



summary and excerpts
Vital Impressions:
The KPM Approach to Children



The following is a summary of Dr. Gary D. Borich's study of the KPM Approach to Children. Dr. Borich is a professor of educational psychology at The University of Texas. Over a two-year period he visited Sri Atmananda Memorial School in Malakkara, Kerala, India, and the branch school in Austin, Texas to observe and document a unique approach to children modeled in the schools. Administrators, teachers, and aides at the schools contributed to the data collection, which was coordinated by Dr. Caroline Kirby in India and George DeGroot in Austin.

Vital impressions can be thought of as those personal experiences that stay with one throughout life. There are "life-giving" experiences that augment one's individuality and sense of dignity, and "life-taking" experiences that diminish those qualities. Most of us have our own personal school experiences that illustrate both. The challenge of education lies in the following question:

"What if all the life-giving experiences that only periodically happened to us during our school years were compressed into a single day, month, or even school year? Then eliminate the life-taking experiences, and we will have transformed schooling as it has never been transformed before. This is the challenge of education and the goal of the KPM Approach to teaching and learning that is the subject of this report."

Deep Learning

How can a school enhance a child's personal fulfillment, promote social and emotional well-being, and contribute to life-long success? One solution is to employ one of the alternative models of teaching and learning built on the notion of deep learning. Some characteristics of deep learning are

- An intention to understand material for oneself
- Interacting critically with others about the content
- Relating ideas to previous knowledge and experience
- Using organizing principles to integrate ideas
- Relating evidence to conclusions
- Examining the logic of arguments

Three cardinal principles of deep learning are

1. Children are innately curious and will explore without adult intervention.
2. Human intelligence unfolds in stages.
3. Educational experiences should be defined by the creation of an environment that stimulates exploration and discovery.

Three broad categories of schools suggested by Secretan (1996) are “mechanistic,” “compromise,” and “sanctuary.” Here is how deep learning might apply to those classrooms:

1. The **MECHANISTIC** school is characterized by strategic planning models, organization charts, and behaviorally measured outcomes. The teacher is in charge, and the child has little or no scope for exploration or discovery.
2. The **COMPROMISE** school blends a traditional system with a sprinkling of interdisciplinary units, projects, portfolio assessment, and cooperative learning, to give the classroom a surge of energy and spontaneity. These “add-ons” soften the authoritarian-subordinate teacher-child relationship to give some scope for student interests and deep learning, but hopelessly straddle contradictory educational environments.
3. The **SANCTUARY** school, the natural home for deep learning, promotes spontaneity, risk-taking, and creativity through learning integrated with real-world problem-solving.

Frameworks for Alternative Education

In the history of American education, the most influential alternative approaches are

- **HOLISTIC EDUCATION.** Educators address the whole child, the stages of his development, and his need to learn by problem-solving.
- **HUMANISTIC EDUCATION.** This person-centered approach emphasizes meeting the child’s basic needs for physical and emotional security before deep learning can occur.
- **PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION.** Educators influenced by John Dewey emphasize learning that is related to experience from interaction with the environment through real-life experiences.

The common emphases shared by these three perspectives are: the interactive relationship among the child’s social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions; his social and cultural background; and his own interests and experience. Each of these approaches makes a unique contribution to present-day understanding of child development.

Integrated Learning and the KPM Approach to Children

The KPM Approach to Children gives the educational theories of John Dewey and others a grounded framework and practical examples for understanding their effects. A key concept of the KPM Approach is integrated learning, in which disciplines are integrated around major themes that are connected to real-life experiences that are personally meaningful.

“KPM educators believe that true education must come from first hand experience, from an active engagement with the lessons of nature, conveyed through conversation, demonstration, investigation, problem-solving, and physical activity that promote the discovery of interconnections while encouraging the learner’s imagination and self-expression. Learning arises from self-initiated activity. The role of the teacher is to awaken, invigorate, and support rather than force the child’s faculties upon prescribed courses of thought. It is to heighten the child’s awareness of self and environment and to awaken the production and exercise of integrative thought rather than to load the memory with discrete facts. The teacher does not pour subject matter into the learner, but develops the abilities already in the learner and in the process helps the child develop his or her own ideas.”

To guide the learner, KPM teachers

- Inspire the learner’s trust and confidence
- Unconditionally value the learner so the learner cannot fail
- Provide the learner with the opportunity to pursue his or her own interests, with the teacher as a resource, so that learning becomes direct and immediate
- Encourage the learner to go beyond his or her teachers without limits

The defining characteristics of the KPM Approach to Children are as follows:

1. It presents social, cultural, and subject matter challenges to learners at their current levels of understanding.
2. It represents the orderly expansion and organization of subject matter through growth of experience. (Knowledge accumulates like skin on an onion.)
3. It recognizes the powers and purposes of those taught and the subjective or internal dimensions of the child.

The KPM Envelopment Model of Learning

The Prigogine-Stenger (1984) theory of dissipative structures may be employed to explain the way a KPM child’s understanding evolves to increasingly higher orders:

“The continuous flow of energy within a child creates emotional, social, and cognitive fluctuations, many of which are absorbed or adjusted to in normal day-to-day activities of the traditional school environment without altering the integrity of the child’s behavior. But, if the fluctuations of energy that are created, say by an ‘integrative experience’ typical of the KPM environment, reach a critical level, the child’s emotional, social, and/or cognitive behavior becomes sufficiently turbulent so that the old connecting points no longer work, and the system must transform itself into a higher order to accommodate the change, one with new and different connecting points.

The dissipation of energy created by the integrative experience provides the potential for a reordering of how the child develops. The parts reorder into a new whole and the child's emotional, social, or cognitive behavior moves into a level of greater understanding—or envelopment. Each new level of understanding is more integrated and connected than the preceding one and requires a larger flow of energy and excitement to maintain it. Every time there is an integrated experience the child becomes more susceptible to further emotional, social, and cognitive change. One could say that when the new understandings reach beyond the child's present understandings, the child becomes creative in his reorganization. Maslow (1943) would say 'self-actualized.'"

Integrative Learning Activities

There is a difference between an integrative learning experience, which happens in the mind of the KPM child, and an integrative learning activity, which is the opportunity provided to the child to create that experience:

"To the KPM teacher, these synchronous events are 'openings' for integrative experiences. They exist for only a moment—a glance here, or a small deed there—and are gone in a flash if not seized as a potential source of positive energy that provides a gateway from previous inadequate understandings to larger integrations from which connections are made and opposites transcended."

An Integrated Learning Example

The classroom give-and-take of teacher and child during an integrated learning activity can be likened to a dance:

"While in transactional synchrony, the teacher's and child's physical movements are in tune with one another's words, providing a sort of physical and conversational harmony—as though dancing. When the KPM child and teacher talk, they don't just fall into harmony, they engage in empathy."

The KPM Paradigm of Learning

The KPM paradigm can be characterized as "direct experience" learning in which the child may go beyond the teacher without limits, the knowledge is direct and immediate, unmediated by the teacher, and the child overcomes fears and apprehensions to take the plunge to explore and discover in authentic, real-life environments.

Some key points of the teacher-child relationship in the KPM Approach are

- The child pursues personally relevant goals, with the teacher as resource, so that learning is direct and immediate.
- The child is encouraged and even expected to go beyond the teacher. The primary goal of the teacher is to inspire trust and confidence.
- The child is unconditionally valued, without limits.

The KPM Approach Compared with Other Approaches

When considering the KPM Approach to Children alongside the Montessori and Waldorf movements, there are some commonalities and several key distinctions:

1. While Montessori gives the child freedom to follow his own course, it adjusts the course when he strays from the norm. KPM gives the child the freedom to pursue his own course, free from adult expectations, while slowly increasing levels of guidance and structure through the upper grades.
2. Montessori prepares the environment to elicit the behaviors and outcomes that the teacher wants to see. The KPM environment provides opportunities for learning from which children can choose.
3. The Waldorf approach employs regular classrooms, while KPM children alternate at will between the flowing space of the learning environment of the entire school and specially prepared classrooms devoted to rotating demonstrations, investigations, and illustrations that children may attend according to their interests.
4. For both the Waldorf and KPM approaches, the relationship between teacher and child is key. But for the KPM Approach this intimate familiarity is focused on valuing the child unconditionally so the child can explore and discover on his own, with the teacher as resource, and without fear of failure.

Description of Sri Atmananda Memorial School

The guiding principle of the KPM Approach to Children is displayed on a plaque at the entrance to each campus:

“There is a latent push in any man, which is only a search for perfection. Rightly pursued, one finds this in one’s awakening experience to one’s real nature through the atmosphere between the real teacher and the taught. Education is only an attempt towards this.” -- Sri Adwayananda (Sri K. Padmanabha Menon, 1911-2001)

The grade levels at Sri Atmananda Memorial School are divided into sections, which are taught in separate physical settings. Those levels are Kindergarten, Lower Primary, Upper Primary, and High School. At the Kindergarten and Lower Primary levels, teachers facilitate young children’s interests:

“The teachers stay with the children, singly or in small groups, looking for opportunities to provide them recognition and to engage them, but remaining in the background, until they find an opening to step into the child’s world. The teachers continually provide positive support by using encouraging language, praising them, holding them, and most of all, by making the child feel important. They offer guidance when conflicts come between children by mediating an argument, organizing turn-taking, or creating a diversion, always imposing as little as possible on the child’s self-initiated goals.”

The Child’s Journey through Sri Atmananda Memorial School

Borrowing Joseph Campbell’s concept of the life stages through which mythological figures pass to attain the status of hero, one can identify several stages in the child’s experience of learning in the KPM Approach: challenge, support, and change. To illustrate these stages in an educational context, longitudinal case studies, called “journeys,” were collected, of students at Sri Atmananda Memorial School. The journeys illustrate how the children encounter challenges, receive support, and are able to experience deep learning.

Vital Impressions: A Synthesis of the KPM Approach to Children

The KPM Approach to Children can be described as “life-giving.” It is an approach that would both startle and amaze some of the strongest advocates of alternative education. Viewed from the top-down, as might a casual observer, the school could be seen as chaotic. Viewed from the bottom-up, as might a seeker of the behavioral foundations of effective teaching, one might mistake the “nuts and bolts” for the outcome that they are intended to produce.

This study has attempted to bridge the chasm, by reviewing the history and philosophy of other attempts at alternative education that share some of the same aims as the KPM Approach; by defining a conceptual framework—set of organizing principles—that can help parents, teachers, school administrators, and those who may be unfamiliar with it to make sense of it; and by illustrating how that framework fits with the actual behavior, or journeys, of teachers and children who have experienced this approach.

The four essential elements of the KPM Approach to Children are

- Every kind of learning is related to every other kind of learning.
- Every subject is related to every other subject.
- Learning is related to doing.
- Students learn from one another.

Some Questions About the KPM Approach

Many questions come naturally to mind after learning about the KPM Approach to Children. Here are some of the most common:

What special conditions are necessary for the KPM Approach to work?

“The KPM Approach to Children does not require a different kind of school building, context, or special conditions. In other words, it is not an approach that works on one educational “turf” but not on others. The concept of KPM is universal, although like most educational methods, some work better under some conditions and work less well under others. From the KPM child’s point of view, its methods of inquiry can be applied to learning in every conceivable context, traditional or otherwise. The success of the KPM Approach, however, will always depend more on the adaptation and flexibility of the teacher to enter the child’s world and to unconditionally value the child than on the physical context. For this the teacher must relinquish his or her traditionally taught role in order to promote the child’s freedom to explore and discover developmentally appropriate self-initiated learning opportunities. While this can undoubtedly occur in a traditional classroom, it rarely is achieved at a rate commensurate with the needs of the child without the adaptation of the teacher to a distinctly different role in the learning process.”

What would be an acceptable teacher-to-child ratio in a KPM learning environment?

“An acceptable KPM teacher-child ratio would be approximately one teacher for every six to eight children, which would include trainees and volunteers. This ratio is essential to creating the mutual trust and confidence between teacher and child, which is the foundation of the KPM Approach. From this mutually trusting and confident relationship flows the unconditional acceptance of the child, self-initiated activity in a risk-free emotional environment and, ultimately, the child taking the plunge to explore, discover, and go beyond the teacher without limits in a richly textured learning environment, with teacher as resource.

Educators will recognize that the KPM teacher-to-child ratio is unusually small relative to traditional school classrooms and to many alternative school classrooms. For the KPM child and parent this may be a considerable asset relative to other educational alternatives. But, while it is easy to ascribe the positive results of the KPM Approach to a small teacher-child ratio alone, seasoned educators realize that poor teaching can occur just as easily with one teacher surrounded by eight children as it can when surrounded by thirty. This is especially so when considering that one of the foremost goals of the KPM Approach is to engage the child in a continuous process of emotional, social, and subject-matter learning in a real-world environment. Integrated learning experiences, mutual trust and confidence in the teacher-child relationship, teachers entering the child’s world, and connections to real-life events are just some of the dimensions of the KPM Approach that could not be orchestrated and achieved with a small teacher-child ratio alone, especially while maintaining the fun and spontaneity of learning, which is the signature of the KPM Approach.”

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Gary D. Borich’s report, Vital Impressions: The KPM Approach to Children, will be published in its complete form. Information on the book’s availability may be obtained at www.avef.org and at www.samschool.org.