



## Contextual Education System and its Principles

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### Abstract

*Contextual education system is a system of principles and a framework for education and learning in the XXIst Century. Those principles were drawn from research, and from 20 years of observation how children learn. Each principle complements the others, and only applied together they establish an effective framework for learning. We strongly believe that any student can learn, and that we are responsible for breaking down learning to help students, no matter their context. Context guides learning, but does not define it.*

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Contextual education system is best introduced through the 10 key principles which are as follow:

### 1. Teacher's goal is to help a child

A teacher must be trained to understand that the success of an education process depends not only on the child's ability to assume responsibility for his or her educational process, but also on the teacher's ability to assume responsibility for the educational process and, in particular, its planning.

A teacher should not pass this responsibility to parents and a child. Teacher has to continually improve, adapt to the needs of a particular age (developmentally appropriate practice) and the needs of individual children. He must have an excellent and thorough understanding of the context. The context of each child is multifaceted: it's socio-economic, cultural, biological, educational, family relationships, etc. Only after thorough examination of this multifaceted context, closely related to the educational process, the teacher(s) will be able to partly assume responsibility for the child and successfully achieve educational goals.

### 2. Contextual planning

In a contextual education setting it is planned using methods of work in different groups. Depending on the content of the curriculum and the needs of the students, individual activities, work in small groups, and as a whole class are planned. The teacher plans the questions to find answers to with the class, looks for ways to find out what the students already know / are able to do, and what they will need to achieve. Teachers think of each activity, weekly experiment, tablet application, or a book for reading. Why? Because when you do not know where you're going, it does not matter which road to take: one has to be well prepared in order to reach destination.

All teachers working with a child plan taking into consideration the socio-cultural, biological, emotional, and educational context of the child and the group. A successful plan reflects the needs of a particular group of children, so even the same theme plan can vary significantly in different classrooms. A teacher understands that in a particular class the interpretation of one of the aspects may become a thread, emphasized throughout the theme, while in another class another aspect of the same theme will be chosen.

Therefore, there can be no recommended plan, because children's abilities are not limited. In the contextual education system, a plan is not designed to complete a program and / or get a good grade, but to keep a child constantly engaged.

When everything is thoroughly planned, one must realize that the flexibility of the plan, the ability to adapt it to a specific group of children on a particular day, and even to abandon certain parts of it, is vital.

Oftentimes educators and parents are inflexible, stuck their plans and do not take into consideration the needs of children on a particular day, do not allocate time for free play or interfere too much. It is necessary to ensure that the child, but not the program, is in the center of the education process.

### 3. Personalization through differentiation

Differentiation is one of the key principles of contextual education and it's a crucial part of daily learning. When differentiating, one should look at the groups of the students one has and match the needs of the students.

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The core of the differentiation is flexible grouping and smart planning, when the prior knowledge is reviewed and a deeper understanding is constructed based on new concepts and skills. Differentiation is crucial, because children have different need, and their home and cultural context may differ greatly. Those differences influence learning, and we should not ignore those differences while planning curriculum and learning.

In contextual education inclusion of all is a natural part of education, and children of all backgrounds and all abilities are equal participants. Each and every child is viewed as an integral part having unique needs, and the contextual awareness allows us to apply differentiation ever better.

#### **4. High community expectations**

Each teacher is responsible for minimizing the gaps among the children in a particular group. The self-worth and the achievements correlate with the emotions that a child has in school. The way teacher comments about the value, intellect, and abilities of the child, affect how the child not only feels at school, but also her performance. We believe that high behavior and performance expectations, especially at an early age, lead to better results.

This does not mean that all children will, for example, read at the age of four or will write without errors at the age of six. The result we seek is for a child to make maximum effort to achieve to her highest ability, not compared to other children. We care not only about academic results, but also about social responsibility, emotional intelligence, character education, and respectful behavior, e.g. the whole child.

Contextual education system encourages each and every child to believe that everyone can perform to the heights of her ability if she is determined to work hard.

#### **5. Parental involvement**

Contextual education system is effective only within the close collaboration of all participants of the education process: educators, parents, and children.

Just as the teacher needs to understand the child's context, parents need to understand the context of a class, school, and the teacher in order to adapt their expectations. Contextual education is not about "us" and "them" – it's about "we". In order to successfully implement the curriculum, mutual trust and confidence in the context-based curriculum and its principles are necessary.

#### **6. Freedom of expression of a child**

Contextual education in early childhood is unimaginable without free play - it is the basis for social and emotional intelligence and it determines the success of the child not only in school, but also in life.

Play helps children to overcome fears, allow them to portray things that are impossible in real life, teach them how to regulate the expression of emotions, help avoid the consequences of misconduct.

Often, play is associated with pre-school children, but research and practice suggest that older children, who play free games, are more realistic about themselves, better manage emotions, have more adequate self-esteem. Children who have enough play in their lives begin to understand and believe that all difficulties may be overcome, and self-esteem does not depend on one's success or failure.

We strongly believe that creativity and play go hand in hand, since both processes require the ability to use symbols.

Therefore, play does not only teach children to solve problems (which is one of the key skills of the 21<sup>st</sup> century!), but also develops creativity, and children learn better.

Sufficient time devoted to play inside and outside in the context-based learning process allows children to be open to new experiences, to not be afraid of change, and to creatively solve problems.

In a world where the curriculum is constantly changing, the ability to find the right content, to adapt it and to use it is very important, and play teaches exactly that.

#### **7. Character and value education**

Values education in a technology-driven, constantly changing world, ensures stability, continuity, and sustainability. Character education is the formation of good habits based on fundamental values - the teacher has to be an example for his students. If we want to bring up a respectful person, we have to be respectful ourselves. If we want our students to be tolerant, we have to be tolerant ourselves, etc.

The values taught in the contextual education system are gratitude, trust, perseverance, cooperation, curiosity, creativity, empathy, enthusiasm, autonomy, sincerity, respect and tolerance.



As children grow, we focus on creativity, empathy, respect, resilience, and courage, and values are consciously integrated into the daily plans and practices.

Character and value education is done by analyzing experiences, specific situations, and integrating them into the curriculum. We also consciously move children out of their comfort zone where they have to make value decisions, and discuss their choices and character afterwards.

### **8. Ability to question and think critically**

Questions are the cornerstone of the process of education, so the contextual curriculum teaches children to question and to think critically while looking for answers and problem solving.

Contextual education encourages children to take responsibility for their education. Consequently, we believe that the ability to communicate is essential, and we teach not only to speak (several languages), but also to listen.

Children are naturally curious and they begin with "what is this?", moving on to "why?", and finally "Why do I need it?"

The ability to question teaches children to think critically, increases self-esteem, develops socio-emotional intelligence, teaches listening, problem solving and to avoid stereotypes, respond critically and rationally to the challenges, not to be afraid of mistakes and learn from them. Children grow up like scientists who do not accept anything blindly, but question and use the method of scientific research.

### **9. Encouraging the child's curiosity**

We are born with an infinite desire to explore the world around us. Natural curiosity encourages children not only to ask questions, but also to look for answers.

The natural desire to explore and discover the world around us allows teachers to integrate science, mathematics, languages, and other disciplines. The knowledge and the skills gained help to understand how the world around us operates.

Hands-on, experiential, and play based learning engages children and teaches them to solve real world problems.

### **10. Contextual curriculum**

Contextual curriculum is implemented through themes, and children explore each theme as a matrix of integrated subjects.

In order to ground the curriculum, four cornerstones are emphasized and central activities stem from either of the cornerstones: hands-on science curriculum, emotional intelligence and character education curriculum, thinking curriculum (technology and mathematics), and literacy curriculum.

The curriculum serves and a guideline for planning, is extremely flexible, hands-on, play-based and sees child holistically.

Rethinking Education

The changes in our world have (should have) a great impact on education. The students of today see knowledge as "open, collaborative, accessible, often from the bottom up, and frequently presented in multimedia" and "they see the world as a place to learn" (pg. 7, Future School). Contextual education system rethinks how we teach and learn, and builds a new system for a new world on the shoulders of giants before us.

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