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Social Foundations of Early Care and Education – ECE 210

May 25th, 2021

EC Advocacy Paper

Due to the need for both parents to work to support their family, the number of children attending daycare centers has grown over the last several years. The imminent need for childcare services caused this field of business to grow significantly, resulting in non-prepared professionals opening and running childcare centers. Regardless of any best intentions they might have, most providers or directors (both words will be used interchangeably in this paper) of daycare centers do not have the knowledge on best practices for teaching young children and planning curriculum. Some refer to third party programs that offer a generic curriculum which often have little to do with children's interests and learning needs and styles. Not only the curriculum is generic, but also filled with worksheets activities that are not developmentally appropriate and that fail to offer meaningful learning experiences to our children. Children are being affected the most because their interests and learning needs might not be met by a one-size-fits-all curriculum. For instance, a child that has some sort of developmental delay most likely will not benefit from the approach the generic curriculum offers. This child needs the attention of an intentional teacher who will observe him/her closely to develop a successful learning strategy adapted exclusively for his/her needs. Children are the future of our society, and early learning experiences influence lifelong learning. Best practices in early childhood learning can set the scene for a successful and healthy emotional and social adult life.

Despite the fact most providers and professionals working in daycare and family-based centers do not hold a teaching degree, they still must have knowledge of how young children learn and know the meaning of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP for short). Copple and Bredekamp (2006) state that “Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) means teaching children in ways that meet children where they are, as individuals and as a group; and help each child reach challenging and achievable goals that contribute to his or her ongoing development and learning” (p.3). Young children learn best through hands-on experiences as well as by socialization, including scaffolding when needed. As mentioned before, many early childhood center providers might find easier to select a pre-made curriculum instead of intentionally observing children’s interactions with others and the environment, to plan learning experiences accordingly. As the leaders responsible for deciding on the practices adopted by the center, childcare center providers need to be familiar with DAPs and have the skills necessary to put these practices into action. They must also encourage their team to do the same and keep parents informed and involved as parental support is a key factor in the success of any early childhood curriculum. Even though it might take some time to implement DAP into their programs, this action needs to start being taken now. Providers can start small, educating themselves and parents on the subject, while implementing small but effective changes in their approach to young children teaching practices.

While many of us have memories of learning in preschool by using dittos and worksheets, recent research has stated time and again the disadvantages for young children of learning by these methods. For instance, in the article “The Worksheet Dilemma: Benefits of Play-Based Curricula”, the assistant professor Sue Grossman states that worksheets and workbooks in early childhood settings are not beneficial for learning. In fact, they could add stress and cause harm to the self-

esteem of those children who do not yet succeed at paper and pen tasks. The author describes that toddlers and preschoolers are still in the pre-operational stage and need concrete materials and hands-on experiences in order to make real connections with abstract concepts. In addition, Grossman gives suggestions on how to give parents feedback on their children's progress, for instance by creating a parents' newsletter, an individual child portfolio and sharing observations about the children with parents. I believe this article is important because it helps to debunk the misconception amongst childcare setting providers that play-based curriculum is not effective in helping children achieve learning milestones. It can also be used as a source of information for parents and families, the first teachers of every child, who might also carry misconceptions about DAPs.

Another article that sheds light on DAP guidelines is "Intentionality in Action: A Strategy That Benefits Preschoolers and Teachers". The authors Gronlund and Stewart present the techniques used in planning and teaching intentional curriculum. The article points out that "intentionality" is key in teaching young children, as well as in supporting staff's professional knowledge. Intentional teachers set children up for success when presenting them with challenges and scaffolding as needed (as well as materials), allowing children to make decisions in concern to their learning process. A specific example of intentional teaching mentioned in the article is the "Golden Ticket". Teachers noticed that given the choice, students would go over and over to the same centers, not risking something different. The "Golden Ticket" directed students to new centers and paired them with peers they did not usually interacted with. This DAP gave students the chance to practice new skills strengthening their self-confidence, and the ability to socialize with different groups of friends, developing new interests. Teachers also benefited from this approach in their own meetings, when they had the chance to visit each other's classrooms,

brainstorming ideas for new centers and ways to implement best practices in their teaching. This article gives great insight on strategies that can be used by childcare professionals on how to plan developmentally appropriate experiences for young children, as well as to keep them engaged in their learning process.

My small advocacy action would start with gathering as much information as possible about DAP and its benefits, educating myself first before I could spread the message. Next, I would schedule a meeting with the childcare service provider, since she is the person who makes the decisions regarding the curriculum that is used in the daycare. With the help of an informative and interactive power point presentation, I would present the information using formal and non-formal sources (i.e. news articles, videos, academic journals). It is possible that her initial reaction would be to offer some resistance. Firstly, because she has been doing things a certain way for a long time and secondly, she might worry about parents expectations and how to display children's learning progress. In our meeting, we could openly discuss these issues and I would be able to collect feedback from her and learn more about limitations that would prevent us from implementing DAPs. If she receives the information well, working together we could brainstorm ways that could be adapted to better implement these practices in the daycare center. Next, we could analyze the current curriculum to identify aspects that have been working and ones that have not been. In addition, we would carefully observe children's interests and backgrounds, and the results of these observations would be the main guide for curriculum planning.

As my large advocacy action, I would suggest to the program provider that we face the roadblock parents could impose to the curriculum changes. As part of the misconceptions about DAPs, parents might believe that children cannot learn without worksheets and that there is no other way to gauge children's learning. This is especially true in private settings, where parents

invest hard-earned money in their children's education and want to see the results of this investment. I would suggest that we start a social media campaign on the program's social media page. On the page we would post bits of information from different sources (e.g. blogs, scientific research), discussing the benefits of developmentally appropriate practices for a preschool classroom. We would also address the common misconceptions about this approach (e.g. children will not be ready for kindergarten without worksheets). As an alternative for parents who do not have social media accounts, we could send parents an informative newsletter containing some of the info that had already been posted online. After introducing these new ideas and learning techniques, we could schedule a meeting with parents to discuss their concerns or suggestions.

This topic is important to me because I experience daily, the disadvantages of using worksheets and dittos. In the preschool classroom I work, I observe that some students can learn from the worksheets. However, the rest of the students who do not have the same level of maturity or have different needs, fail to achieve the same outcomes. During this semester, I have been learning about developmentally appropriate practices and the multitude of learning experiences it can provide to each student. DAP is about meeting the student where he/she is, observing him/her and learning about their interests, then tailoring the learning goals accordingly. DAP helps children to develop critical thinking as well as creative thinking, skills that will be beneficial down the line in their academic lives. Developmentally appropriate practices allow students to be hands-on as well as minds-on and include learning goals in many subjects such as math, science, social studies, English, and arts. It also teaches children self-regulation skills as well as social skills. This topic impacts me as an early childhood educator because it provides me with knowledge and motivates me to be a responsive teacher, respecting each of my students' individuality. Being the ones most affected by using worksheets, they need help to recognize their inner capacity and value. I want to

aid them in becoming ready for Kindergarten: not just academically, but most importantly, emotionally.

References

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