

Hallmarks of an Education for Life School

When you visit an Education for Life School, you will find that each classroom seems unique. There is no standardized “look” to the classrooms, no set outward curriculum that each teacher follows, and no fixed style of learning for students. What then, are the distinguishing features of an EFL school? It is the purpose of this pamphlet to highlight the subtle, yet essential factors that define Education for Life and therefore determine the quality and scope of a child’s school experience.

First and foremost, EFL teachers are trained to appreciate that life itself is a school. Throughout our lives, the events that come to us offer a series of lessons that can lead to an ever-deepening sense of personal fulfillment and happiness. Put slightly differently, life continually offers us the opportunity to expand our consciousness. From this perspective the primary goal for the years of formal schooling becomes the development of the skills and attitudes that will help us take full advantage of these life-lessons.

A hallmark of an Education for Life classroom then will be the modeling of a cheerful openness to life and the unexpected lessons that might come our way. Although teachers will bring appropriate lesson plans to class, there will always be a readiness to embrace and make use of whatever special experiences a particular day presents. In the early grades opportunities for growth might present themselves through an unexpected visitor, unusual weather, or a spontaneous incident from the playground. In later years there will be a concerted effort to involve students in the broader streams of life outside the classroom. In every instance, an EFL teacher will strive to help students discern whether their responses to new events produce an expansion or contraction of consciousness. Specifically, the teacher will guide students from reactions of fear toward courage, from judgement toward compassion, from sadness toward joy. In our school’s philosophy this directionality of attitude is referred to as Progressive Development.

This focus on the gradual expansion of the student’s consciousness leads naturally to the next essential component of an EFL classroom, a child-centered curriculum. While every school must address the standard topics of modern education, the EFL curriculum will be child-centered in the sense that the teacher looks primarily to the students’ readiness for particular kinds of growth in determining the specific activities that will take place in the classroom. By knowing each student’s interests, talents, and potential, the teacher is able to present the lessons in a manner that maximizes student involvement and progress. Thus while a teacher may work with the same basic material over a period of years (fractions, world history, etc.), each class will manifest a unique expression of the learning process. EFL curriculum categories such as Understanding People, Cooperation, and Wholeness, as well as our small teacher/student ratios, facilitate this approach to learning.

The emphasis on a child-centered curriculum also contributes to a feeling of mutual respect between teacher and student. In paying close attention to individuals, the teacher develops an appreciation for each student’s positive qualities. Children, on the other hand, sense that the teacher is seeking to adapt the learning process to their interests and abilities as opposed to imposing a rigid program of prearranged lessons. In this way teacher and students can partake in the excitement of co-creating the curriculum.

The final characteristic of an EFL classroom is also rooted in the goal of preparing children to find happiness and fulfillment in life. In responding to life’s challenges, we have four primary tools at our disposal: the body, feelings, will, and intellect. The proper development of these

“Tools of Maturity” lies at the heart of Education for Life. In our schools we emphasize one of these tools in each 6-year cycle of the child’s growth.

The stage from 0–6 encompasses the “Foundation” or preschool years. During this period the child is primarily occupied with learning to relate to physical realities, especially those of the body. An EFL preschool will promote physical vitality through a healthy diet and generous amounts of exercise, sunlight, and fresh air. Frequent nature outings will be interspersed with activities specifically designed to promote physical agility and coordination. The Foundation Years are also a time for cultivating the physical senses through creating a beautiful classroom environment and involving the children in painting, crafts, music, dance, and other activities that refine the children’s capacities for hearing, seeing, feeling, etc. Storytelling and role-playing are popular venues with this age for sharing initial insights into human behavior. The preschool years also provide an opportune time for cultivating uplifting habits of cleanliness, cooperation, and truthfulness.

The next cycle of growth covers the period from 6-12, the “Feeling” or elementary years. During this stage we shift our emphasis from the body to working with and through the child’s emotions. For a beginning step, children are helped to notice the different kinds of feelings and their varying effects on people. Students learn to appreciate and cultivate the uplifting influences of kindness, cheerfulness, and even-mindedness. Conversely, they can learn to redirect the disturbing energies that produce anger, greed, and jealousy. Techniques for working with these energies include breathing exercises, affirmations, yoga, and meditation. Of crucial importance during these years is the cultivation of the calm, centered state that leads to clear intuition. As their capacity for refined feelings develops, students learn to discriminate between the positive and negative effects of different kinds of activities and environments. Teachers will also utilize feelings as a powerful stimulus for other kinds of learning by emphasizing the awe of nature and scientific exploration, the sense of order and symmetry in mathematics, and especially the encouragement to be gained from the study of inspiring and saintly people.

Properly understood, the “Willful Years” from ages 12-18 present some of the greatest opportunities for the child’s development. Adults can help students avoid the self-involved negativity and rebelliousness that can plague the junior and senior high school years by encouraging positive applications of the will. Realistic, yet challenging goals must be set for these young people; goals that are in accordance with their own higher sensitivities as well as their individual talents and interests. Through faith in their positive potential and consistent adherence to appropriate disciplinary procedures, adults can support the students’ efforts to gradually learn such lessons as perseverance, self-sacrifice, responsibility, and self-control. Classroom applications of this approach will emphasize a “hands-on” style of learning where students can apply their energies to life-like situations. Science projects, debates, service projects and challenges of physical endurance are especially appropriate for this age group. A primary goal of the EFL teacher is to help each student identify and realize individual areas of expertise, thus providing a basis for the healthy development of the will. In an EFL school students of this age are asked to share in the responsibility for financing field trips and other special activities, even to the point of earning part of their tuition.

The final EFL cycle covers the “Thoughtful” or college years from 18-24. During this period the intellect is trained to work in conjunction with the three complementary tools of the body, feelings, and will. Intellectual insights are coordinated with the energy and enthusiasm produced by physical vitality, the intuitive feel for the rightness of an idea that comes from clear, calm feeling, and the ability to overcome obstacles that results from a dynamic application of the will. In this way the intellect becomes an effective tool for gaining the insights needed to lead a productive and fulfilling life.