

Thoughts on Teaching Kindergarten

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“We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference,
ignore the small daily differences we can make which,
over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee.”

Marian Wright Edelman

As the gateway to formal education, kindergarten is a crucial year when attitudes toward school and academic foundations are established. Kindergarten presents both an academic and social challenge to children. In class, kindergarteners become members of a large, often disparate group and must learn not only to negotiate their individual needs but also to contribute to the smooth functioning of a “community of learners” (228). As a kindergarten teacher, I aim to create a nurturing and stimulating environment that will capitalize on students’ natural inquisitiveness, foster positive self-concepts, provide the structure for smooth interpersonal dynamics, and create a favorable attitude toward learning both at school and at home.

Building on my previous teaching experiences and recent decade as a preschool director, I intend to incorporate learning through play, to implement a constructivist approach, and to build on my students’ innate interests and motivations. I also aim to be sensitive to undiagnosed learning challenges in order to advocate for early student services. Overall, I hope to share my enthusiasm for learning and school culture as well as my belief that positive classroom and interpersonal dynamics are the foundation for healthy and supportive communities.

Kindergarten instruction addresses both cognitive and social learning and is the student’s introduction to the expectations and routines of the culture of

formalized schooling. Kindergarten academics establish the framework for future learning across the content areas and in daily life. Instruction focuses on essential literacy and reading skills, basic math concepts, scientific inquiry, and the function of communities in classrooms and the greater world. In tandem with content knowledge, social learning (76) is a crucial element of kindergarten instruction. Social goals such as turn taking, active listening, and taking the perspective of others all facilitate social dynamics within a classroom, minimize disruption and loss of instructional time, and ultimately contribute to student motivation (305).

The Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs) codify kindergarten's dual focus on social skills and academic content. For example, the English kindergarten SOLs include explicit social skills such as "the student will.... a) begin to follow implicit rules for conversation, including taking turns and staying on topic" and "c) begin to use voice level, phrasing, and intonation appropriate for language situation" (English K.3.a, K.3.c). The kindergarten History and Social Studies standards also emphasize these important attributes, stating that "the student will demonstrate that being a good citizen involves a) taking turns and sharing,... d) following rules and understanding the consequences of breaking rules, [and] e) practicing honesty, self-control, and kindness to others" (Civics K.8). Even the kindergarten Science SOLs address the practical social skills needed to forge a

strong classroom community, stating that “the student will investigate and understand simple patterns in his/her daily life... includ[ing] d) home and school routines” (Science K.8.d). These SOL citations underscore the critical social emotional learning that occurs alongside academic instruction in a kindergarten classroom. Kindergarteners must learn to assume a constructive role in a classroom team and that good manners and mutual respect are necessary to foster a positive classroom learning environment.

Still in Piaget’s preoperational stage of development (38), kindergarteners are egocentric and have difficulty in taking the perspective of others (75). In terms of moral development, they are operating at Piaget’s stage of external morality (81) and at Kohlberg’s preconventional stage of moral reasoning (83). This age group faces the social and emotional challenges of subverting their individual needs to the overall well-being of their kindergarten class. As a result, social problem solving is a major focus as students learn to “observe and interpret social cues, identify [group] goals, generate strategies, [and then] implement and evaluate the strategies” (76). The teacher plays a key role by modeling respect and manners, scaffolding self-regulation, and providing opportunities for social and emotional growth (179). In accordance with Social Cognitive Theory, teachers “should clearly specify the behaviors [they] will reinforce so students can adapt their

behavior accordingly, and ... should provide students with clear feedback so they know what behaviors have been reinforced” (180). Teacher role playing of dispute resolution is one means to demonstrate appropriate behaviors.

Cognitively, kindergarteners are dominated by perception and have the pre-operational tendency of centration, that is, “the tendency to focus on the most perceptually obvious aspect” of a topic (38). Kindergarteners have also progressed beyond early language development and are now refining their grammar and expanding their vocabulary (52). Some advanced students may be entering Piaget’s concrete operational stage (39) and will have a more logical approach to classroom activities. Concrete, hands-on experiences are developmentally appropriate for kindergarteners and these authentic, interesting connections make activities meaningful and thus more memorable (#28). Kindergarteners benefit from scaffolding (i.e., support) from peers as well as adults in their zone of proximal development (47) in order to advance in their cognitive and social development. In addition, they are transitioning from Erikson’s Initiative vs. Guilt to his Industry vs. Inferiority stage and therefore will be demonstrating increased autonomy and participation in the classroom routines and academics (68). As described below in the classroom examples, social interactions in small group investigations advance these development objectives.

Kindergarteners learn best in a play-based, secure, and warm environment. In a “community of caring and trust” (354), students are conditioned to feel positively toward school through genuine connections with the teacher and productive collaborations with peers (165). Piaget and Vygotsky both emphasize the need for hands-on investigations of authentic real world subjects (233). Although recently pushed aside in many classrooms to make room for more traditional academic approaches, play is fundamental to this exploration and should be a cornerstone of kindergarten instruction. Play-based kindergartens support constructivist learning and span all subject areas.

The American Association of Pediatrics states that “play is integral to the academic environment. It ensures that the school setting attends to the social and emotional development of children as well as their cognitive development. It has been shown to help children adjust to the school setting and even to enhance children’s learning readiness, learning behaviors, and problem-solving skills” (Ginsberg, p. 83). Specifically, the fine motor and literacy corner encompasses book-making (language arts), an easel allows artistic expression of student knowledge across the curriculum, dramatic play (e.g., restaurant, airport, hospital) supports social studies and oral language standards, and the sensory table,

manipulatives, and block corner construction areas address math, science, and oral literacy objectives.

Kindergarten classroom instruction must also be flexible enough to address the broad range of learning styles proposed by Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (127). In today's high-stakes testing environment, students are often sedentary and recipients of an "alarming increase in didactic instruction and inappropriate testing" (Miller and Almon, p. 16). Kindergarten learning can be active and incorporate kinesthetic elements in conjunction with cognitive learning. For example, the multiple versions of the "Active Alphabet" activity (Wisniewski & Keith) succeed in creating associations (#28) between gross motor skills and cognitive knowledge: "S is for Stand, T is for Twist". For naturalistic learners, an alphabet treasure hunt is a hands-on experience that serves to expand learning beyond the classroom. Given kindergarteners' limited attentional capacities, an active approach with shorter lessons limits cognitive load (200) and aids retention.

Direct instruction, guided discovery, and cooperative learning are all appropriate instructional methods in kindergarten; lecture-discussion does not suit the attentional capacity and development level of this age group. Kindergarten academics are characterized by a focus on essential literacy and mathematics skills,

incorporation of play, and the use of language to learn content (53). Direct instruction is useful in teaching specific literacy skills such as phonemic awareness (Lemlech, p. 199) and math fundamentals such as numbers and operations (Lemlech, p. 245). An example of direct instruction would be a teacher demonstration of initial consonants, then structured practice with student suggestions of relevant examples, followed by guided practice in small groups (409-412).

Direct instruction is integrated with guided discovery and cooperative learning in project-based learning units that span the curriculum (Katz & Chard). Tailored to the unique interests of individual kindergarten classes, Project Approach units include “A Study of Bones,” “School Bus Project,” and “The Bug Project” (projectapproach.org). Project-based learning is consistent with Vygotsky’s theory of development due to its use of authentic materials, language interactions, the social context of the children’s interaction in both large and small groups, and the modeling of the teacher (46).

Groundhog Day is a successful Project Approach unit I have used that specifically addresses a kindergarten science standard: “The student will investigate and understand that shadows occur when light is blocked by an object” (K.7). The unit utilizes a text set of fiction and nonfiction selections about

shadows, groundhogs, and hibernation. In one of its activities, the teacher uses a collection of classroom objects, a flashlight, and available sunlight to lead a large group demonstration and discussion about which items cast the darkest shadows. As each object is tested, the teacher prompts the students to offer predictions about the strength of the shadows. The teacher concludes the large group session by soliciting student input about what specific characteristics (e.g., opaque, translucent, transparent) affect shadow strength. The students then break into small groups to investigate a teacher-prepared collection of everyday objects that vary by shadow characteristics and difficulty of prediction. The class later reconvenes in a large group where students are invited to present objects for testing and to state their group's thinking and predictions. After testing these predictions, objects are labeled and classified in a central classroom display. The teacher concludes the lesson with reading a shared book about shadows.

My authoritative classroom management style (64) will support my teaching goals of stoking students' innate interest in school and fostering resilience (116). I aim to create a secure environment with predictable rules and routines, high expectations, consistent feedback, and genuine connections and caring. Rules will be logical, easily understood by students, stated positively, and teacher defined (359). Particularly at the start of the year, I envision walking through procedures

and explaining rules in order to create clear expectations for the learning environment.

In my kindergarten classroom, I intend to build on successful structures from my preschool experience. Environmental print with icon imagery will be used on schedules, signage, and bulletin boards in order to scaffold existing knowledge, include all ability levels, and assist in retention. Musical antecedents for classroom transitions will serve as a countdown timer and as a sensory cue to an impending activity shift. “Boogie Shoes” was a recent favorite signal for clean up before the end-of-day read-aloud. Visual timers (e.g., hour glasses and stoplight-colored time trackers) and five-minute warnings will also assist kindergarteners’ time management skills and transitions. A job chart with defined roles will personalize individual responsibilities and spread the burden from the teacher to the larger classroom community. Overall, I intend to create a safe, vibrant, and dynamic classroom where physical changes in décor and room organization signal shifts in units of study, stimulate creativity and curiosity in students, and incorporate and honor children’s art and academic work.

I believe in positive reinforcement of student behavior and creating a motivating climate of developmentally appropriate expectations (169). For example, I believe that movement and short lessons are crucial for maintaining the

attention of kindergarteners. Restless children are not a classroom discipline issue but a natural kindergarten characteristic that can be addressed by building movement into the daily curriculum. I believe that the common practice of reducing recess time for fidgety kindergarteners is unproductive. I also reject the public displays of behavior charts, instead favoring private desktop behavior assessments as a means to maintain respect in the classroom environment and to optimize motivation.

Constructivist learning fosters intrinsic motivation by providing students with authentic, interesting experiences. Foisting subjects onto students without context and established interest is likely to be unproductive. A necessary prerequisite for any kindergarten lesson plan, intrinsic motivation is nurtured by experiences that “present a challenge,... promote learners’ feelings of autonomy,... evoke curiosity, ... [and] involve creativity and fantasy” (285). For example, a lesson on Virginia Science standard K.3 on magnets resonates for students as they use magnets to create art (moving paint-covered magnet balls across paper), investigate the magnetism of everyday objects (sand table exploration), and construct buildings using Magna-tile blocks. These playful investigations of magnets increase student motivation and provide real-life experiences that students

can use in academic discussions and teachers can use as a base for future instruction.

The four major theories of motivation (286) all play a role in the kindergarten classroom and can be used interchangeably to address the diverse needs of a given class. My natural teaching approach has been humanistic, in that I attempt to nurture the innate interests of individual students and convey my unconditional positive regard (288) for every class member. I intend to cultivate a mastery-focused environment (320) and forge a cohesive team within the class. This approach also fits with the sociocultural view of motivation that “a learning environment can provide a form of motivational scaffolding that results in learners’ engaging in activities that they would not do on their own” (288). For example, in a literacy-focused classroom, reluctant readers may be motivated to read if drawn into the general classroom excitement of a unit investigating multicultural interpretations of the Cinderella tale or prankster animal fables.

Measurements of academic and behavioral objectives in kindergarten include both formal and informal assessments such as checklists and rating scales, running records for reading, and portfolios to track skill improvement and illustrate content area knowledge. Portfolios can be integrated into instruction and can include writing samples, alphabet identification and math skill inventories, art

samples, and photographs of small group projects and individual construction projects. Involving kindergarteners in their own portfolio creation can heighten metacognition (450). For example, an “All About Me” artifact from the beginning, midpoint, and end of the school year might include name, date, and a writing topic selected by each child. Such artifacts document fine motor and letter formation skills, progress in inventive spelling, and growth in artistic representations.

Checklists and rating scales can draw from both the students’ written and oral performances. Other non-academic factors that affect school performance should be documented throughout the kindergarten year. These assessment areas include observations of speech and language abilities, fine and large motor skills, sensory processing issues, and visual and auditory performance. Kindergarten assessment is generally formative rather than summative and is best achieved through use of an OPIE-type model of pre-assessment followed by instruction and then evaluation (#1). Formal diagnostic testing in reading skills and math is a crucial element in this entry year and is generally coordinated by school-based curriculum coordinators (Lemlech, p. 159).

I believe that diversity of cultural experience and knowledge can only be addressed through flexibility in approach and curiosity of mind. I aim to avoid rigidity and to create a responsive curriculum to engage each year’s unique

community of students. As a reflective practitioner, I welcome input from colleagues and supervisors and hope to be placed in a collaborative community of teachers where we brainstorm and problem-solve together. Ideally, I would like to draw on the experience and insight of a mentor.

For example, I remain profoundly ambivalent about within-class homogeneous ability groupings and will look to my colleagues for perspective and experience. Ability groupings are frequently used for development of reading skills but are controversial in that they are believed to impact the social and emotional learning critical in this first year of school (Tach & Farkas, p. 1053). While emphatically wishing to avoid the stigmatization associated with tracking, I feel the urgency to address literacy deficits. Thus, consultation and reflection are vital before making any decision about this grouping strategy in my future classroom.

Regardless of my future school structure, I naturally tend to be a highly self-critical individual and believe that this characteristic should serve me well in my classroom role. I plan to rework lesson plans after their conclusion and to keep my overarching goal in mind: to nurture a positive learning experience for the individual students in my class and to be guided by the idea that “students’ emotional reactions resulting from their experiences in schools are among the most

important outcomes of schooling” (165). I understand that, as in Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory of development (63), a teacher plays only one of many roles in the education and life of a student. Nonetheless, I believe that a caring and committed teacher can positively affect the resiliency, happiness, and motivation of any student. I aim to fulfill that role for my students.

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