Learning to Balance: Teaching the Child, Not Just Curriculum in Inclusive Settings

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Dreaming of a Bigger Tomorrow: Building our Future through Collaboration and Partnership

Jane M. Sileo, Ed.D.
State University of New York, New Paltz
sileoj@newpaltz.edu

Cathy Johnan, MSEd.
First Steps Preschool
cathyjfirststepsecec@gmail.com
Responsive teaching can be described as “a dance in which nature (what the child brings into the world) and nurture (the relationship of the child’s context) are partnered” (Bowman, et al 2001, p.58).

This ‘instructional dance’ is most effective when improvised, not scripted, by a teacher who is continually assessing the extent to which s/he should lead or follow each and every child (Fowler, 2017).

Developing relationships is critical ~ if we don’t know our students, we don’t know how to either “join or ask them to” the dance (personal communication, C. Johnan).
Focus on the Child

- “...early educators need to focus on identifying, not how a child fits within single developmental approach, but rather how to tailor instruction, based on a variety of developmental approaches, that best fits the child’s needs” (Fowler, 2017, p 160).

- The teacher’s objective is to develop the children’s curiosity, explore their thinking, and strengthen their learning (Scheinfeld, Haigh, & Scheinfeld, 2008).

- Teaching the whole child includes providing an environment in which children can learn not only meaningful lessons specific to subject matter (such as letters and numbers), but social lessons that support broader learning goals, such as caring for others, being part of a community, and working to create positive change (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010).
Emergent Curriculum

- Listen and Observe
- Scaffold
- Hypothesize
- Plan
- Document
- Interpret
- Project and Decide

“Is not predefined but rather a dynamic process of inquiry that develops with common interests shared by adults and children alike” (Palmer, 2008, p26).

Scheinfeld, Haigh, & Scheinfeld, (2008)
Questions to ponder...
• What are your student’s strengths?
• What are your student’s challenges?
• How can you use your student’s strengths to lift up the challenges?

Emergent curriculum is based on the children’s strengths, which include his or her interests, learning styles, temperament, and skills (Lickey & Powers, 2011)
Observe...

...children to learn about the children’s own means of learning their interests in the world, and the natural strengths that children bring to their own development (Lickey & Powers, 2011).

... and document children’s actions, interactions, and representations through note taking, photography, tape-recording, and collecting children’s work (Scheinfeld, et al. 2008, p59).
Children are part of the planning

We base our curriculum on the children’s strengths, which in turn helps the children invest in their own learning.

Wien (2008) states “if curriculum is pre-scripted, preplanned, and tightly controlled, the agenda for teaching and learning is closed” (p145).

Building the curriculum together

Children’s interests and strengths drive the curricular choices.

The teachers and their students, decide what they want to learn about.

Teachers collaborate with parents to learn students strengths, then they collaborate with students and related service personnel (i.e., SLP, OT, PT, SEIT) to build the curriculum.
The curriculum...

...is not predetermined but rather an investigative process that develops around a common interest.

...the teachers often “participate in learning alongside children, asking their own questions and conducting their own quest” (Wien, 2008, p147).

...is in a continual revision process.

...is an honest response to what is actually happening.

...In an emergent classroom, “good teachers plan and let go” (Jones & Nimmo, 1994, p12).

...may also be expressed in the context of spontaneous play activities (as with *The Wedding*) or through an object that a child brings to school (Scheinfeld, et al, 2008).
In an emergent classroom, teachers provide instruction in tool and material use, help find materials and resources, and scaffold children’s learning sometimes entering “inside the group of children,” sometimes remaining attentively “on the outside.” (Edwards, 2002).

The optimum experience occurs when teachers provide children the time and materials to support a satiating educational experience across curriculum.
Our Projects

The Wedding
Olympic Ice Skating
The Princess and the Pea
From preschool setting to college class...

Our process...
Rather than provide the student with what the teachers think they need, we taught our teacher candidates to ask the students “what they need” in order to build the curriculum.

Teacher candidates were taught to observe and or interview their students to learn about their interests and strengths and THEN plan their lessons.
Initial reactions...

I am kind of excited, however, I am also nervous. The entire interview experience was fun and it seems like I only learned a little bit about him, but I actually learned a lot. I know the more I work with Beetle, the more I will learn and be able to guide my activities around his interests and needs (MCP, 6/15/17).

I am anxious to see where Sam takes me with this and to see how I can support him. I need to remind myself to have Sam focus on guiding the play and not me forcing him to play a certain way (MC, 6/15/17).
I’m also thinking about how excited Bianca was when we talked about doing this project. I hesitated to ask her what she thought she was good at, but she was absolutely correct. “Paint and draw”, she said. She knew what she was good at, and it is now so obvious that I should have been tapping into her strengths more all year. She told me what she wanted to do, and I told her we would do it, it was that simple, and she was smiling ear to ear when we left my room. As I told her classroom teacher about our plan, I mused, “Wouldn’t it be great if we could do this for every student?” It truly would, and I can’t wait to see how it goes (SW, 06/15/17).
Initial reactions continued ...

I liked that I was able to really develop a thorough plan after careful and detailed thinking about the student, his abilities, interests, and weaknesses; otherwise, I would have probably picked something where he may not have been so successful (KO, 06/15/17).
Final reflections

This process was an amazing experience. Even though I feel like my sequence of steps still resembled some typical education structure, this experience was completely new to me. Not having every moment planned out felt liberating because I did not feel stress to meet some sort of deadline. This entire experience was very valuable for my career because no matter what grade level I teach, I will have to remember the benefit of letting my students drive the instruction through their interest (MCP, 06/15/17).

I found this experience to be very enlightening and inspiring. I also found it to be heartbreaking because majority of the time teachers don’t have the opportunity to do this in their classrooms. I wish we were given more time in the typical school year to do this with students. It gave me such a better understanding of the child’s strengths and weaknesses. It really allowed me to focus on teaching to his strengths and fitting the curriculum to him (MC, 06/15/17)
Final reflections continued …

I was truly surprised at how much Bianca talked through these activities - it was nothing like I’ve seen from her this entire year. I’ve already begun to introduce Emergent Curricula with other groups and the results are fantastic. My 3rd graders are currently finishing up research posters that they will present to Kindergarteners next week - and these are students who supposedly hate school...pretending to be teachers! The enthusiasm (and amount they’re learning without knowing it) is wonderful and a truly fun and satisfying way to end the school year. It seems that when students have that “buy in”, where they feel that they are part of the process, that they don’t even remember they are learning. I feel that this is how school should be for young children, typical or atypical, and I cannot wait to do more Emergent activities next year! (SW, 06/15/17)
Final reflections continued...

It was a very interesting and rewarding process for both of us. He was really excited about learning and this made my teaching more engaged and active, as I wanted to show him more and more about bugs. It was really interesting to give control back to the student (KO, 06/15/17).
Our Students Projects

Learning about Cars
Exploring Bugs
Building Dolls
Our Students Projects continued
Conclusion

Allowing children sufficient time to explore and construct their own learning helps them acquire a clear understanding of the problem and reinforces their ability to solve the problem successfully (Barnett & Halls, 2008).

When teachers provide children sufficient time to explore and construct their own learning and guide their development through the processes of communicating, negotiating, planning, problem-solving, constructing materials, and creating story lines, they help children develop their skills far beyond rote learning (Lickey & Powers, 2011).
Questions?