**My Experience Teaching The Basic Concept Programme**

*Aminata Kalokoh, Stanford University Intern*

(March 2019)

I had experience working with children before coming to Cape Town, but I had no experience in using the methodology of Basic Concepts. I had taken the online programme and had one on one instruction from the founder of the programme, Louis Benjamin, but I had not had experience actually teaching learners using the programme. I found myself often learning along with my learners. I had to figure out what worked and what didn’t work for them. When I first began with my learners, I began with the colour blue. As with many of the other concepts that I mediated, most could tell me that what they saw in front of them was the colour blue but when that colour is taken out of the context, many became lost and confused. They could no longer recognize the colour because it wasn’t in the context, they had learned to recognize it in. I worked with them through the six steps of the concept teaching model and by the end of the week they could recognize the colour blue in different contexts, they could tell me that blue made them feel cold and sad and that the sky and the sea were also blue.

I came to the realization that the *Basic Concepts Programme* benefits both the learners and the educators. As my learners were learning about Shape and Colour, I was learning how to mediate those specific concepts and conceptual domains to them. I became critical of the ways I had been taught to think about education and what it meant to be a learner. By criticizing the ways in which I had been taught to teach, I was better able to reach my children and try to instill a love of learning. I was also able to show the learners new ways of thinking about the world around them. The *Basic Concepts Programme* is an opportunity to change the way we, as educators, think about our learners. It is an opportunity not only to give autonomy to the learner but also an opportunity to give the learners confidence in themselves and their school work.

Some of the major changes that I saw in my learners was an increase in their vocabulary, an increase in their confidence and ownership of their educational journey. When I began my sessions with my learners, many were unable to make eye contact or even speaking to me, let alone speaking in full complete sentences. When I would ask a question, many would just repeat my question. They weren’t able to distinguish between a question and a statement. They assumed I just wanted them to repeat what I had just said. I understood their lack of communication skills came from not having the vocabulary to communicate what they were thinking or what they wanted to say, so they just stayed quiet, not having the confidence to try.

The increase in vocabulary happened because each session they were exposed to new words. By the end of all of their sessions, they encountered words such as *tall, short, medium, big, small, same, different, measure, compare, angles, sides, shapes, colours* and many more. I had exposed to them to different words, defined the words for them and put them into a context that they could understand. Exposing them to these different words helped them internalize them and give voice to the things that they wanted to vocalize but had not previously had the range of words to express. When I asked them a question, I also asked them to speak back to me in full sentences. I would give them an example of a sentence but also asked them to come up with their own. At the beginning they were not sure what I was asking for, nor did they know how to do so. Often, they would just copy the sentence that I had previously used. But by the end of my 8-week internship programme, they were beginning to come up with their sentences and their own way of speaking. They no longer needed as much instruction or guidance. Many of the learners, that had begun by only repeating what I said…suddenly when I asked a question, were using *“this is because…”* It seems true that the more words a child is exposed to, the better their vocabulary will become. Without there being a mediator to help define and contextualize the words, the learners would have had a very hard time learning the meanings of the words and in turn widening their vocabulary. The programme emphasizes that children need mediators to be the link between what they already know and what they don’t yet know but need to know.

After a few weeks, I began seeing small changes such as, my learners taking responsibility for their own learning. One of my students while learning about the circle, asked me if the circle that she had drawn was acceptable. I asked her to feel a 3D circle in front of her and make her own judgments. She was learning about the importance of accuracy and precision. She wanted to learn, wanted to do better and wanted to avoid being impulsive.

Teaching the *Basic Concepts Programme* was very challenging in many ways. I often found myself frustrated, wanting to stray and do my own thing. But I found that if I pushed through, the learners could better understand the concepts. The *Basic Concepts Programme* helps the educator to be more patient not only with the learners but with themselves. It’s easy to have a learner memorize his/her colours, but to have that same learner tell you how the colour makes him/her feel, or for that learner to tell you all of the different places they saw the colour, makes all the difficulties along the way worth it.

In conclusion, there were many things that worked with my learners and many things that didn’t work, but the *Basic Concept Programme* gave me the tools to mediate many concepts to my learners. It gave my learners the vocabulary to express themselves about the world around them. If I had had more experience and more time, I think I really could have made a much bigger difference. In my opinion, I think all of my learners benefitted from being part of the intervention groups that I worked with, even if all they got was a boost in confidence. I also do recognize that I am not as experienced as their actual teachers and want to acknowledge the good work that they do with their learners every day. Every learner could benefit greatly from smaller classroom instruction and I’m glad that I could fill that role.