

YOUNG LEARNERS – PLANNING FOR THE UNDER 5'S

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Children bring to school or child care or preschool, a range of skills. This occurs regardless of their ages. A two year old for example, may start child care with the ability to communicate with adults, the ability to understand what is asked of him or her, the ability to walk and run. He or she will also be developing in independence, will probably enjoy helping adults, will be able to manipulate crayons, paintbrushes etc. Of course these skills are not completely developed. They need to and will continue to develop.

What is important for us as educators to be aware of, is that the learning of these skills occurred in most instances, without formal structure, without force and in the company of respectful and loving adults, who were aware of what skill their child needed to learn. The adults supported and encouraged the child and provided physical and emotional support when it was needed.

There are trends in young children's learning. Kostelnik, Soderman & Whiren (1993) outline that these trends are moves along a number of continua. These include:

- simple to complex
- known to unknown
- self to other
- whole to part
- concrete to abstract
- enactive to symbolic
- exploratory to goal directed
- less accurate to more accurate
- impulsive to self-controlled

Learning environments for young children need to reflect an awareness of the trends in young children's learning. In particular, they need to include:

- positive emotional climate

Children need to feel safe to learn in a manner which suits them. As learning occurs, mistakes will also occur. Children need to feel safe to make these mistakes. In order to feel safe, the environment needs to be a positive one where children feel respected and valued.

- space

The space provided needs to reflect the experience which has been positioned. Children need space to safely manipulate and explore items. Learning doesn't necessarily occur at tables and chairs. They may decide to sit on the floor, or to sit in small groups, so the environment needs to reflect this.

The space also needs to be planned. When setting up experiences, be careful to put experiences next to each other that fit together. Setting up a noisy experience close to a quiet experience will probably lead to discomfort for some children, and learning will be affected.

- material resources

Children learn through their senses and through manipulation of concrete objects. This means that a learning environment needs to include lots of hands on, manipulative items which children can touch and explore.

- interested and respectful adults

The adults within the child's learning space are very important. They need to respect and value the learning that is taking place. The adults also need to respond to the children in order that the children's learning is supported and increased.

Vygotsky supported the role of adults in children's learning via the use of scaffolding. Scaffolding is support provided by an adult or expert to a child, so that he or she can achieve a task which is not achievable alone. Vygotsky (1978) suggested that when working within the zone of proximal development, children required scaffolding from adults in order that learning experiences could meet and challenge a child's level of development.

- purposeful experiences

Children's learning needs to be based on real experiences. This suggests that experiences presented to the children need to be meaningful to the child. For something to be meaningful, the child needs to be actively involved in the development of it. This reinforces the importance of the young child participating in and in conjunction with an adult, setting his or her own goals.

- interests

Children learn from that which is interesting to them. It is important for learning environments to reflect a range of children's interests. If children are known individually, then experiences can be specifically planned for a child's interests. If the children are not personally known, then experiences based on issues and ideas which children are generally interested in need to be included and planned.

- social experience

Children learn by interacting with others (Vygotsky, 1978). This means that the environment should be planned to encourage and allow group interaction. Adults are also part of the social experience and the environment should include adults to socialise, support and scaffold children's learning.

The space which hosts the learning environment should reflect the need for children to discuss issues. It needs to provide places for children to do this and should be planned in such a manner to expect and cater for some amount of noise. After all, children can't discuss issues without talking and we all know what it's like if you are passionate about an issue. Somehow the discussion just keeps going.....

- learning centres

Children need hands on learning centres. Learning centres provide children with opportunities to gather, analyse and evaluate a range of information about particular topics. Children can follow up on topics using a variety of methods of obtaining and analysing information. These learning centres need to be based on children's interests so that meaningful learning occurs.

The role of play in children's learning

Reconsider the manner in which children have learned skills before they start in some type of preschool, child care or school environment. The child's day has been spent with adults who are interested, some time has been spent in routine times of eating and sleeping, but the bulk of the child's day has been spent playing.

Rubin, Fein & Vandenberg (1983) cited in Rogers & Sawyers, (1988), suggest that the disposition of play is made up of six factors:

- Play is intrinsically motivated.
- Play is relatively free of externally imposed rules.
- Play is carried out as if the activity were real.
- Play focuses on the means not the ends.
- Play is dominated by the players.
- Play requires the active involvement of the player.

From the play experiences which young children are involved in each day, they learn about themselves, other people and their environments. The children also learn the impact they can have on people and things around them.

Through play, children can use and develop skills and they can gain knowledge at a rate that is appropriate to their individual level. Consider the decision of a group of children to build a

cubby. According to Tegel, (1992: 9-10), this play experience caters for many areas of development.

- The play required decisions.
- The play involved group management.
- The play involved cognition and hypothesising.
- The play involved creativity.
- Physical skills are employed.
- Aesthetic development.
- Language is used, practised and developed.
- Concentration skills are increased.
- Children's self esteem is increased.

The cubby could be as intricate or as simple as the children chose. The play was child-initiated and child controlled. Adults did not control or dominate the play, but allowed the children to take control and therefore determine the direction of the play. The play was valuable because it was "open-ended" and structured by the child.

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