Child-Directed Learning Through Inquiry

The terms child-directed and inquiry have been buzz-words in the early childhood education field for many years. Many schools and practitioners have turned away from flashcards and didactic teaching methods, and are leaning heavily on the works of early childhood education theorists such as Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget. What these theorists discovered is that children learn in social contexts, and through direct experiences. So, how does this translate into the early childhood education classroom? One former preschool director and teacher we consulted mentioned that learning through inquiry involves facilitating learning by asking the children questions which focus children’s attention on methods for gathering information, providing materials to support exploration, and playing the role of joint participant.

Joint participation means that teachers can often be heard stating, “How can we find out?” “I don’t know; how could we solve this?” Joint participation does not resemble a free-wheeling, hands-off approach to instruction, however. Teachers engage in direct and indirect instruction to teach children *how* to obtain information, and how they can utilize tools to gather information. Through this method, educators are teaching the life-long skill of learning strategies that can be transferred to other situations. Joint participation provides the foundation for divergent and critical thinking skills that are required throughout life.

Children, and adults, will explore subjects that are of natural interest to them. Research further suggests that children will more likely retain information gleaned from learning experiences when the affective domain, or interest, of the child is engaged. (Kuhara-Kojima, 1991). Acquisition of knowledge deepens when children already have prior knowledge about a subject. The brain acts as a repository of information gleaned from prior experiences, and when children have the opportunity to explore areas of interest, new information is more easily transferred to working memory, and long-term memory. (Bailey, B., 2011). Domains such as motor development, mathematical thinking, and social-emotional skills are all fostered through this “project” approach to learning. These areas of development are supported via authentic experiences, and provide meaning for our children!

The early childhood setting supports children in their quest, as the environment is designed so that explorations can be repeated, as children learn best through repetition of experiences. In the classroom, this will resemble the sensory bin filled with loose materials, measuring scoops, or balance scales. Early literacy pokes its head in through documentation of findings, drawings, and conversations with peers and teachers. (Dyasi, 2005). The next time you are in your child’s classroom, take note of the drawings adorning the walls, conversation webs, and the items located in the classroom. Conversation webs, charts/graphs, and drawings are representations of constructed knowledge. Items found in the classroom are the tools that our children use at Work Time and play a valuable part in the construction of knowledge! Learning at the Weekday School is a busy and hands-on process!

Sources:

Bailey, B. (2011). *Creating the school family.* Oviedo, Fl:Loving Guidance, Inc.

Dyasi, H. (2005). *What children gain by learning through inquiry.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

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