

## The Cultivation of Approaches to Learning, so that Children Lifelong Benefits - Reading the Feel of *Enthusiastic and Engaged Learners: Approaches to Learning in the Early Childhood Classroom*

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### Abstract

Approaches to learning is not only the basic quality of children’s physical and mental development, but also the key to determine the quality of children’s learning. However, there are still some phenomena such as inattention, inactive learning attitude and lack of good learning habits among Chinese children. How to do it? Marilou Hyson, a famous American scholar, wrote “*Enthusiastic and Engaged Learners: Approaches to Learning in the Early Childhood Classroom*” undoubtedly gives us profound inspiration. In order to comply with the new requirements of improving the quality of preschool education and the implementation of preschool education, and to correctly consider the positive learning quality and

children’s education, as a kindergarten teacher should recognize the value of active learning quality and cultivate the potential of children; pay attention to children’s education and care for children’s growth environment; comply with the law of growth and stimulate children to actively learn quality.

**Key words:** Approaches to learning; Young children; Kindergarten teachers; Cultivate

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### INTRODUCTION

What is “Approaches to Learning”? What is the role of “Approaches to Learning” to young children? When I read the latest research results of Dr. Marilou Hyson—a senior advisor to the National Association For Education of Young Children (NAEYC) — *Enthusiastic and Engaged Learners: Approaches to Learning in the Early Childhood Classroom* (Beijing: Education Science Press, April 2016), I am deeply touched and inspired. This is an introductory book on the study of “children’s learning quality” that is both easy to understand and has strong practical guidance. It is also the top ten educational book in the “100 books that affect teachers” in 2016. The book does not talk about universally boring theory, but ingeniously combines theoretical research with our educational practice and exploration, both complement each other, so that I read a kind of “the paper is so shallow that we must learn to do it” feeling. In the process of reading, I understand that the international community has attached great importance to the concept of “Approaches to Learning” since it was put forward, and our educational research has shifted

from focusing on what children “learn” to focusing on the new orientation of “how to learn” and further explored the teacher “how to teach” and the child “how to learn” question. At the beginning of each chapter, the teaching scenes familiar to kindergarten teachers are introduced, and then the theory is applied to dissect them. Every time I finish reading a chapter, I will fall into deep meditation: “If the teacher in the case was me, what would I do?” “Can I apply the theories mentioned in the book to my future educational practice?” “How should I cultivate children’s learning quality?” Unconsciously, I think of children, teachers and preschool education in my mind. Reading to the last page, I deeply feel that the important value of “Approaches to Learning” to children’s lifelong development is immeasurable, and the importance of children’s lifelong development cannot be estimated, but its important value and importance cannot be overemphasized. Therefore, it is imperative to help young children develop good “Approaches to Learning”. Next, I will talk about my own reading experience, which is both a reflection and a recollection of reading, and a sharing with everyone.

## 1. ACTIVELY LEARN QUALITY AND ITS FOUNDATION AND VALUE

The book *Enthusiastic and Engaged Learners: Approaches to Learning in the Early Childhood Classroom* is centered on the basic theory and cultivate way of active learning quality to Launch a discussion. And in the first chapter of the book, Dr. Hyson (2016) take “What is active learning quality” as the chapter name and throws a key question to readers. So, what exactly is “Approaches to Learning<sup>1</sup>”? And how should we grasp the concept of “Approaches to Learning”? In fact, for the definition of “Approaches to Learning”, the definitions given by the experts are different, and there is no unified definition. Just as the saying goes: “Benevolent see benevolence, sage see Moses”. But there is no change, and all definitions are inseparable from the question of “How to learn”. For example, Dr. C. Kagan<sup>2</sup> (1995), a foreign scholar, combines the innate and early manifestations of children to define the quality of learning as “How children enter the learning context, namely learning style... It is a variable and aggregation that reflects the characteristics of children’s reaction patterns under different situations.” John Fantuzzo et al. (2004) believe that approaches to learning is “a series of unique behaviors that presage the

way children participate in classroom learning activities”. Another example is that Chinese scholar Ge Minggui (1998) defines approaches to learning from broad sense and narrow sense. In broad sense, Approaches to learning refers to the sum of physical and mental qualities that students show in the process of learning, which is closely related to the learning effect of good and bad of effects; in narrow sense, approaches to learning refers to the characteristics of non-intellectual personality factors<sup>3</sup> that students exhibit during their learning activities. Sun Yan (2011) and Li Jimei (2013) agreed that approaches to learning refers to the basic qualities that children begin to form and develop in the early stage and affect their lifelong learning, such as: children’s attitudes towards learning, learning tendency, learning habits etc. and other basic qualities closely related to children’s learning.

In this book, Dr. Hyson (2016) clearly points out that “Approaches to Learning” is mainly composed of two basic dimensions: emotion/motivation dimension and action/behavior dimension, in which the emotion/motivation dimension points to “Enthusiasm” for learning, and the action/behavior dimension points to the “Engagement” in learning. In the first chapter of the opening chapter, the author talked about the case of Monica, a 4-year-old girl. In the case, Monica concentrated on painting for at least 15 minutes, and kept trying to drop different colors into the circle on the coffee filter during the period. In this process of trying again and again, Monica did not show any impatient expression, and when she finally drew the magical effect, her face showed a surprise expression. In this painting work, Monica showed a positive learning quality—“Enthusiasm” (interest in activities, joy after success) and “Engagement” (concentrated and undisturbed, repeated attempts and persistence, etc.). In this book, “Enthusiasm” and “Engagement” are the two basic dimensions of the active learning quality research framework<sup>4</sup> that runs through the book. Each dimension contains different specific dimensions, and in this book, Dr. Hyson gave a detailed introduction for reader through different cases.

“Several Opinions of the State Council on Current Development of Preschool Education” (2016) pointed out that preschool education is the beginning of lifelong learning and an important part of the national education system. The “Outline of kindergarten education guidance (Trial)” (2001) also shows that kindergarten education is

<sup>1</sup> The term “Approaches to Learning” originated from the big environment in which the United States needs to prepare for school readiness and do well the work of the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP, 1995.). Usually translated as “Approaches to Learning” or “Approaches Toward Learning”, but the former is more widely used.

<sup>2</sup> Study the initiator of approaches to learning.

<sup>3</sup> Also known as non-cognitive factors. Refers to the psychological factors that people do not directly participate in the cognitive process in intellectual activities, including needs, interests, motivation, emotions, will, character and so on.

<sup>4</sup> Proposed by Dr. Marilou Hyson—the Framework of Approaches to Learning: Key dimensions and elements, including two main components: First, emotion/motivation: enthusiasm for learning (including: interest, happiness, learning motivation); Second, action/behavior: input to learning (including: focus, persistence, flexibility, self-regulation).

an important part of basic education and is the foundation stage for school education and lifelong education in China. And preschool education is of great importance to young children's physical and mental health, habit formation and intelligence development. Therefore, good learning quality should be cultivated from young children. Any practice that ignores the quality of young children's learning and simply pursues knowledge and skills learning is short-sighted and harmful. American scholars Denton and West (2002) found that children who regularly demonstrate positive learning qualities in kindergartens score higher on entrance exams in reading and mathematics than those who lack positive learning qualities or only occasionally show positive learning qualities. Dr. Hyson (2016) has proved the important value of approaches to learning through related research, and proposed that approaches to learning not only has its own intrinsic value, but also is an important basis for young children's learning. It also proposes that positive learning quality not only has a protective effect on children in distress, but also is the starting line for children's sustainable development. Approaches to learning is a basic quality that young children must possess. It is not only related to the future learning and development of young children, but also affects the lifelong development of young children. Therefore, it must not be ignored or neglected. As a qualified kindergarten teacher, in kindergarten, we should not only consider how to develop a single skill of a child, but also how to make the child acquire more ability to learn various skills, so that the child has a positive learning quality and helps him learn to learn, let young children benefit from life-long, and be an "Enthusiastic and Engaged Learner".

## 2. THE CAUSE OF YOUNG CHILDREN'S NEGATIVE LEARNING QUALITY

Dr. Hyson (2016) emphasized in the book that when young children have learning qualities, it does not necessarily mean that good results can be produced, that is, not all learning qualities can be called "positive learning qualities". It also has its opposite side—"negative learning qualities". As in the case of the "Kindergarten first week to play jigsaw puzzle" mentioned in the introduction to the book, Ryan and Joe are playing a particularly complex animal puzzle. When Ryan encounters a difficult puzzle, he carefully puts it where he thinks it is right. When he tried a few times and it was still wrong, he began to try another piece of similar puzzle. After repeated attempts, he finally found the right puzzle. On the contrary, when Joe first saw the complicated animal puzzle, he had already self-denied and thought that it was impossible to complete

the puzzle. When he encountered the same problem as Ryan, he quickly put down the puzzle in his hand and didn't play it, because he did not know where to put the puzzle in the place is right, and then began to sit there and wait for other children to come and play with him. From this case, we can see two very different learning qualities from Ryan and Joe, namely, their behavior, motivation and attitude in the jigsaw puzzle. Ryan dares to try and dare to challenge, but Joe easily denied himself and feared the challenge. So, what are the "causes" of children's negative learning qualities?

### 2.1 Non-Supportive Relationship Between Teachers and Young Children

Just as the emotional and supportive relationship between teachers and children can promote children's positive learning qualities, the lack of this relationship between teachers and children is not conducive to the development of children's positive learning qualities. Teacher-child interaction is the key to forming a good teacher-child relationship, but most of the children in kindergartens have little or no opportunities to interact with teachers. According to a survey conducted by National Prekindergarten Study, the average time for children to interact directly with teachers or other adults during the kindergarten is less than one-third of the class time. (Clifford et al., 2005) For example, teachers often lack emotional factors when interacting with young children. (Hyson, 2003) Just as the long-distance, accusatory interaction between the teacher Manning and the young children Oscar mentioned in the example in the book, it is difficult for teachers and young children to form a harmonious and supportive good teacher-student relationship.

### 2.2 Children's Own Participation Degree in Activities

Whether young children participate in activities positively or not is one of the important factors that affect their approaches to learning. Nelson (2005) found through investigations that the positive learning qualities of young children who were active in discussing scientific topics with their parents, making handicraft, doing sports or reading alone, singing and dancing, doing housework within their ability were significantly higher than that of children who are rarely involved in family-learning-activities in the family. Chaplin et al. (2003) found through empirical research that young children who actively participate in educational activities in kindergartens show higher levels of attention and persistence than those who passively participate activities in kindergartens, and their participation in class is also much higher than involuntary children.

### 3. HOW DOES PRESCHOOL EDUCATION CULTIVATE YOUNG CHILDREN'S POSITIVE LEARNING QUALITY

#### 3.1 Grasp the "Critical Period of Cultivation" to Protect Young Children's Curiosity and Interest in the World Around Them

John Dewey (2015), the founder of pragmatism education, said in the book *How We Think, Experience and Education*: "For children, the whole world is brand new; in every new encounter, there is some things that make a sound person excited, and make people passionate about exploring these things, not simply waiting and enduring passively." Young children are curious about the natural world and the surrounding environment. They are sensitive, inquisitive and imaginative. They are lively, energetic, and never tirelessly explore the world around them. Curiosity is one of the main characteristics of young children's psychology. Young children have a strong sense of inquiry about things they don't understand. They always want to see, touch, smell, and taste. Strong curiosity will trigger children's interest in exploring the world around them, prompting them to try to use the materials around them to positively interact with their surroundings. Under the drive of curiosity and strong interest in exploration, young children will want to try everything, and want to know "why". You never know what problems children will ask in the next second. Those problems may be weird or unreasonable. The reason why children keep asking questions is because their existing knowledge and experience can't explain the problems they don't understand. It also shows that the children's imagination, curiosity, creativity and learning ability are quietly sprouting and their desires and abilities to explore the world are gradually increasing. As a kindergarten teacher who is good at grasping the "Cultivating critical period", he will focus on protecting the curiosity of young children, accompanying the imagination of young children, and discovering children's interests and hobbies. In the process of getting along with young children, they are good at grasping every educational opportunity. Know how to make young children curious and interested in the world around them and "To turn this interest into a rich, beyond self-expressive pattern of impressions." (John, 2015) At this time, kindergarten teachers only need appropriate prompts or hints, so that children's interest can be sustained. When children are beginning to feel fresh about the world around them, teachers should seize this opportunity to make rational use of the nature of young children, be good at guiding and encouraging, and should consciously create appropriate conditions for young children, and believe in the ability of young children. From the perspective of young children, we should satisfy the curiosity of young children as much as possible, stimulate children's interest in exploration, and

let children freely, happily and safely enter the "magical exploration journey".

#### 3.2 Create a Pleasant Atmosphere of Activities, Triggering Young Children's Initiative and Enthusiasm for Activities

Education is by no means a purely cultural transmission. The reason why education is education is that it is a kind of waking up of personality and mind, which is also the core of education. A good training environment cannot be separated from the creation of activity atmosphere. Kindergarten teachers should pay attention to the creation of education atmosphere, the pursuit of education style, the selection of education scene and the casting of education spirit in the design of activities when designing activities. Young children want to participate in activities, want to explore activities is their initiative to start the first performance, but want the young child to maintain the high initiative and then arouse the enthusiasm, then cannot leave the joyful activity atmosphere. In activities, children will inevitably make mistakes, but we must allow young children to make mistakes. In the face of children's mistakes, we should be tolerant, understanding, listening, and know how to use love to encourage instead of criticizing and blaming children, to avoid young children's negative emotions caused by mistakes, so that children in the activities always maintain a relaxed and happy mood. When young children perform well in activities, they should be promptly given children clear encouragement and timely feedback, such as positive language guidance, gesture of praise, smiles for young children, etc., which have a good incentive for young children. However, it should be noted that teachers should avoid using the vague and general language such as "Baby, you are awesome!" and "Well done, baby!" to praise, praise should be clear and creative, should be directed at the child's performance the specific behavior is praised, that is, the praise should be justified. Let the children know that they have been praised by the teacher because they have done something. Only then will the child continue to maintain good behavior and understand what he can do in the future to performed better. When children ask questions or express their ideas in activities, teachers should not pretend not to hear or directly ignore the child's speech, should give timely feedback to the child's speech, so that children realize that in fact, the teacher attaches importance to me, my speech is meaningful, so as to help children participate more actively and come to the activity.

#### 3.3 Rational Use of "Emotional Support" to Cultivate Young Children's Concentration and Persistence

In Dr. Hyson's (2016) view, "Focus" is one of the core elements of "investment in learning." Concentration is one aspect of the mental process, when the brain performs a very important control function. (Zeiazo et al., 2003; Rothbart et al., 2007) Monica, the little girl mentioned in

the opening case, kept her attention on her painting for at least 15 minutes, undisturbed by other children, devoted herself to her creation, and tried again and again with different colors until she achieved satisfactory results. When the result was shown to the teacher, the teacher praised Monica and showed the work to other children. During the period, Monica's face was always filled with a happy smile. According to the results of relevant investigations, (Yang et al., 2016) when teachers can give students appropriate support and encouragement, can fully recognize and understand students, can treat each student with equal respect, it will help to enhance students' self-confidence in learning and enhance students' involvement in learning, which also shows that teacher's emotional support<sup>5</sup> is conducive to the cultivation of student's perseverance to a certain extent. With the emotional support of teachers, young children can be in a warm and comfortable learning environment. If kindergarten teachers are able to give attention and support when children encounter difficulties, it is helpful for young children to adhere to the activities. The warm and comfortable activity atmosphere is also conducive to the cultivation of young children's concentration. Because in the appropriate environment, unnecessary interference factors are eliminated, so that children can more focused participation in the activities. And kindergarten teachers praise and praise of children and other emotional support for the growth of young children play an extremely important role, the appropriate and sincere emotional support of teachers can not only make children enjoy spiritual joy, but also stimulate children's expression and enthusiasm. Therefore, the rational use of emotional support can make young children's focus and perseverance to be a certain training.

#### **4. HOW DO WE VIEW POSITIVE LEARNING QUALITY AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATION**

Through reading Dr. Hyson's masterpiece, we can find that Dr. Hyson's uses the eyes of theory and practice to look at the qualities of children's learning. From studying the value, basic structure and influencing factors of learning qualities to exploring the logical way to cultivate and construct scientific evaluation tools which is makes us deeply feel how deep the researchers' cognition of children's learning qualities will lead to the profound understanding of children's growth. Children's education is the foundation of national education. Developing children's education is of great significance for promoting children's healthy growth, improving the overall quality

<sup>5</sup> That is, kindergarten teachers give warm attention, encouragement and support, praise and affirmation, respect and understanding to young children's appropriate specific behavior.

of basic education, and achieving the goal of building a well-off society in a new era. Dr. Hyson's deep insights into learning quality and child growth have brought new help to how we view positive approaches to learning and children's education, and also prompt us to think deeply about this issue.

#### **4.1 Thinking 1: Recognize the Value of Active Learning Quality and Cultivate the Potential of Young Children**

As Dr. Hyson (2016) said in his book, "Enthusiasm" and "Engagement" are two important dimensions of positive learning qualities, and more importantly, they are also the cornerstones of learning. For children's growth process and learning development, active learning qualities has an undeniable important value. As a "key" factor, positive learning qualities is like the foundation of a building supporting the core structure of the building. If we can strengthen children's enthusiasm and engagement to learning, then other aspects of supporting and ensuring school preparation will also be strengthened. As a "protection" factor, positive learning qualities can protect disadvantaged children from harmful factors that hinder their development, and help to enhance children's resistance to difficulties. McWayne et al. found that approaches to learning, especially positive learning qualities, can have a protective effect on the serious academic failures and disorders of school-age children. (Wayne et al., 2004) As a "circular" factor, children with positive learning qualities will receive more attention and positive feedback from adults, and thus gain more opportunities to participate in sustainable learning. The value based on positive learning qualities enlightens us that as an educator, education influence should be based on the premise that learning qualities guides children, so as to better cultivate children's potential ability and discover the bright spots of children.

#### **4.2 Thinking 2: Pay Attention to Preschool Education and Care for Young Children's Growth Environment**

As Mr. Cai Yuanpei (1997) said, "The future of the world depends entirely on the activities of children when they grow up." And children's education for children's growth has an indelible significance, is an indispensable part of children's growth process, but also the cornerstone of lifelong learning. At present, with the turning of socialist contradictions and the increasing improvement of people's living standards, the desire for children's education quality is becoming higher and higher, and children's education is not only of great value to the healthy growth of children's body and mind, but also of great value to the formation of children's good habits and the development of potential intelligence. As the object of children's education, children are not only independent individuals, but also members of the family, kindergarten, and society. Just as the truth of "Mencius's mother moved

thrice”, “Latent immersion”, “To turn red when close to vermilion and black when close to ink”, the influence of family environment, kindergarten environment and social environment on children is also subtle. No matter which part of the problem goes wrong, it will directly or indirectly affect the growth of children. Although each child is unique and has certain unique qualities since birth, but children will continuously to interact with their surrounding environment during they grow up. (Bronfenbrenner et al., 2006) Therefore, as educators, we should not only attach importance to children’s education, but also care for children’s growth environment, so as to create a comfortable environment for children to learn and grow up.

### 4.3 Thinking 3: Conform to the Law of Growth and Stimulate Young Children’s Positive Learning Quality

The object of our education is children. As natural persons, children are fragile and passive. They need to be protected, concern and care for. But as social people, children have independent personalities, have their own thoughts and their own feelings. Children also have things that they really want to do or do not want to do, and more importantly, they have the right to grow up freely. Therefore, education should also conform to the law of children’s natural growth. Any “full house irrigation”, “spoil things by undue haste” and speed-up education are not only not conducive to the development of children, but may even hinder the development of children. The essence of education is to discover the special laws of physical and mental development of children and to guide their healthy growth. “It’s better to teach him how to catch fish than to give him fish directly.” Good education does not lie in giving children what, but in how to guide children correctly and mobilize their initiative to learn actively. The education that is really suitable for children should be based on the actual situation of children, and choosing an education that not only follows the laws of children’s growth but also contributes to the healthy growth of children. As educators, we should fully grasp the law of children’s growth, stimulate children’s positive learning qualities, and help children grow in the direction of overall development.

## CONCLUSION

Dr. Hyson’s book—*Enthusiastic and Engaged Learners: Approaches to Learning in the Early Childhood Classroom* opens a new horizon for us to further understand approaches to learning, paving the way for a new direction for us to further study the quality of learning, and the road has brought new help to our further promote development of preschool education. Finally, borrow a sentence from this book to share with all educators and researchers: “Our efforts to improve the quality of learning must meet the

needs of all children, no matter what cultural background, abilities and physical defects they have”.

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