1.3: Interaction and Conversation as Curriculum

Interactions and conversations throughout the day model for young children the expected ways of communicating with and being with members of the group or community. Through the ways in which they interact and talk with young children and guide children’s behavior, teachers support children in learning the code of behavior and the language of the education and care community. Children rely on family members and teachers to provide the experience of expected patterns of behavior, interactions, and language. At home, children experience interactions and language that are grounded in their family’s culture. In the early care and education setting, they encounter what might be a different expected pattern of behavior, interaction, and language from what they experience at home.

The following vignette offers an opportunity to observe and listen to learning from the children’s point of view and to see what the teacher intentionally does to guide the children’s thinking.

Vignette

Mr. Ravi and his group of preschool children enter the play yard on Monday morning. As several children run to the sandbox, Vicente shouts with dismay, “Oh, look! Somebody ruined our fort and messed up all the hiding places we dug for our food! That was mean!” Mr. Ravi comes over quickly to join them. He surveys the logs and boulders strewn around in the sand and notes the children’s distress and sense of outrage.

Mr. Ravi responds sympathetically, “You all spent so much time working together to build this last Friday. It does seem unfair that it has been destroyed. Do you have ideas about what to do?”

Vicente suggests, “I know! We can make it over again and then you can write a sign that says, ‘Keep Out. This is OUR fort.'” The other children agree.

Mr. Ravi says, “It sounds like you have a plan to rebuild and protect your project. I know that Marcos can write words...
and likes to make signs. Why don’t you ask him if he would be willing to make the sign you need?” The children agree with this idea, and Mr. Ravi accompanies them to talk to Marcos, who sits alone on the stairs. “This is going to take a lot of teamwork,” comments Mr. Ravi.

“Yes, but we’re getting really good at teamwork,” responds Vicente confidently.

This experience illustrates what is referred to in the California Preschool Curriculum Framework as a teachable moment. It was not planned, and the teacher had no way of knowing that it was going to occur. It was a spontaneous encounter, but when planning at an earlier time, the teacher had wondered whether one like it would occur and had considered how he would respond in such a moment. Having in mind how to respond to various situations, especially moments of conflict or misunderstanding, emerges from the reflective curriculum planning that early childhood teachers do. It also allows the teacher to think about how to include a child who was not participating with other children and may not have had the social skills to join the group on his own. Knowledge of group dynamics helped the teacher be aware of opportunities to connect Marcos with his peers.

Here is another example of how a teacher is supporting learning. In this classroom, the children speak four different languages.

Vignette

All the children are playing outdoors, and the teachers have set up a board with openings in different shapes (e.g., circle, square, triangle, rectangle). Jasmine, a child who speaks Farsi, is looking toward the board and appears interested. Mr. Li gestures to Jasmine to come closer and picks up a beanbag. He models for Jasmine how to throw the beanbag toward the board at the different openings. While he throws the beanbag with an underhand motion, he simultaneously says, “Look, Jasmine, I swing my arm and throw the beanbag.” Mr. Li repeats the physical action several times while simultaneously describing his actions. He then encourages Jasmine to try it. When Jasmine picks up the beanbag, Mr. Li smiles and repeats, “Swing your arm and throw. That’s the way to do it, Jasmine!”

This type of reflective curriculum planning may not show up in daily or weekly posted written plans. Through planning, teachers are able to anticipate interactions and conversations in which they may help children think about how to solve a problem or resolve a dispute, or support children in learning a new language. Early childhood curriculum includes principles and approaches for how teachers can support young children in learning English, when their home language is not English (CDE 2010a, 177–223.)

Early childhood curriculum also includes principles and approaches for intervening when conflicts between children arise (CDE 2010a, 67–68.) Some of what teachers do to plan such curriculum is written into the daily or weekly plans, but much of it occurs during teachable moments, in which teachers already have in mind a clear plan for what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. Even so, the moments that teachers apply their plans are not known to them in advance. The principles and approaches addressed in the frameworks necessarily go beyond a series of planned activities.

For Example:

A teacher watches an infant who is on the verge of being able to crawl. The child focuses her gaze on a desired yet distant object and attempts to move toward it. In spite of her effort, she barely budges. The teacher watches the infant’s
expression of delight change to a frown and tears welling up in the baby’s eyes. The teacher knows to move closer to the child and offer words of encouragement. The teacher’s attentive presence, calm voice, and look of encouragement reassure the child, help her focus her attention, and prompt her to sustain her efforts. Feeling connected with the teacher and emotionally secure, the child is ready to try again, moves forward on all fours, and looks at the teacher with an expression of glee and surprise.[3]

These examples illustrate how teachers support children in negotiating projects, in building language skills, or in trying a challenging physical movement. Such examples are integral to daily life in an early childhood education and care setting. Teachers keep in mind concepts and skills described in the foundations and apply strategies and approaches presented in the frameworks, as they engage in interactions and conversations that occur within unplanned yet curriculum-rich teachable moments. In the two preceding examples the teachers supported children’s learning in an intentional way, yet their responses and strategies were not spelled out ahead of time in their written plans. Nevertheless, the teachers know that such interactions and conversations are important components of the curriculum in early childhood settings.[4]

References

[1] California Preschool Program Guidelines by the California Department of Education is used with permission
[2] California Preschool Program Guidelines by the California Department of Education is used with permission
[3] California Preschool Program Guidelines by the California Department of Education is used with permission
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