



## Speed School and Play ©

The core philosophy and practice driving instruction in the Speed School classroom are that children learn best when they engage actively and together with the content of their lessons in ways that build from their existing knowledge, reflect the world in which they live, and align with their collective and individual motivations. This translates into a few concrete instructional strategies, all of which have a foundation in the principles of play:

- Pupils sit in small groups, allowing them to support each other’s learning in a variety of ways, bringing their respective experience, knowledge, talents, enthusiasm, and encouragement to (i) solve problems or create things—e.g., stories, objects, and presentations—collectively, (ii) master content or skills with which one or more classmates may be struggling, and (iii) assess each other’s work and provide feedback and remediation, among others.
- The teacher (called “facilitator”) links lessons directly to the local context, helping and stimulating pupils to learn their lessons by (i) showing their relevance to the present and future lives of the pupils and their families and (ii) turning abstract information and techniques from their lessons into practical, engaging tasks and challenges.
- Pupils engage in abundant “hands-on,” physical, and creative learning, using a variety of materials and moving around the classroom both to make their lessons fun and to plant the content and skills from these lessons more indelibly and retrievably in their brains, anchoring these in a wide array of concrete, meaningful actions and products to which pupils can associate content directly rather than simply presenting these as words scribed in chalk on the blackboard.
- Facilitators design and deliver their lessons to achieve an intersecting triumvirate of learning objectives: academic, practical, and personal. The idea is that *academic learning* provides a great opportunity for cultivating the other two and that *practical and personal learning* strengthen pupil’s mastery of the curriculum’s academic content. Concerning practice and personal skills, lessons purposefully aim for pupils to practice and hone their curiosity, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, inquiry, problem-solving, perseverance, confidence, planning, and other competencies to learn also their academic ways in ways that contribute holistically to their success in school, in life, and in their livelihoods.

Seen overall, the aim of the Speed School classroom is more to make learning resemble how children learn in play and independently than to subject them to the dull drudgery of most conventional classrooms. This means creating conditions and tasks for them to learn together, by doing, by stumbling and trying again, and by discovering, all with joy. Regardless whether learning is playful or play fosters learning, the Speed School classroom is characterized by the joyful development of all pupils’ academic, practical, and personal competencies.

The summary of Speed School’s core instructional elements and strategies on the following pages aims to illustrate the play-based nature of the teaching and learning that characterizes these classrooms.

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## A. Learning materials

Pupils and facilitators create and use various and abundant locally made no cost and low-cost materials to strengthen teaching and learning. These include, illustratively:

- Letters, words, numbers, and calculations drawn on cards (with drawings) and inscribed in sand and on geoboards;
- Models of animals, household items, food, tools and other artifacts made of clay, cardboard, and other recycled and natural items;
- A cardboard box “television,” with paper story scrolls;
- Gameboards and pieces;
- Bottle tops, plant seeds, and other items for counting, writing letters, and drawing pictures; and
- Storybooks, with text and illustrations.

These are displayed and available on every surface of the Speed School classroom, including all four walls, the ceiling, the floor, and any shelf space.



## B. Simulations

Pupils solidify their learning by participating in many sorts of simulations drawn usually from everyday life and involving items and scenarios they create themselves. These include, illustratively:

- A mock store (standard in every Speed School classroom) where pupils conduct transactions and calculations to purchase food and other common items;
- Other commercial or productive activities, such as a mock bank, a coffee shop, and even plowing fields;
- Skits or other play-acting to demonstrate various sorts of interactions and scenarios; and
- Small-scale productive activities, such as planting mini gardens, constructing model furniture and other items, and food preparation.

These activities occur within and outside the classroom.



### C. Physical movement and activities

Learning in the Speed School classroom uses physical activity within lessons to stimulate and solidify pupil's learning and between lessons to "re-charge" their learning "batteries." Illustrations of moving for learning include:

- The matching of physical gestures to content from language, math, and other lessons;
- "Energizers," including clapping, stomping, shaking, and other movement of body parts to expel gathered-up energy while supporting the learning of numbers and counting, of letters and spelling, and of other content;
- Outdoor recess and in-class movement to expend energy and regain concentration for returning to lessons;
- A variety of clapping methods to recognize the successful learning or effort of classmates; and
- Pupils' contorting their bodies to form letters and words or numbers and equations.

These actions are often accompanied by boisterous noise, including full-throated choral recitations of class slogans, songs, etc., all peppering the day with the sound of joyous learning.



## D. Discovery & inquiry

Speed School classes create many opportunities for pupils to learn on their own, putting them into situations where they must obtain information by asking, observing, and experimenting and then organize and analyze the information they acquire before sharing it via a variety of media. A sample of such learning includes:

- Venturing into nature, the community, work settings, and elsewhere to learn-by-observing about some specific aspect linked to classroom lessons, planning their inquiry beforehand;
- Interacting with various resource persons drawn from different sectors of the local community—economic, social, political, cultural, traditional, etc.—so pupils can learn about different areas of expertise in ways that interest them while thinking about their own futures;
- Conducting (and even devising) experiments in the classroom with locally available materials and products to learn about science and other natural phenomena; and
- Conducting surveys and other investigations on topics that the pupils identify themselves, usually as groups.

The learning activities aim very deliberately to foster simultaneously the three core areas of learning: academic; practical; and personal skills.



## E. Learning games

Pupils participate in games, as a class and in small groups, in order to practice and strengthen their learning in stimulating ways. A sample of such activities includes:

- Memory games, such as matching images hidden on over-turned cards by revealing them two at a time and pupils' naming items from a category—e.g., food, plants, and animals—in succession without repeating what a classmate has said;
- Tossing pebbles (or other items) towards a circle or circles to perform calculations with the number of pebbles falling within and without the circle(s);
- Playing cultural counting, naming, and strategy games;
- Creating game boards on which pupils advance their pieces by answering questions correctly; and
- Making up stories as a group, with each pupil's taking a turn to add a sentence or part.

Games happen both as collaborative and competitive activities, in both instances supporting and motivating all to participate.



## F. Art and Music

While separate subjects and periods in most curricula, Speed School weaves the development of pupils' Art and Music abilities into lessons covering the core primary school topics: Language, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies/Civics. This happens as follow, among other ways:

- Pupils draw pictures, create posters, and develop “thinking maps” to depict content from the various academic subjects;
- Pupils sing songs learnt from the teacher or that they know from home on the topics they are studying, often accompanying themselves on instruments they have made on their own;
- Pupils create and perform their own songs on themes and content from their lessons;

Pupils use creative materials to write the alphabet, spell out words, and present calculations, decorating the classroom; and

- They produce other learning materials, as mentioned above.

Singing and art are definite favorites among the pupils and facilitators alike.



## G. Storytelling

In the Speed School classroom, facilitators use several methods of storytelling to stimulate both language and content learning by their pupils while triggering their creativity, imagination, and critical thinking, among other personal competencies. Some ways they do this are:

- Beginning every school day with one or a few students' sharing "news," reporting something they may have observed and heard since the day before;
- Reading stories on familiar or new topics to pupils aloud, engaging them by asking questions, inviting questions, stimulating debate, and giving them the opportunity to re-enact the story in artistic, musical, and dramatic ways;
- Creating opportunities for pupils, alone and in groups, to create and share their own stories, either relating or acting out something they have lived, seen or learned or creating something from their imaginations; and
- Inviting community members with a reputation and talent for storytelling to share a traditional tale with the pupils in the classroom.

As with most of the learner-centered strategies in the Speed School classroom, storytelling involves pupils in activities with which they are deeply familiar from their "free" time, but practicing this in the classroom setting takes some practice.



## H. Projects

Project-based learning offers Speed School facilitators and pupils an especially effective and engaging way to integrate learning across the curriculum and addressing all three learning objective areas, requiring students, usually in groups, to plan, complete, evaluate, “course-correct,” and present their project over an extended period. Illustrative strategies include:

- Creating some economic activity, such as in agriculture, food, a service, or crafts;
- Undertaking a social or environmental initiative, such as a health or safety campaign and a trash clean-up or tree-planting activity;
- Preparing a classroom learning resource, such as a mock bank, fake store, game boards, or a cardboard “television” and paper scrolls with “tv shows” to “broadcast;”
- Organizing a class excursion to a place and/or person of interest or a visit by a local expert to the classroom; and
- Preparing an event—a concert, play, sports match, awareness-raising, etc.—for their parents or a larger group from the community.

The implementation of such projects draws heavily on many of the other play-based strategies.

