

Masters Unit Understanding Learners and Learning January 2007

How does my planning affect the learning of the children in my class?

By Nina Clayton

The purpose of this writing is to try to clarify the learning theories that I use, as well as to answer questions about how I can best support the children in my class through clarification of what I believe in. Teachers need to inform their own learning theory (Whitehead, 1989) in order to be a good teacher:

“...It makes no sense to decide how one is going to teach, before one has made some study of how people learn.” (Sotto, 1994, p.29)

There is much written about learning theories and the gaps that occur between the research findings of psychologists and the practices of teachers. Therefore, as a classroom teacher, it is important to have some knowledge of the basic findings of traditional and contemporary psychologists to support my work. This knowledge will also support my own theory of learning.

Learning theories and their relation to my work as a teacher

There are numerous learning theories. Many can be grouped into families and it seems the most recent theories, expand on or are stimulated by the older theories. Piaget's (1896-1980) work has interested many for years. He believed children pass through certain stages of development and a child cannot operate at these later stages, before passing, in their own good time, through the earlier ones. Children will naturally pass through the stages with little teacher intervention. Teachers would then wait for children to be ready for the next stage. From experience, I know that children are all at different stages and waiting for others to pass certain milestones would be detrimental to the learning of some children. I agree that children cannot learn if the work is at an inappropriate level and the planning is not based on what a child already knows. Children are at different developmental stages and these need to be addressed in order that a child can learn.

“It was believed that Piaget diminished the role of the teacher with his emphasis on the child as an individual explorer of the world, discovering and making sense of new situations through exploration and self-directed problem solving.” Fisher (2004)

Teachers in the 1960's and 1970's started to believe that children were encouraged to 'do as they please'. Nowadays, when we talk of self-directed play and discovery, not unlike Piaget's ideas, often the response from many of my colleagues is sceptical. They believe the best way to get what we want children to learn, is to stand at the front of the class and offer, by verbally giving or writing, the information they need. This goes against my belief and experience of how children learn.

'Natural unfoldment' or 'self-actualisation' theory as described by Bigg & Shermis (2004) is closely linked with the traditional Interactionists theory of learning. Natural unfoldment theory stems from the idea that all people are good and at the same time active in relation to their environment. This resonates with my belief that all children are free and it is their own responsibility and choice to learn. Rousseau's (1746-1827) position was that everything in nature is good, so humans are too. A bad social environment could make bad human beings. As I work in a deprived area where many of the children live in poor conditions and are surrounded by inappropriate role models, it is essential their classroom environment is safe, secure, consistent and clean. The classroom environment needs to be a suitable place to learn. I expect the classroom environment to belong to the children. It is not 'my' classroom, it is theirs too. The children are apart of how the classroom is maintained, they choose what displays are made and where equipment is kept. This not only gives them a sense of belonging but helps them respect their environment.

Vygotsky (1962) offered a different view for the role of a teacher. He saw our job was to extend a child's learning by the right intervention at the right time. His work includes the idea of zones of proximal development and 'scaffolding' learning.

Behaviourists believe that we can only say how a person learns from how they behave; we cannot say what is going on inside someone's head.

After reading some of the ideas and research carried out by both traditional and modern theorists, it is difficult to believe in and follow the work of just one set of ideas. The principles laid out by Bruce (1987) seem to pick out the most important ways in which a child learns and offers them in a clear table. The 10

principles include what I believe to be a valuable framework for the development of good teaching practice. They have clearly arisen from the work of people who believe children are at the centre of their own thinking.

My research

Using an action research model, I have been able to support my own learning in addressing the question in the title. Action research allows for improvement of practice and this is what I strive for as a teacher of children. If I continue to bring out the same planning each year and teach the same topics, how would this benefit me as a teacher or learner? All teachers should be learners as well, learning from their students to improve their own teaching knowledge and techniques. The model of action research allows me to improve and to be involved. It encourages me to spend less time planning and acting and more time observing and using a 'self-reflective' cycle. Through exploring and enquiring I can challenge my beliefs and gain new insights to improve my practice.

'How we (as teachers), perceive a human being and what they mean to us, reflects on how we teach.' (Bigg & Shermis, 2004, p14). I feel this is fundamental for the way I teach. I see the children in my class as equals who should be given the same opportunities. The ongoing debate of nature or nurture should not effect how I treat these children. They will have had different experiences of life up until now but as individuals, they should be given the same opportunities to experience and develop as learners. Fisher (2002, p.3) outlines the findings of the Carnegie Corporation report. It concludes that it is imperative that teachers offer experiences sensitive to the needs of the children and appropriate to their development. The results of school experiences stay with children forever.

How I perceive and value the children in my class is reflected in numerous ways, including the most obvious:

- What I plan for them,
- How I organise the classroom,
- How I organise routines,
- My manner,
- The relationships I hold with them,
- The opportunities I arrange for them,
- The behavioural boundaries I set.

Rousseau (Bigg & Shermis, 2004, p.32) believed children learn best when working close to nature. He discusses how a boy in the country doesn't need to go to a false environment like a school to learn how to speak. His speaking skills will grow and improve by talking with local people. Rousseau goes on to say that we should set up, as much as possible, settings and scenarios in city schools to reflect what nature has in the country. I have always tried hard to do exactly this within my classroom. The outside area is used as an extension for learning. I plan with relevant activities that the children can relate to. I allow the boys to play fight outside, (against the wishes of my colleagues). However I believe boys (and some girls) needs to let off steam and be rough and tumble. We have a school policy for the children not to do 'hand-stands' as their have been accidents in the past. Often we are told not to allow the children onto the grass because it is wet and slippery. I find this ludicrous; how will children ever know what a slippery surface is unless they experience it? The children are not allowed to climb in the bushes for fear of more accidents. Again I do not understand this restriction. With some warnings given to the children of what might happen and basic safety rules, surely the children can experience their physical capabilities and explore science? I heard recently that a head-teacher banned his children from going out in the snow because it would be dangerous! They all had to watch the snow fall from the window and have 'wet playtime' activities instead.

At present, I am responsible for the development and learning of thirty Year 1 children. There is one statemented child who has 1:1 adult support for the majority of the school week. This adult often supports the other children on the table she works. I also have a general LSA who takes small groups of children out of the class for phonic work every morning.

With such a minimal amount of adult support and with a large number of small children I am finding it very challenging to keep them all involved and on task, learning. All but one or two children are below the National average for their age in numeracy, writing and reading. The majority are on 'P levels' and a handful have individual target plans. These children need more than I can physically and emotionally give them. I often feel I am failing them.

After identifying this problem I asked myself the following questions: How can I teach, encourage and inspire these children to learn when they are individuals motivated by different things? We all learn differently. They

all have different learning styles. How will I ever get to know all 30 children? How will I be able to plan appropriately for each child's developmental stage?

Is this a problem I face or a challenge to overcome? In the 6 years I have been teaching children in this country I have always been able to get to know the children I work with and learn about them. With a combination of understanding what motivates them and what they already know, I have been able to move their learning forward. Fisher (2002), states that it is imperative that learning starts from the child. That we build upon what they already know and challenge their learning within the zone of proximal development. The large class I am faced with at present is causing the problem. I cannot get to know all these children; there is not enough time to give each of these children the attention they deserve. Time is always a factor that teachers are up against. The curriculum states what we are supposed to cover and we have to deliver this in limited time.

“For teachers not only like right answers, they like them right away. If a child can't correct his mistake immediately, someone else will correct it for him” (Holt, 1994, p.8)

What is expected of us and the outside pressures is something that all teachers are faced with. I often find myself saying to myself, 'hurry up' as the child is stuttering as he tries to tell me the correct answer. I want to give them the answers so the class doesn't lose interest and pace. I know this is wrong and children need to first process the language of what it is I am asking, then deduce what the answer might be and finally, realise how to put their answer into a comprehensible sentence. This all takes time for a child. How can we get around this problem? Is there an answer to my question? Will something have to give? Less P.E? Less music? What subject is not important? Instead of feeling defeated I need to address these problems and support the children I teach to the best of my capabilities.

I need to motivate the children in order that they learn. I do not have the time to get to know them so I will try to inspire them through my exciting plans! Both Froebel and Montessori believed that children learn best from self – directed activity, which is linked to intrinsic motivation (Bennett, Wood, Rogers, 1997, p. 2). After reading Sotro (1994) I realised this may not be the case. His research showed that children are already motivated to learn. I need not waste time trying to motivate them. He believes we just need to find out, not what they want to learn, but how they want to learn. We are given a curriculum framework to work from, but we are not told how to deliver it. This is what makes us all individual teachers and may be the answer to my question about limited time.

Assessing their prior knowledge when beginning a new topic is always the first thing I do. What I think they already know is often completely different to what they do know. What they remember from last year's topic is often different to what I thought they would remember. For example they remembered the term 'nocturnal animals' but they couldn't name any, and would say their favourite animals instead!

When writing medium term plans it is important I hold an awareness that all children learn differently and at different rates. Some children enjoy being challenged and even though they cannot achieve the task straight away they continue to persevere until they succeed. They know they will reach their goal. Whereas other children like to know that they will be able to complete a task with no trouble. One child I can think of will take one look at an activity and stomp off if he believes that he would not be able to do it. I can fully understand this, as a learner myself, I have no confidence in my own abilities and need to be sure that I could do what was asked of me before I even begin. We have a saying in the classroom; to “have a go, just try your best.” I want to encourage my children to be good at learning and have the skills to persevere and work through problems. The learning skills taught at school is what my children will take with them throughout their life.

I teach the children in my class to realise there is not just one way which we can learn. Everyone has a preferred learning style and it is up to teachers to offer children the opportunity of as many different ways of learning as possible. Teaching an awareness of different learning styles is important to a child's understanding of how they can learn best. Our school follows the work of Claxton (2002) and his theory of Building Learning Power (BLP). Claxton's ideas enable children to work in a variety of different ways. The children in my class are familiar with a simplified version of Claxton's terminology and ways of learning. BLP helps us decide:

- What it takes to be a good learner.
- Develops an appetite and ability to learn in different ways.
- Shifts responsibility from the teacher to the learner.
- Engages teachers and children creatively as researchers in learning.

- Establishes habits of lifelong learning.
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A wall display of a wise old owl helps me to indicate to the children all the different BLP ways of learning. When we have a problem we look to wise old owl to help us decide how to solve it.

Holt (1994) talks about how we should make children less and less dependent on us and allow them to find out things for themselves. The following two examples of my work over the last few weeks show how beneficial this concept has been for the children in my class.

A different way of delivering the curriculum - Example 1

Until the theatre group 'Travelling Light' came to visit I was still feeling that the children in my class were not learning to the best of their abilities. On the fourth week of term Travelling Light performed for us the story of 'Papa Please get the moon for me' by Eric Carle. I abandoned all my planning for literacy and numeracy this week and decided to follow my heart and the enthusiasm of the children. We spent a whole week studying, learning enjoying and questioning the story of 'Papa please get the moon for me.' It was such an inspiring, uplifting and very enjoyable week. It lifted my spirits and it proved to me that these children can learn, even in such a large class. The children covered all subjects within this story topic based week including:

- Science- the cycle of the moon, the positions, movements and distances of the earth, moon and sun.
- Numeracy- Time: days in a week, month, months in a year. Measures: ladder lengths, heights of mountains.
- Literacy- character descriptions, voice intonation, writing, retelling, interpreting into own language, firing imaginations.
- P.S.H.E- team work, sharing, thinking of feelings/moods, challenges.

Every subject was covered. Every child learnt something that they will remember. The video clip is of 3 children who chose to retell the story themselves. They had no adult direction, they just wanted to perform. They had rehearsed together for about 10 minutes during a choosing time session (on day 4) in the school hall. They found their own props and worked together, taking it in turns to retell the, now, familiar story. One of the children had recently been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and usually found it very difficult to work in a team.

It seems the key to solving part of my problem is to allow the children to lead their own learning. By giving them the power they were able to solve questions and dilemmas, they worked by themselves and with others. I could see them grow as individuals and learn about issues I could never have predicted or planned for.

As they proved to me that they could learn when given the opportunity I now needed to give them more opportunities. I needed to change the way I plan. I can no longer generalize about the three differentiated levels I would normally plan for or compartmentalized subjects. My medium term objectives are in place but I now should plan for a maximum of three days at a time. This will allow the children to show me what they already know, what they need to learn, what they want to learn and how they want to learn it

A different way of delivering the curriculum - Example 2

Last year, I taught the story of the 'Elves and the Shoemaker'. I followed the ideas set out by the story making project. It was very successful and the children enjoyed the week. Our literacy co-ordinator wanted us to carry on the project this year and introduce some of the junior class teachers to the project. We were told to stick to the stories we taught last year, so no year group would repeat a story already covered. Teaching the same story again did not really inspire or motivate me. However I planned the project into week 5 and on the Monday started to retell the story to the children. I planned not to show them any written text until the following week, with the idea that they would conjure up their own images of the characters. I found myself teaching the story in a completely different way to last year. I was retelling the story using different vocabulary and voice intonation. I knew the story so well that it was stale but alive. I invented my own interesting characters and not only did the children enjoy the story telling, I was having so much fun! The children immediately set about copying and mimicking my actions, words and enthusiasm. The children used costumes, made puppets and painted the characters. I felt redundant as a teacher again and was able to enjoy observing them, joining in with their role plays and getting to know them. The writing that came from this week was incredible. These children were not only inspired to write pages of writing but the skills that had learnt during their phonic group work had paid off more than it had ever in the past.

Although this example of working was specifically for Literacy time, it did very often roll over into our numeracy time and afternoon foundation subject's work. This seemed very natural as the children continued to learn numeracy while counting pairs of shoes, cutting out the shapes of leather, lacing up boots in different ways, counting stock and ordering shoe boxes for the workshop etc.

I believe the examples above reflect the work by the Reggio Emilia (<http://www.youngchildrenlearning.ecsd.net/reggio%20emilia%20philosophy.htm>) movement in Italy. The philosophy of Reggio (Valentine, 1999) starts with the child, who is allowed to explore and follow their creative ideas in order to learn. The examples also highlight some of the goals set out by the Crucial C's taken from the work of Lew and Bettner (1995). I have reflected on these goals and believe they are essential to my planning as a teacher. The Crucial C's are set out below:

CONNECT – Every child needs to know they have a place to feel safe and belong.

CAPABLE – Every child needs to believe they can do it!

COUNT – Every child needs to be able to make a difference.

COURAGE – Every child needs to know they can handle what comes.

What I have changed as a result of addressing my own learning theory in relation to the problems I face working with such a large class.

My planning has drastically changed as the key to unlocking the problems of learning in a large class. It is impossible to try and involve every child and teach them all at the same time. As already stated children learn differently, they work at different levels and are at different stages. Therefore whole class teaching needs to be kept to a minimal. This then gives me extra time to spend with individuals/small groups. The class has been split into 4 ability groups for me to work with and 6 groups for the LSA to take out of the class for phonic work. The ability groups are different for numeracy and literacy. I work with each group once a day, so I at least get to speak and spend time with every child at least once a day. When I work with a group we discuss how we are going to achieve lesson objectives together. We ask questions relating to how we can learn best. The following are starting points for our group work:

- This is what I need to teach you, (a curriculum demand).
- This is what I have noticed we need to work on, (prior knowledge and assessment).
- How do you want to do it? (Giving children ownership and a chance to use a variety of learning techniques).
- What do we need? (BLP – children becoming independent).
- Where do you want to learn? (Children taking control of their own learning).

When I am not working with a group I plan activities that continue on from what we have discussed together the day before as a group. They are able to continue by themselves much easier because we have discussed what is needed to achieve the learning objective. They know what to do if they get stuck from basic BLP skills. When they feel they have completed their work they know the rules of what they can do not to disturb the group that I am working with. This includes using equipment and toys that enhance their own learning.

Below are some other of ways I have managed to include all 30 children to complete a hands on active curriculum, where the children are learning for themselves in ways they can achieve best:

- Observation-plays a role in my planning, following the work of many early childhood learning theories.
- There is less emphasis on written work as a result of research into the purpose of writing. Who is it for? Is it relevant to a child's understanding of concepts?
- Assessment and LSA feedback is essential in finding out prior and current knowledge.
- Questioning can support assess a child's understanding and supports thinking skills.
- Opportunities for ownership of learning, this values children's opinions and allows them to feel valued and have a sense of belonging.
- Opportunities for a flexible and responsive curriculum through active and practical activities and actively engaging all children.
- Constructive praise and ways to raise self esteem.

Conclusion

I will now take steps to take a more topic based approach to my planning. However, in order to ensure I cover all the curriculum requirements I have only made the afternoon (foundation topics) completely topic

based. In the mornings, I continue to have a specific time set for a literacy lesson and a numeracy lesson. Sadly, without the go ahead from the government I would be hesitant to completely change the mornings into topic based work too. However, the way I deliver literacy and numeracy will be more child-centred based on different learning styles and scaffold their learning in a sensitive, fun way. I still plan to have 'collapsed curriculum weeks', which are approved by our school. The major changes as a result of this enquiry will be in the way I plan the children's learning opportunities.

I have clarified the learning theories I have found useful. I have used the knowledge gained through reading, my own research and experience. I am beginning to encourage and support good learning in my class through the increased opportunities for freedom, careful planning and solid relationships. I know now that it is possible to support the learning of all 30 children.

My cycle of learning continues as I now want to discover a way to allow the child to find out for themselves the best ways in which they learn and for them to hold an awareness of their own learning theory. How children learn is at the centre of all learning theories.

Gerhardt's (2004) work on brain development and child reactions has interested me. She talks of the importance of emotional attachments, how they are formed and how important they are for children. Valuing children's opinions and work is vital and sharing experiences prevents emotional problems later in life.

As a result of the change in planning I feel I am beginning to form better relationships with the children. While the children are beginning to lead their own learning I am able to build on the relationships I have with the children. The children are doing more of the work which in turn gives me more time to spend with them.

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