Ramona Greene, Stanford Student Intern

Portavue Primary School

I was placed at Portavue Primary School through Stanford University’s Engaged Learning Internship in Cape Town. My mediator training for the Basic Concepts Programme illustrated a stark difference between the way I had been taught in primary and secondary school in the United States. I arrived at Portavue with an apprehension of how the Basic Concepts Programme would be received by the learners because of my unfamiliarity with the learning style. My first session with the learners was about Colour. After my first day at Portavue I thought the Basic Concepts Programme was not suited for the majority of my learners because the learners already knew their colors. However, as the programme would prove to me, the knowledge of a concept by the learners was not the only marker of growth that would take place through the use of the BCP sessions.

I mediated four classes of 6-8 learners per class for seven weeks. The structure of my interventions was as follows:-

Step 1: Focusing and Naming: Involves calling their focus and having them guess what the session for the day will entail using complete sentences.

Step 2: Identifying: The learners explain why something is what it is and not something else.

Step 3: Internalizing: The learners use their imagination to internalize a concept.

Step 4: Bridging: The learners connect the things they see around them and actions they do on a daily basis to the session.

Step 5: Application: The learners learn categorization by categorizing and sorting different objects.

Step 6: Transferring: The learners go home and discover things that connect to the sessions we learn in class.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH BASIC CONCEPTS

VERBALIZATION AND COMPLETE SENTENCES

At the beginning of my time at Portavue many learners could do activities correctly but could not verbalize what they had done. One activity my classes had to do at the conclusion of a concept is categorize blocks based on the concept we were studying. When we learned about Colour they had to sort blocks into groups based on Colour. All of my learners successfully sorted them but they could not tell me how they sorted them once they were done. They did not know how to verbalize that the blocks were in Colour groups or that they had sorted/grouped them based on Colour. When I asked them how they made their groups, or why they put certain blocks together and not others they also could not tell me. By the end of my time with the learners, they were able to more adequately express in complete sentences both their reasoning and method for sorting the items they were given according to the various criteria they were given.

VOCABULARY AND CONCEPT LEARNING

The concepts of “Same” and “Different” took about two weeks for all of the learners to understand. A mistake I made was thinking that words like these were easily understood. To bridge their confusion about the meanings of the words I constructed variations of simple phrases. Instead of saying these two things are the same we would say that these two things look like each other. Eventually, we progressed to understanding that when things look like each other that means they match which means they are the same. Their understanding of these two words helped the flow of the rest of our sessions and Basic Concepts teaching method did wonders for their growth in understanding these words.

“Colour,” “Shape,” and “Size,” were words/concepts that for a majority of my learners were interchangeable. When we sorted our blocks by Shape the majority of the learners mistakenly explained that their groups were based on Colour, multiple times. Another confusion with the concepts of Colour and Shape is that the majority of learners at the beginning of our session could not make the cognitive connection that red is a Colour. By this I mean I could ask a learner for a red crayon and they would give it to me. If you were to ask the same learner if they could tell you what colour a square block was they might answer square. In the same breath, if you were to ask a learner what shape a red square block was they might answer red. A majority of learners were making this mistake in Week 1, but by Week 4, only a small minority would make this mistake. We also experienced this problem as we learned about Size, (about two weeks after we learned about Shape.) The number of learners who were still making this mistake held steady at a small minority but they were now correcting themselves without help from me. By the end of our session covering Size, all learners were correctly identifying and understanding the difference between Colour, Shape, and Size.

ISIXHOSA LEARNERS

I had the pleasure of teaching a few IsiXhosa learners for only two sessions and I realized that neither of the students I taught understood English. To complete activities they watched what the other learners were doing and then followed suit. However, some activities were especially hard for them so I spoke in Xhosa for the duration of our session which immediately made one of the learners much more comfortable with me. My limited proficiency in Xhosa disallowed me from fully conversing with the learner when he tried to have a conversation with me outside of class. The experience made me contemplate how IsiXhosa learners can’t understand directions in class because of the language disparity. One of the best things about the BCP is its ability to develop language and although I wasn’t able to teach them more in depth, I think that a Basic Concepts curriculum for IsiXhosa learners could do wonders for their linguistic development.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on my time at Portavue, I am most taken aback by the language development that took place amongst my learners. The growth of the learners from BCP is one that you cannot fully comprehend from completing the online training. I can say with the utmost confidence that Basic Concepts Unlimited is doing wonders for the furtherance of language amongst children in South Africa and is exponentially increasing their vocabulary.