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Wonderings to Wonder! The Success of Project Happy Café - An Immersive Learning Experience



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Vivek (name changed) was quite curious and excited. His wife and he had booked a table at the Happy Café at his son's school that morning. After being served by the little ones in a most efficient manner, from the way they took our order, to the café service and then being served lemonade and a hot pizza, we had been very impressed by how the children were running the café almost independently, with little or no help from their facilitators.

As I always do, I had left a little of the crust on the plate. Just as we were about to get up to leave, our little waiter arrived with a handwritten sign that said 'Do Not Waste Any Food!' I explained that I never eat the crust, but he was very insistent that not wasting food was an important thing. I had little choice but to eat up every little bite on my plate!

What stayed with me was his conviction about the importance of not wasting food. It is rather difficult to turn down a convinced child when it comes to doing the right thing!

This is one of many happy stories that could be recalled when it came to the Happy Café Project at Tapas Progressive School.

In the field of early childhood education, the value of hands-on learning experiences is increasingly recognised as an essential for developing foundational skills in young learners.

Project Happy Café stands out as a shining example of such an initiative, expertly woven into the curriculum at Tapas, where creativity meets practicality. This project allowed students to step into the vibrant world of café operations, cultivating life skills, teamwork, and an understanding of the food and service industry.

Little heads bent together deeply engaged in discussions. Little hands are busy serving customers, taking orders and preparing food and beverages to be served. Deep concentration and trays of food are brought out to the waiting customers. These were the scenes that we

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The objectives of Project Happy Café were multifaceted, creating a holistic learning experience:

1. Understanding Café

Operations: To familiarise learners with the concept of a café, including its key areas such as the kitchen, serving area, billing station, and waiting area.

2. Exploring Roles and Responsibilities:

To introduce a variety of job roles within a café, from chefs to servers and cashiers, highlighting the importance of each role in ensuring smooth operations.

3. Learning Practical Skills:

To engage students in food preparation, table setting, hygiene, and customer service, fostering essential life skills.

4. Menu Design and Café Branding:

To promote creativity by inviting students to design their own menu, choose a café theme, and create a logo.

5. Hygiene and Safety:

To instil an understanding of food safety and cleanliness, enabling learners to develop safety and hygiene rules for their café.

6. Social Responsibility:

To encourage environmentally sustainable practices by serving nutritious options and minimising waste.

planned activities that fulfilled the educational objectives while capturing the children's imagination:

Exploring Café Concepts:

Through discussions, visuals, role play, and field trips to local cafés, learners grasped the essential functions of a café, laying the groundwork for deeper exploration.

Role Exploration: Inviting professionals such as baker Ms. Afrah and facilitating visits to cafés enabled students to observe and understand the various roles within a café.

Safety and Venue Planning:

Students learned about safety standards and participated in setting up the café, practising table-setting and cleanliness routines.

Food Preparation and Role

Assignment: Each learner chose a role aligned with their interests, diving into food preparation and storage tasks.

Creative Menu Development:

Ideas flowed as students collaboratively designed menus reflecting their café theme. Handwritten and hand-drawn elements enriched their artistic and literacy skills.

Café Implementation:

The highlight of the project was the café opening, where learners served parents and staff, putting their skills into practice. They engaged in real-time service, learned how to take orders, manage portion sizes, and implement efficient operations.

Reflections: What they learnt, and what we learnt and discovered shows that Project

all witnessed when our five year old learners planned, set up and ran an operational café over a fortnight.

Fostering Child-Led Learning

At the heart of Tapas Progressive School's educational philosophy is the belief in child-led learning. This approach provides children with the autonomy to explore their interests, leading to deeper engagement and enhanced retention of knowledge. Project Happy Café stemmed from the children's natural curiosity after a baking session earlier with their teacher. In a discussion with their facilitator after the baking activity with her, they asked "Can we have our own

café where we give people our cookies?"

When projects were being planned, this proposal was floated and after a detailed evaluation of feasibility, the facilitator plunged into the process of planning this immersive project for her pre-school learners.

What began as simple wonderings blossomed into a comprehensive, and immersive learning experience that transformed their classroom into a bustling café.

Engaging Activities for Young Learners

The execution of Project Happy Café involved carefully

Happy Café provided numerous opportunities for personal growth:

- 1. Teamwork:** The collaborative setting fostered effective communication and cooperation among learners.
- 2. Creativity:** Students expressed their creativity through menu design and café decorations.
- 3. Responsibility:** Taking ownership of their assigned roles instilled a sense of accountability and pride. One of the little learners was responsible for the clean up team. Her parent had asked if she wanted another responsibility as she would be cleaning up after everyone at the café. She had replied saying, "We have to clean the café. I have that role. I have to do my job."
- 4. Social Responsibility:** Managing café operations with an emphasis on sustainability and minimal waste equipped learners with an understanding of responsible citizenship.

Following the café's operation, students reflected on their experiences and discussed the valuable lessons learned, particularly in teamwork and adaptability.

Overcoming Challenges

The journey was not without challenges. Students navigated logistical hurdles, such as brainstorming café names and menu options and managing operational procedures within a limited time frame. With guidance from facilitators, they developed practical strategies,




including simplifying measures for food preparation and creating easily readable order forms.

Customers were asked to bring cash in specific denominations to simplify billing, while practice sessions honed their coordination skills. Furthermore, the café's waiting area featured engaging art and reading corners designed by the students themselves, showcasing their creativity and planning abilities.

When the little cashier was asked if he needed any help in the amount that had to be paid, he quietly and confidently replied, "No, I know (what I have to do.)"

This meticulous planning and execution ultimately led to the café's successful operation, highlighting the young learners' dedication and teamwork.

Conclusion

Project Happy Café served not only as an educational endeavour but also as a transformative, immersive experience for early years learners. By integrating hands-on activities with real-world applications, students gained invaluable knowledge about café operations while developing critical life skills that will serve them well into the future. This project exemplifies the power of experiential learning in early childhood settings, inspiring educators to continue cultivating environments where curiosity can flourish and wonder can lead to meaningful learning. As we move forward, the lessons learned from Project Happy Café will undoubtedly inform and enrich future educational initiatives at Tapas and beyond. 

To know more about the Happy Café at Tapas Progressive School, follow the link via this QR code.

