can find an answer to this question or at least a few clues which set us thinking, we would definitely add to our efficiency as teachers.

This, then, is perhaps the first question we ask ourselves when we are faced with the task of communicating to the child what we know and believe to be important for the child.

**How does a child learn?**

Another question cannot help but strike us when we are thinking of children and the process of learning: How does a child learn? We are all aware of the happy monkey-like nature of children. They love imitating and pretending to be mamas and papas going to office, managing the shop or the farm, feeding the children, etc. They love to play 'teacher-teacher' with imaginary piles of notebooks. This is a tendency which carries on right through the primary school years. In their speech, and in their actions we can hear ourselves. This tendency of children which all of us have observed reminds us that we are teaching even when we are not, so to speak, teaching. We are teaching just by being ourselves and we are perhaps teaching far more than science or maths or language. So another question also has to be looked at clearly:

**What does a child learn?**

It was pointed out long ago that the verb 'teach' has two objects. As a teacher you are actually handling both of them.

You are

- a. teaching Mathematics.
- b. teaching Sonia Mathematics.

In other words, to be a good teacher you must not only learn Mathematics but you must also learn about Sonia, for you are, after all, teaching Mathematics to Sonia. Teaching implies a relationship. And since Sonia is not a machine but a live, thinking human being and there will be in your class not one Sonia or one Ramu but many many children I think you can see that you will have a lot of learning to do. So the third important question you have to keep asking yourself is: Do I know Sonia? Or maybe we can put this question differently:

**Do I know my learners as a group? Do I know them as individuals?**

In actual fact, since we cannot compartmentalize human beings, question no 3 will contain within itself both question 1 and question 2. As teachers, we cannot ever afford to neglect to know our learners.

In this unit we will try and provide some insights about our young learners. Remember that you are not the only person who wants to know more about children. Parents have an endless and natural curiosity about the subject. Children have charmed and intrigued poets and philosophers and scientists over the centuries. Many wise men have theories about children, and how to treat them and how to teach them. How can one tell which theory is correct? Physical punishment for children is a good example of a child-rearing method about which people have strong views, both for and against. Which side is correct? Today answers can be suggested by the results of research into the behaviour and development of children over the past century. Theories are continually being tested in the laboratory and in the classroom. The wise teacher can take advantage of the work of scientists. Research findings can greatly enrich his/her teaching practice.

But finally, it is you yourself, the teacher, who will make the difference to your learners. You are the poet with a vision, the philosopher alive with thought and the scientist who makes hypotheses and tests them as you reflect upon your daily experiences in the classroom, and makes modifications, small or big, in your practice of teaching.

**OVERVIEW**

In this introductory section we looked at some fundamental questions which the teacher is forced to ask himself/herself about the learner. Section I explores the learner at primary school level and elaborates on the non-homogenous nature of this learner. Section II deals with the emotional and social development of the learner. Section III deals with the intellectual development of the learner — his/her cognitive (thinking) and language development. Section IV concentrates on analysing the role of the teacher at primary/elementary school level keeping sections I-III in mind. It makes special reference to

Indian conditions and the awesome responsibility of the teacher at the junior school level in India. Each section is followed by a few questions designed to ensure recall of the important points and also to help the teacher to apply his/her knowledge to the daily practice of teaching.

### Check Your Progress 1

What questions must we keep asking ourselves as teachers at elementary school level and why? Are there any other questions which struck you as you went through the text? Write them down and see if the text which you will read now answers any of your questions.

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## 1.2 SPOTLIGHT ON THE LEARNER AT THE PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL

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A. What is the childrens' range of age that one can expect at elementary school level?

Primary/Elementary school is usually taken to signify Class 1 to Class V. In a few States it signifies Class I to Class IV. It encompasses therefore a wide age group right from the age of 6 to the age of 11. Would you treat a child of 6 in the same way as you would treat a child of 11? As we will see a little later, we will have to treat them somewhat differently.

The situation becomes worse because of the 'private' schools which are rapidly multiplying in India both for the rich and the poor. Here you will see children as young as three years old in schools. And in these schools there is no guarantee that you will teach only the 'primary' level learner, you must understand how to cope with the pre-primary level as well.

B. Variations within a class

In one class there will be children at different levels of development i.e. although there is a norm for every age group there are variations within that norm. You must be as sensitive to these variations as you are to the variation from one class to the next. In fact, variations within a class need very careful preparation on the part of a teacher.

Very often these variations arise because of different input from the home. In one class you will get children from homes where learning is a tradition, and where parents give enormous support to learning at school; and you will get children where there is no learning support available at home and children are sent to poor quality cram schools or take private tuition to make up for any lack in education. Still other children have no one else but you (the teacher) to support their learning endeavour. How would you view the performance and abilities of these three categories of children? Again there is need for sensitively responding to individual differences.



## B. Emotional Development In Primary School

By middle childhood, children feel embarrassed, proud, etc. (i.e. the self-conscious emotions) even without adults to provide the signals for these feelings. They are also able to exercise some control over their emotions as the central nervous system matures. Sensitive parents and teachers also help this social maturity. Children also become aware of emotional display rules i.e. when it is acceptable to show emotion in public.

Empathic responding i.e. ability to feel and respond to the happiness/distress of others increases during this period. It has been found that parents who are nurturing and encouraging are more likely to have empathic youngsters. Children with harsh and punitive parents create disruptions in the development of empathy. Such children tend to respond with anger and aversion to the distress of others.

## C. Self Esteem And Our Learner

Self concept (how you see yourself) and self esteem (evaluation of self i.e. what you think of your own worth or value) slowly develop from early childhood. At first children tend to describe themselves in terms of what they can do and later in terms of what they feel. They also begin to absorb what others think of them and so their self concept slowly develops. Self esteem grows in the same way. By age 7 they know how good they are at doing things.

Self esteem is negatively affected by overly strict parenting as it conveys the message that the child cannot manage her own behaviour. Self esteem is also affected by a competitive school environment in which stress is placed on performance. The situation is worsened by humiliating remarks or public comparisons of one child with another. Teachers who subtly convey that low achieving pupils perform badly because they lack the ability to do well also affect self esteem negatively.

**Self esteem and behaviour:** High self esteem leads to better behaviour. Low self esteem is associated with low self image and can result in low grades, aggression and violence.

**Self esteem and learning:** When Raju fails at a task does he attribute his failure to a lack of ability? And when he succeeds at a task does he believe that his success was only a matter of luck? Psychologists would say that Raju has developed 'learned helplessness' and that he has a low expectation of success. Children like Raju will avoid challenging tasks only to protect themselves from feelings of failure. Over time such children do not pursue tasks which they are actually capable of mastering and can fail to realize their potential. Even when they are making career choices later in life they will choose a less challenging alternative.

Shaila responds to success and failure differently. If she fails she thinks she should have tried harder and when she succeeds she credits it to her own ability and effort. Children like Shaila tend to focus on learning goals rather than performance goals. When Shaila failed in her factorization test she went to her teacher and asked for help with understanding this concept and began to practise more problems. Naturally, in the next test she performed better. What do you think Raju would have done in the same situation? Children like Shaila are said to be 'mastery oriented'

How did Raju develop this 'learned helpless' style? Adult feedback has a powerful impact on developing this style. Teachers can show a low opinion of a child's ability. Parents who set very high standards but actually believe the child is not very capable also foster this style. Shaila is fortunate to be mastery oriented for girls are especially prone to develop 'learned helplessness'. This is true also of children from minority groups, and low income groups. In India, children from lower castes will tend to develop this problem.

Can we turn a Raju with his 'learned helplessness' into a mastery oriented child? Yes, this can be done effectively if the task is begun in middle childhood. The technique is called 'attribution retraining'. Children are taught that success is due to both ability and effort and also to focus on mastering the problem area rather than on securing better grades. They can also be taught metacognitive and self regulatory strategies. One very powerful motivator is the presence of adult models of success.

**D. Moral Development**

When does a child learn that one tiger attacking another tiger is not 'bad' but that one man attacking another man is wrong. Are children born with this knowledge? Or do adults give it to them? Psychoanalytic theory regards emotion as the primary basis for development. A warm and powerful model is very good for children for they are drawn to such models and can pick up desirable traits like helpfulness. It is even better if the model explains her choices e.g. No, I won't come for the movie. I promised Farooq that I'd help him with his homework and he will be disappointed if I'm not there. According to the cognitive developmental school the child actively participates in moral development by weighing different aspects of situations and deriving new moral insights. Another interesting finding is that children pick up the most lenient standards of behaviour given by adults.

Moral development begins in early childhood and according to most theorists continues well into adulthood. Children first begin to show guilt reactions between age 3 and 6. They gradually begin to adopt moral standards and begin to be sensitive to good/bad intentions when judging an issue.

How can an adult help in conscience formation? Conditioning children with rewards and praise for good behaviour and modelling desirable traits has been suggested already. According to Laura Berk a special type of discipline called 'induction' supports conscience formation. It involves pointing out the effect of the child's behaviour on others: If you push Renu she will fall down and cry. The explanation can be simple or elaborate according to the ability of the child to understand. Perhaps this method works because it encourages the child to empathize with others. Another interesting technique is the 'time out' technique where the child is sent away from the scene till s/he is willing to cooperate and behave better.

On the other hand, discipline that relies on threats and punishment is not so effective. It promotes fear and anxiety such that children cannot think clearly to figure out what they should do. Harsh punishment does not foster long-term goals. It supplies children with social sanction for violence and adult models of violence. Another sad consequence is that even if the adult is well-intentioned and loves the child, the child will be frightened away from that adult and this will reduce the opportunity for interaction through which the child could learn more acceptable behaviour.

**Check Your Progress 3**

- 1. Cite three reasons in support of the statement: 'Emotions are fundamental to all human activity.'

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- 2. Six year old Renu is sobbing bitterly over a broken toy. Shyam tries to console her. 'Come on Shyam', says Meena differently, 'let's go and play.' Comment on the incident in the light of what research findings on empathic responding suggest. Is there any role which the teacher can play in this case?

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3 a. Explain with examples the impact of low self esteem on behaviour and learning. Suggest four good ways in which you as a teacher could encourage a healthy self esteem in your learner.

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b. 'How can a child like you give such a stupid answer, Kamlesh. I could have expected such an answer from Neeru Kumar, not from you!' said the teacher. Describe the possible effect of this remark on the self-esteem of a) Kamlesh b) Neeru.

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Rakesh, showing his mother his class photograph, 'And this side, Mama, all the dumb ones sit. Miss has a terrible time with them.' How do you think Rakesh has decided that certain children are dull and they are painful for the teacher?

4. What is 'attribution retraining'? Explain with examples how it can be done.

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5. Think back to your own childhood. Can you remember any adult who added to your self esteem or damaged your self esteem? Did this have any long term impact?

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6. Do you feel that you as a teacher can contribute to the moral development of your learners? Discuss

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7. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child's'. Consider this old saying from what has been found to be associated with harsh punishment. Do you feel teachers should use physical punishment in class? Justify your answer.

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## 1.4 COGNITIVE AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AT THE PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL

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How does a child learn?

Like a puppy learning to beg through praise and reward or through disapproval?

Like a magnificent computer which takes in, processes stores and retrieves an unimaginable amount of data?

All these images and more have been used effectively to describe the way in which human beings learn. No single explanation can yet be called flawless and complete but all give us valuable and helpful insights.

Three explanations have had a great influence in the twentieth century. Piaget's cognitive development theory (already discussed in Course 1, Block 3), Vygotsky's social learning theory and the information processing approach.

Both Piaget and Vygotsky view the mind as actively trying to make sense of this world. But Vygotsky gave great importance to language in the process of human learning whereas Piaget stressed that major cognitive changes take place as the child acts directly on the world around him/her.

Piaget identified 4 stages in which cognitive change takes place (also look at Course 1, Block 3, Unit 2). First, the sensorimotor in which development is entirely through the senses and through movement (0-2 years); second, the pre-operational (2-7 year), in which children become more able to represent images of their world through language, through make believe play and through art. Piaget stresses their lack of logic and their egocentric perspective at this stage; third, the concrete operational (7-11 years) in which the child's thought processes become much more logical and organized, and fourth, the formal operational stage (11 years and older) in which children are able to think logically, frame hypotheses, etc.

How does the change take place? Piaget takes the help of biology to explain this. The body has physical structures which have evolved in adapting to the environment. Similarly the mind too has structures which are developed as the child gradually learns to interpret experience in ever more complex ways. These structures of the mind Piaget calls schemas. All the time the mind is interpreting the world in terms of its current schemas. At the same time the schemas are being modified to take in information which does not match its current schema.

Take little Alok out on an animal safari with his parents: "Doggie," he called excitedly, as he spotted a giraffe. Not "doggie" said his mother, "giraffe", "gir-affe". "Doggie" insisted Alok. "And all were doggies," said his mother with irritation, "deer, lions, the lot". Alok is obviously interpreting the animals in terms of what he knows. At the same time the differences will also have registered in some way and slowly schemas for giraffes, deer and lions will also be among his increasing array of schemas.

### **Piaget and our learner**

Piaget's theory (which has been substantially tested on children) is extremely relevant from the point of view of the primary (and the pre-primary school teacher).

Different Piagetian stages: "I want more juice, I want more juice," screamed six year old Reena. "Don't be a silly baby," said her elder brother, aged 10. 'We've got the same amount. Only your glass is fatter so it looks as though you've got less.' Reena according to Piaget is in the pre-operational stage but her brother is in the concrete operational stage. His reasoning is more sound. The primary school teacher has to deal with two different stages of brain maturity and cognitive ability.

Different types of learning experiences needed: The early primary school years will need classrooms or learning areas where children can actively explore their world and build up schemas, for it is on the simpler schemas that more elaborate ones are built up later. Sand play, water play, make-believe play which may of course include the first two, drawing and colouring, are all the ways in which the child is building up schemas and reinforcing them.

In the later primary school years, the child still needs a strongly concrete base on which s/he can apply his/her reasoning. So equipment or models for teaching are very important even if they have to be improvised by the teacher. For instance, actual leaves would be better for a Science class rather than drawings of leaves. Similarly, telling a child that 1/5 of the air is oxygen and is used for breathing is not effective. Simple experiments would help the child to understand this concept.

Discovery Learning: This is basic to Piaget's theory where the emphasis is on the child's spontaneous discovery of his/her world. In actual fact the 'discovery' is artfully guided by adult planning.

Vygotsky's approach gives great importance to interaction with adults: He says that children learn about the world through interaction with adults and language is the tool of this interaction. Adults try to tune themselves to the child's cognitive level as s/he undertakes a task. Then slowly they withdraw their support as the child becomes more competent.

Indian schools certainly have a great deal of talk from the teacher. Unfortunately the 'talk and chalk' method is not quite what Vygotsky had in mind when he spoke of interaction with adults. The numbers in each class are usually so large that meaningful interactive learning is difficult. But it does remind us of the irreplaceable role of continual dialogue with the learner when the opportunity arises.

Another face of the Vygotskian method is 'peer teaching'. "Mama, look how beautiful my writing has become", shouted Rinku, "Karina taught me how." Peer teaching has been found most effective when 'the peer' is a very competent one but group activity with peers of similar competence have also been found useful and enjoyable by learners.

Information processing: The brain has often been compared to an extraordinarily sophisticated computer. The analogy is a very useful one for trying to understand human learning. Here the researcher uses computer - like diagrams and flowcharts to map the exact sequence in which the human brain processes information. Then each step is studied and analysed.

Information processing and the learning process: "I've got a useless class", says Mrs. Kretha, "just look at their marks." What is wrong with the Mrs. Kretha's remark according to the information processing approach? She should be analysing each aspect of the

learning activity beginning with the objectives framed and locate the source of the flawed learning.

Let's look at some examples:

1. Learning readiness: Was the class ready for the teaching? i.e. the children could have been tired out with PT when she was busy teaching. Or her voice could have been too monotonous or too soft to engage their attention. The writing on the blackboard could have been too small and crowded. Or the material may have been too 'tough' for the average learner.
2. Teaching method: Perhaps Mrs. Kretha had been just too quick in trying to teach a new concept. She could have given more examples or more simplified ones. She will have to do that even now if she wants to improve the situation. She will have to ask the children to give new examples of the concept. If she is teaching a principle, then she must make sure that all the underlying concepts have been mastered. Enough opportunity should be given for diagnostic feedback so that children have enough chance to succeed before they experience failure. Questions should be framed in such way that they really test learning and not simply rote memory.

Information processing highlights the use of cognitive strategies in processing information. An important one for the primary school teacher is metacognition or awareness of thinking processes which aid performance. This enables the use of cognitive strategies to aid memory or to increase comprehension. Adults use these strategies all the time e.g. re-reading a difficult passage or noting information down in a diary. Children are aware of these strategies but are not good at monitoring their own learning. Children systematically taught, for example, to edit their work to weed out spelling or language errors benefit greatly from the exercise.

#### 1. Check Your Progress 4

Match the following:

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| a. infant learning to walk | awareness of thought processes which aid performance |
| b. information processing  | Vygotsky   |
| c. interactive learning    | brain as computer                                    |
| d. metacognition           | sensorimotor stage                                   |
2. In what way do the current practice in Indian classrooms differs from the best learning environment as suggested by a. Piaget b. Vygotsky

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## 1.5 YOUR ROLE AS A PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER

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Perhaps you can see now the multi-faceted nature of your relationship with your learner. What you will be doing with Sonia and Raju and Kamlesh and ... and ... In India the list is endless.

It is an awesome task:

1. You will unlock the door to the world of learning. You will make the child literate. If you are successful, she will enjoy her learning and her school life. If you are not, then she will find even middle school impossible. For this task, you may or may not have the collaboration of the parents, and to invite this may be one of your tasks.
2. You as an adult, and a very powerful adult in the child's little world, will be shaping her personality — her respect for herself, her confidence, her attitude to others. Remember that this is the first time the child will be moving out of the protected environment of the home. She is functioning on her own as an autonomous being.

And as the various aspects of development which we have discussed have shown, she is at a formative stage.

The child's parents are relying on your love, and concern for the child. You have the unique opportunity of seeing the child in the company of her peers. You have to notice if she has a learning handicap which will frustrate her attempts to learn. Through your observation you can identify the slow learner, the child with hearing or sight problems, the dyslexic child. Have you heard of these terms? If not, you will come across them in Unit 3 of this Block) You have to be alert and alive all the time to new information in your field. Often, there is no specialist to whom you can turn. You are the general practitioner and the specialist rolled into one.

#### IN INDIA YOU HAVE A SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY

**YOU ARE A NATION BUILDER.** In our country every second person is illiterate (38.2% of Indian males and 66.2% of the Indian female population are illiterate). You have to be innovative and efficient as a teacher. You have to attract your learner to school and you have to induce the child to stay in school.

Most schools in India whether rural or urban have a large percentage of first generation learners (i.e. students whose parents are illiterate/semi-literate).

They also have very poor facilities: large numbers in each class, multi-grade teaching (teaching more than one class simultaneously), school buildings in poor condition, and lack of teaching aids.

Although we have mentioned that support from the parents may not be effective, this is because parents don't know how to support the school environment because of their own illiteracy. Parents today, even those from the villages are very very anxious indeed that their children receive an education.

We must make a qualification here. In North India, particularly, there is a pronounced gender bias. The girl child is considered good enough for household chores and the care of siblings. So we have to be especially gentle about our little girls and persistent with their parents. This is why we have referred to the learner as a 'she' to highlight the importance of seeing her benefit from good primary education facilities.

Then there is the problem of child labour.

You yourself may be a major part of the problem. If you have a class/caste bias or even a fastidious cleanliness bias which makes you turn away from a dirty ragged little child in disgust, it is better that you look for another vocation. It is a wonder that the child is in your class. Can you look deeper, can you overcome the externals, the dirt, the hair full of lice, the running nose,, the defiant smell, can you look deeper and see the god within.

Then you can begin your work.

You may have to lessen your curriculum expectations from such children. But if you are dedicated and committed and achieve even a measure of success under these difficult circumstances you will enjoy the respect and affection of the child and the parents. You will see the child and the community grow and you will experience great joy. And you will know that you are in a very real sense a nation-builder for your people, the people of India.

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## 1.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have focussed on the cognitive and social aspect of the learner at the preprimary, primary and elementary level. We have, once again, informed you of the major learning theories. We have emphasized that any teacher, and especially a teacher teaching at the primary school level, needs to observe her learners and guide them at this formative stage to be 'good' citizens - by learning a decent value system, competent learning habits, and finally, especially among the disadvantaged sections - of staying in school.