2.5: Role of the Teacher - Being Intentional with Children

Teachers play a pivotal role in children’s active construction of knowledge. They intentionally provide the environments and experiences that support children in actively building concepts and skills. The role of the teacher who works with young children birth to age five is to support children’s active construction of knowledge. In a sense, early childhood teachers serve as research supports as the children sense, discover, and construct meaning about the world around them. Young children’s natural impulse to learn by investigating (1) what things are like and what they can make them do, and (2) how people create and share meaning shapes the role of the early childhood teacher. The early childhood teacher is responsible for: offering children well-stocked play spaces where they can construct concepts and ideas, preferably in the company of friendly peers; designing daily routines that invite children to be active participants and to use emerging skills and concepts; supporting children’s learning through interactions and conversations that prompt using language and ideas in new ways and that promote sharing meaning with others.

In carrying out those responsibilities, teachers create contexts in which young children can:

- Wonder about what things are like and what they do
- Investigate a variety of ways of relating one thing to another
- Invent problems and solutions with others; construct, transform, and represent with the materials at hand
- Create and share meaning, and collaborate in learning
- Try new challenges and practice emerging skills
- Express their emotions, feel secure to explore, and regulate their emotions and behavior
- Manage conflicts in ways that support the development of social skills
  - Advocating for one’s own needs, safety, and feelings
  - Learning how to connect with their peers in mutually beneficial ways
  - Learning how to walk away or disengage from their peers when they feel the need to
Learning how to cope with feelings of rejection or exclusion. And in turn, learning how to seek out positive relationships, rather than dwelling on unsatisfying ones.

Early childhood teachers see and support children as scientists and thus design the play environment to serve the children’s inquisitive minds. Teachers also provide the materials children need to construct concepts and ideas and master skills in the natural context of play. Children learn from opportunities to discover materials that they may be seeing for the first time and need time to explore and get to know the properties of these materials. It means offering children materials that they can organize into relationships of size, shape, number, or function and time. Children can investigate what happens when they put these materials together or arrange them in new ways, experiencing the delight of discovering possibilities for building with them, transforming them, or using them to represent an experience.

Early childhood teachers also design the daily routines as rich opportunities for children to participate actively and to use their emerging skills and ideas in meaningful situations. Equally important are the ways in which teachers use interactions and conversations with children to support learning. Many interactions occur spontaneously, with the teacher being responsive to an interest or need that a child expresses. Many other interactions focus on co-creating or co-constructing meaning as the teacher and a child or small group of children focus on a specific topic or activity.

Some interactions may include providing guidance to help children learn to regulate their emotions and behavior or may involve an intervention in which the teacher helps children explore how to negotiate a solution to a conflict.

Other interactions and conversations teachers have with children are more predictable. Teachers anticipate and organize some interactions and conversations as group discussions, in order to prompt children’s thinking and understanding. Sometimes these groups are small, and sometimes, at preschool age, they are somewhat larger. Teachers also guide some activities in a context that allows children to encounter new information and build skills. All interactions are embedded in contexts in which the children are actively engaged in exploring their own developing skills, learning from each other, and acquiring knowledge.[1]

While play occurs naturally, teachers must consider the following responsibilities when facilitating appropriate and purposeful play:

**Spaces (See further detail in Chapter 5)**

- are safe places to explore
- reflect the mission and core values of the program
- include culturally sensitive materials to explore
- include open-ended materials for multi-use

**Routines**

- Are consistent and predictable
- Provide ample time for unstructured play to occur (recommendation is 45 minutes minimum) If children aren’t provided enough time to become immersed in play, they will be less likely to engage enough to receive the benefit of the activity.

**Interactions**
• Stimulate creativity by asking open-ended questions or reflective observations
• Respect individual differences in play and interactions
• Encourage Cooperation

The Educators’ Guide to the Framework For School Age Care In Australia elaborates on intentionality:

To be ‘intentional’ is to act purposefully, with a goal in mind and a plan for accomplishing it. Intentional acts arise from careful thought and in consideration of the potential effects. For example, when offering dress-ups, educators provide a wide selection. This is intentional in the following ways:

• Not having enough may be challenging to children who find sharing and waiting difficult and could lead to unnecessary conflict over the limited resources.
• If only one or two children could dress up, it would limit opportunities to stimulate rich group play.
• If the dress-ups were all the same, respect for diversity and choice are not promoted.
• Providing variety allows children to mix and match and experiment through varied role play.
• Providing variety encourages children to share, collaborate and negotiate.
• Providing educators who are able to interact with the children fosters skill development in this area (through scaffolding).

Intentionality is about educators being able to explain what they are doing and why they are doing it. . . Educators purposefully (and perhaps in collaboration with children) establish routines, set up the environment, select resources, and appoint educators to work with the children. This approach reflects the educator’s understanding of the context, individual personalities and group dynamics.

Educators who are deliberate and purposeful in what they do:

• Promote children’s learning through worthwhile and challenging experiences and interactions which foster high-level thinking
• Seize opportunities during experiences and conversations to extend children’s thinking and learning
• Model and demonstrate active listening skills
• Utilize varied communication strategies, such as open questions, explanations, speculation and problem-solving
• Move flexibly in and out of various roles and draw on different strategies as the context changes
• Draw on contemporary theories and research for their knowledge and practices
• Monitor children’s wellbeing, life skills and citizenship, and use the information to guide program planning
• Monitor children’s needs and interests and incorporate them into program planning
• Identify ‘teachable moments’ as they arise and use them to scaffold children’s learning and development.

As educators it is always good to reflect on your own childhood:

• What were your favorite play spaces as a child?
• What did you enjoy doing?
• How might you incorporate some of your childhood play ideas into your setting?
• What role did the adults play when you were a child?
• What are your beliefs about play?
• How do you think play might have changed over the past forty years?
• What impact do you think this might have on children and the adults of the future?[2]

Pause to Reflect

“First Day!”

Shortly after completing my ECE degree, I had been hired as Preschool Teacher for a New Corporate Sponsored Early Childhood Education Program. With three weeks to prepare the environment and complete my training, before the children were to start. I spent hours organizing (and reorganizing multiple times) the materials, learning areas and extensively planning for our first day!

The Friday prior to the opening of the program was pretty standard, all of the children’s files were up to date, tours had occurred, environment was set and the lesson plans were carefully examined and neatly posted. Everything was in place-Perfection!

With joyful excitement and a little anxiety we welcomed 8 new children to our program Monday morning. As the children trickled in, one by one, their eyes focused on the newness of the environment. My preconceived ideas and expectations were shattered as I stood and observed the children moving quickly from one area to the next and touching everything in sight. I had erroneously thought they would sit and play with puzzles, paint at the easel that was so aesthetically set up or build with the blocks that were strategically placed on the carpet.

Instead, the children avoided those areas and aimlessly walked around the classroom, looked through the cubbies, examined each shelf loaded with learning materials. One item captured their attention more than any other- a water dispenser with little Dixie cups, placed at their level. Each child was fascinated by the ability to press the button and see water come out.

Much of the day was spent tirelessly cleaning up the water and trying to redirect the children to play with the toys that were out rather than the water dispenser. At the end of the day, when the children left, the teachers sat and reflected on what worked and what didn’t work during the day. In unison, we all said the water was an issue and we should remove it.

Then from across the room, our wise director intervened. He challenged us. It appeared to him that we should focus on the children’s interest in the dispenser. It provided children a new sense of independence (they could access their own water when they were thirsty), and they were practicing important problem solving skills and the concept of cause and effect while at the same time mastering the fine motor skills of pushing the button. The children were learning and mastering their new environment through active exploration and using play as a technique to acquire new knowledge about the water dispenser. The children were most excited to come back the next day and show their parents the water dispenser and how to operate it.

We changed our curriculum to additional activities to enhance this interest such as using measuring cups to fill and dump water using our small water table. After a week, their excitement for the dispenser dwindled and it became routine and the children discovered the easel, the blocks and other materials in their environment. I stop sometimes to recall this day and know that it wasn’t what I taught the children, but rather what the children taught me about how they want to learn.
Reflect

Consider an experience when you witnessed a child exploring a toy, learning material, or a play space. Was there anything about the observation that surprised you? In which ways, could you consider intentionality in relationship to the observation. What types of play or stage did you witness during the observation?

References

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