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Creating an Appropirate Curriculum Based On Assessment

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Introduction

All children learn differently from one another. Each child is very unique and has his or her own strengths and weaknesses. Children gain knowledge through social interaction, exploration of their environment, manipulation of materials, and communication with others. For my study, I have decided to focus upon two children, Violet (2.0) and Xavier (2.1)[1], who are of similar ages and backgrounds, but who learn in very dissimilar ways. I will examine these two children because although they are very similar in their age, I have seen definite differences in their social and cognitive development, and I would like to compare and contrast their learning styles. I will generalize and select the information to create a curriculum that will encompass the needs of children in a classroom who have differing learning styles and abilities. I will create both appropriate activities and an appropriate learning environment for children, based on the need to support varying knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

As a constructivist thinker, I fully believe that children construct their knowledge through their classroom environment and social interactions with both teachers and peers. I have chosen to focus on the relationship between social skills and cognitive functioning for this reason. The children begin to create their own understandings through their relationships that they form with those around them. Beginning communication is so important with young toddlers because it helps them to enter into social situations with ease. Language helps a child to exchange information with teachers and peers, which promotes development. As for cognitive functioning, focused attention is an extremely

[1] Pseudonyms are used for all children in this study.

important higher mental function. Bodrova & Leong (1996) define focused attention as the ability to concentrate on any stimulus, whether or not it is exceptionally salient or striking (p. 29). When a child is able to focus on a specific activity for an extended period of time, it demonstrates their ability to concentrate on their learning and ultimately learn deeply. The child is able to ignore outside distractions, therefore gaining more knowledge. Knowledge of children's varying social skills and cognitive functioning are crucial for an early childhood educator to set up an appropriate classroom.

Developmental perspectives

For these milestones, I will often be referring to the Early Childhood Early Learning Developmental Standards (2/16/06), also known as the TNELDS.

Socialization

In the development of socialization, children at eighteen months are able to understand many words and phrases that may be spoken to them. They usually comprehend more language than they are able to speak. Mooney (2000) discussed the Montessorian belief that children learned language without much effort, simply from the environments they spend the most time in. They can follow simple directions easily, especially when accompanied by gestures. They understand descriptions of activities. They can make a choice when prompted to, and they understand non-verbal language just as easily as verbal. At this age, the children begin to understand familiar routines, and when asked to do something they may be used to, they do this easily. They may point to an object when asked its location, around the classroom or in a book, and they also may point to various body parts on themselves when asked where they are. They understand what "no" means, and they usually will cease an activity if requested by their teachers.

Language

During their first year of life, young children begin to use language that moves from jargon to monosyllabic words. This language usually resembles the language they often hear in their environment. Between 15-18 months, toddlers may start to put two words together, often using phrases that are spoken frequently by their caregivers. Santrock (1998) states that from 12-26 months, a child will use mostly nouns and verbs with a few adjectives and adverbs, and they tend to order the words correctly, like "baby bath" (p. 331). They begin to understand that words have definitive meaning. These children still use gestures to also convey what they want to say. Konner (1991) writes that a child will utilize language to get what they want, using words like "more", "no", and "mommy!" (p. 221). They are starting to have social interactions with their peers and caregivers, and they know how to get the attention of adults when desired. They also use their words to convey their needs and desires. They understand when asked a question, and can respond with "yes", "no", or by shaking their heads. They can signal when they want "more" of something, and they can name several objects. These children often use one word phrases, but can put several words together too. They begin to talk to themselves when playing with toys.

Cognition

The cognitive development of young toddlers is created through their confident explorations with their environment and others. They are curious about everything, and they are full of energy to move about and investigate their surroundings. They feel most comfortable when they have an adult present to guide them through their exploration, giving them feedback and comments about whatever they may be experiencing. They

will begin to manipulate various materials to determine their movement or texture. They are very interested in testing how things work.

These children react with excitement to new objects in their environment, and will almost immediately try to use these objects. They are starting to use materials with a definitive purpose; they understand that an object performs in a certain manner. It may be hard for these young children to understand when familiar materials or routines change because they have become accustomed to using them in a specific way.

Memory

The TNELDS state that at eighteen months, children begin to demonstrate extended memory. They are starting to understand cause and effect; they know the consequences of specific actions. They understand and can carry out various routines throughout their day, and they expect for each day to have the same schedule. They are able to mimic the actions of the adults they see on a daily basis. They can recognize themselves and also various sounds and actions.

Child Profiles

Violet

Violet (2.0) is a child who came to the U.S. from Argentina. She speaks fluently in Spanish and English. She is the only child of two students at the University of Tennessee. She is one of the older children in our classroom. Violet has very strong communication, and is able to assert her needs well. She is a very particular child, so at times, she has difficulty controlling her emotions when she wants something.

Violet is very well developed in the area of communication. She uses her words quite often in the classroom, both with her caregivers and her peers; she often lets us know what or who she wants. She enjoys saying her friends' names, and can name all of the children in the classroom easily. She comments on things she observes, like saying

"cot Violet" when she sees her cot being brought into the classroom, or saying "hurt" when another child hits her. She often gives her peers instructions, like when it is their turn, she will say "[Name] turn, for various activities, like diaper changing or participating in a group activity. She follows instruction and guidance well; when a teacher comments on her actions, she will repeat these words to the teacher. She is able to listen to a teacher's words and do as they ask of her. Violet constantly sings songs in our classroom, like "baa baa baa baa" or "mi mono". She tends to mimic what teachers say to her, such as "What's up?" or "Que pasa?"

Violet is confident in her exploration of our classroom on a daily basis. Quite frequently, she mimics the teachers' actions when playing on her own in a specific area. She uses extended memory to continue these actions much later than when she has observed the teachers doing so. She uses our materials with a definitive purpose, and often tests them to have a better understanding, such as with play dough, stickers, or markers. Violet is even able to test objects in ways that the teacher may not have modeled for her; she uses her own curiosity to fuel her exploration. She demonstrates an understanding of our daily routines, and may show confusion if our schedule is changed.

Xavier

Xavier (2.1) is the only child of two University students. His mother and father both came from the Middle East, so they speak Arabic at home. However, his mother attended college in France, so she also speaks French some within the home. He is one of the older children in our classroom. Xavier has very strong focused attention and is able to put his energy into a specific task for an extended period of time. He also has well-developed muscles and excels in gross motor activities. Xavier's communication is still developing; he speaks very few legible words and tends to babble to his teachers. Xavier has definitely showed progress in the area of communication and understanding throughout this semester. He understands what we are telling him, and he is able to follow simple instructions with no difficulty at all. He is able to show us the location of a specific item that we ask about, whether by pointing to something in a book or lifting up his shirt and showing us his stomach. He can let his teachers know when he wants more of something, and he can say "no" when a child may try to take a toy from him. Xavier is beginning to say one or two words, usually repeating what his teachers are saying to him. Whenever he says a word, he will look up expectantly, and become very happy when he receives praise for speaking. He still does babble quite often in the classroom, especially when teachers are trying to have

conversations at mealtimes, but he is beginning to make more sense. It is important that Xavier is trying to respond to our questions and comments.

Xavier is a child who uses advanced focused attention within activities in the classroom, especially in Art. He can remained engaged for an extended period of time, and needs little prompting or guidance from adults. Xavier explores materials in his own manner, and he prefers to be left alone during his manipulation. When given a new substance to work with, Xavier will work with it for quite some time, testing all of its properties. He persists in his activities, never wanting to finish them until he is finished. Xavier always shows interest in new materials in the classroom and wants to try them as soon as he possibly can. He thoroughly enjoys participating in art activities, like drawing or painting. He becomes very involved in his work and is not distracted easily. He can engage in artwork for a long period of time, and he puts intense focus into his final product.

Similarities and differences in the two children

Violet and Xavier are very similar in their background. Both come from families of university students from other countries, and both speak a second language outside of the classroom. There is only a two-week age difference between these two children.

Personality-wise, they both have developed their own unique self, which is quite obvious to any casual observer. Violet and Xavier are able to communicate their needs and desires to their caregivers with little or no trouble. With motor development, each child is able to use their bodies with a definitive purpose, and both of them have a good amount of balance and coordination.

The major contrast between these two classmates is their language usage on a daily basis. Violet is able to use many words; she can put them together to make phrases and sentences, and she speaks both English and Spanish to her parents and her teachers. Xavier, on the other hand, only uses 10-15 words on a daily basis, and quite often babbles to himself or his teachers. He appears to be very sure of himself when he is babbling, so it seems that Xavier really is trying his hardest to communicate with those around him.

Violet and Xavier are both well-developed children for their age when it comes to cognitive abilities. Each of them uses focused attention quite often in classroom activities, and they are able to put forth energy into something constructive. They both are able to explore materials motivated by their curiosity to learn about how it works. Violet tends to use a material of her choice, like the dolls or animals in imaginary play, and will remain focused as long as a teacher is close by, while Xavier uses most any art material and pays little attention to those around him. Each of them may initially watch a teacher modeling with a media, and then use it in their own individual way.

Theoretical considerations

Curriculum Connections

A curriculum must reflect the child's natural learning and development, and never be static. In this section, I will connect my knowledge about children's development to the creation of an appropriate classroom curriculum. It changes as a child changes, so in the classroom, I will be prepared to adapt activities based on what the children need. Xavier's language will continue to develop, and Violet's language will continue to flourish, so I must nourish these two children. Curriculum cannot be planned months ahead of time, because the children's needs and interests will vary over time. I must use with their ideas and create a curriculum based on what they already know and what is important for them to learn. As they continually develop, the activities will become increasingly more difficult and challenging, so the children will constantly be on the edge of their zone of proximal development. Gullo (1992) also stated that another important aspect of curriculum is the child's ability to choose their activities (p.35). The chosen materials should be relevant to their real-life experiences so that they have the desire to use what has been provided.

Branscombe (2003) stated that "Well-prepared teachers analyze content in terms of children's cognitive development and are aware of appropriate opportunities to introduce new content, recognizing that each child will assimilate and accommodate that content based on his or her own reality" (p. 58). I feel that as a teacher, I should have knowledge and understanding of each individual child's capabilities, and work with them on a level that they can learn. Spodek (1973) stated that curriculum builds autonomy within the child, and they are better capable of letting teachers know their needs (p. 82).

Educators must respond to children's natural activities and make a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Spodek (1973) uses the slogan "I teach children, not subjects" to prove his point of responding to needs of the children, and this is important within a classroom (p. 83). Teachers must not become too involved with their own curriculum that they ignore a child's developing interests.

Patience must be practiced continually in a classroom of diverse learners; acquiring knowledge takes time and practice. Each child must be given an equal opportunity to gain knowledge of their world. It is important to work with children one-on-one, so I can help them practice their skills. DeWolf and Benedict (1997) stated that "teachers can serve as powerful pro-social models by exhibiting caring and respect for all people in their interactions with others" (p. 275). As teachers, we demonstrate appropriate behavior for peers to engage in, and the children use these models to determine their own behavior in play and activities.

In my classroom, I will use Vygotskian concepts in building my curriculum for the children. Vygotsky asserted that children learn by observing adults modeling in their daily lives, and eventually children will be able to do specific tasks on their own. The zone of proximal development describes the difference between what a child can do when assisted by an adult, and what a child can do on their own with no help. Vygotsky (1978) defines the ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). He emphasized language in classroom instruction as an important means of children's learning.

Lesson plans need to be interactive and based on a child's abilities. As the adult, I feel that I should model an idea for the children, and then they can explore with the tools and materials to create their own unique understandings. Teachers and students need to work with one another to find a balance of knowledge. Vygotsky also believed in the importance of private speech. Berk and Winsler (1995) stated that when a child begins to internalize their thoughts, they can do for themselves what their caregivers have done for them during joint problem-solving (p. 37). Interaction is crucial in a classroom, and two-way communication gives the children an opportunity to connect their ideas with their teachers. The teacher must support and guide the child to facilitate learning.

Play is also an important component of a Vygotskian classroom. Social skills help a child to gain knowledge because we learn the most from those around us. For children, play provides the opportunity to manipulate various materials, interact with peers, and the exploration of their surroundings. Teachers provide the guidance but do not lead the interests. As a teacher, I will step back and allow a child to explore on their own, so they may create their own unique understandings. Then, I will scaffold them in their efforts to help them build upon their knowledge. Scaffolding involves acting as a support system for the child to help them build new ideas and concepts; it also helps to increase children's competence. (Berk and Winsler, 1995, p. 26).

Applying theory to practice

To create an appropriate environment for children who are on the same age level but who differ in certain aspects of development, a teacher must take each individual need into consideration. Children learn the best through social interactions with teachers and peers, and also through their construction of knowledge based on the classroom

environment. Hart, Burts, and Charlesworth (1997) assert that the child must be the primary reasoning behind a curriculum (p. 3). The following is a presentation of ideas for creating a curriculum based on children's individual strengths and needs.

Language

With the case of Violet and Xavier, a language-rich environment is absolutely imperative to enrich Violet's continually growing communication skills and to build Xavier's developing communication ability. I must constantly use words in these children's classroom to explain activities and also talk to the children throughout many activities. One-on-one conversation will increase Xavier's usage of his emerging vocabulary and help to build new sets of vocabulary. I will use rhymes and repetitive phrases to build an understanding of language. Also, during classroom exploration, the children's actions must be discussed and commented upon. I can use extensive gestures to build upon existing vocabulary and to create new vocabulary. As Violet's talking increases, she, along with the teachers, will be able to help Xavier build vocabulary and begin to verbalize more often. Children often learn from one another, so she could act as a role model for her friend.

I also believe that my classroom should contain many aspects of early literacy and language. Reading to a child helps to promote language development, so there will be a bountiful book area in the classroom. We may also do activities like pretending to talk to our families on the telephone, talking to one another through cardboard tubes. For each child, I will have a "word book" that will include pictures of the words that they are able to say. This will give the child motivation to fill the book with more photographs as they learn to speak more.

In play, we could spend much time in the dramatic play area, creating various scenes. I could narrate a scene for the children, or they can create their own. As the children develop, they will begin to be able to engage in more sophisticated role play. They will use more language, and Xavier will be encouraged by his peers to use his language more often. I will plan various singing activities that use rhymes and finger plays, in order to encourage the children to speak and learn new words, combining language with music.

Cognition

Since both children display proficiency with cognitive development, especially using focused attention, it would be appropriate to bring in more complex activities, so the children can use their concentration to explore new materials and engage in more difficult tasks. Children learn best by exploring their environments independently and engaging in hands-on activities, with teacher guidance. To increase complexity, it would be important to give the children unique materials, increase the number of materials in the classroom, and vary the scale of the materials. For example, instead of regular markers, I might offer the children felt-tip markers, which are smaller and require more concentration. I might also bring real cooking materials into the dramatic play area for the children to use rather than plastic bowls and spoons. More complex materials help the children to be able to ask a question, test the theory, and gain new answers, and they will thus incorporate new concepts into their existing mental schemas. Lastly, as the classroom teacher, I will not direct my students' learning but create environments that stimulate their young minds.

In artwork, I will provide many recyclable and natural materials for the children to use along with the traditional paper, scissors, and glue. These children can use their focused attention to create their own masterpieces, rather than making a teacher-directed "craft". Children learn more and stay better focused with art by using materials in their own way.

Children are very intrigued by different objects' textures, tastes, and smells; they tend to learn by using their five senses. As a teacher, I would guide them to use appropriate senses to learn more about items in the classroom, by including a "sensory" table, whether it be filled with water, sand, or flour. Each classroom should include a table that can be filled with different materials that the children can use to investigate. For example, a sand table can contain seashells, sea creatures, and even some water. This will give the children a better understanding of the beach and ocean life. As a teacher, I will change out the sensory table every few weeks to give the children an opportunity to learn about different objects.

I think that our classroom should include many things that the children can manipulate and use to learn about lots of materials. For example, I would have bottles filled with interesting objects for them to shake or turn. I would also have an area on the wall with flaps that lift up to reveal photos of items in the child's surroundings. We would keep discovery containers that children can "peek" into and learn about the materials. Many items with different textures and colors will be placed around the environment for children to explore on their own. Open-ended materials are used to challenge children and allow them to create their own understandings.

Conclusion

An early childhood classroom must be set up to consider each individual child in the learning process. Xavier and Violet demonstrate how children of the same age and background may learn differently from one another. Here, I have proposed a curriculum that is designed to incorporate each child's unique needs, abilities, and interests in order to effectively engage them in the learning process. These two young children have different strengths and areas of need, but each of them brings a unique perspective to the learning community in which they are able to continually learn from one another. As a teacher, my goal is to create a learning environment that focuses on children's strengths, capitalizes on their needs, and maximizes their learning potential.

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