

“Children’s First Experiences in School” A Reflection for Parents and Teachers

Delia Robinson Richards

University of the District of Columbia
USA

Abstract

Children are products of their environment and their parents/caregivers (the persons or people who raised them) are their first teachers. When children are enrolled in school, they bring with them what they have learned from their home environment. This could be positive or negative and it may fit into their new learning environment or it may not. It becomes the task of the teachers and staff to help these children adapt to their school environment by applying certain methodologies.

Rules must be developed and implemented. From an early childhood perspective, it is recommended that not more than five basic rules be implemented in order that students may remember them. Having this list of rules posted in the classroom may serve as an excellent reminder for children and at times the rules may be fully brought to the attention to children who cause the most distractions in the classroom. Developing these rules with the children’s input will able them to remember and follow the rules. In addition, the cooperation between teachers and students helps in establishing a community environment whereby the children feel a part of the school and classroom while helping the teacher to remind children to follow the rules that they have to developed. It has been demonstrated that once students have participated in developing the rules that are posted in the classroom, they will remind other children when they are exhibiting inappropriate behavior and are not following the rules. This is a great help to teachers because they will then continue their teaching without interruption to correct errant students. The children are then able to become a group of community learners that feel supported by the teacher and each other. Of course, in a home environment, parents can establish rules with their children and these can also be posted on the refrigerator for easy reminders and viewing.

Some teachers tend to forget that the children in their classrooms may not come from the same environment as the teacher. It becomes critical therefore that teachers accept all children for their individuality and that the teachers be reminded that in single household children from the same biological parents and with the same childrearing practices, offer some similarities among the siblings, but also differences as well. Some children before arriving at school, may have had many tasks at home to be completed. These tasks may range from taking care of siblings, fixing breakfast and lunch, and getting themselves ready for school. Teachers in the classrooms need to be aware that some children are undergoing these kinds of adult tasks and challenges before the school day even begins. This forces a teacher to stay on task with the students in order to accommodate these kinds of challenges that particular affects the urban learner. Applying Vygotsky’s Social Constructivist Theory may answer these questions and challenges. Vygotsky’s, theory postulates that the teacher’s primary role is to guide and help children

construct or build their behavior and use it in socially appropriate and productive ways. Vygotsky's use of scaffolding would then play a critical role by implying that the teacher must use informal methods such as conversations, questions, modeling, guiding, and supporting children to help learn concepts related to knowledge and skills that they might not otherwise learn by themselves (Morrison, 2008).

Scenarios

One scenario demonstrates how teachers and staff at a high school applied the Social Constructivist Theory and scaffolding with a Jamal who was encouraged to become a dynamic, hard-working, focused young person. This kind of support was extremely instrumental in helping Jamal move forward proactively in life and is a perfect example of how teachers and school staff can effect positive change for those children in need. This is a real case scenario: Jamal was a high school student whose mother passed away at the age of 12 years-old. He was raised by his step-father, because of his job requirements as a sailor, he was never around to provide consistent parental guidance. Jamal was basically left to raise himself. He worked a part-time job at a department store, while also participating in school activities including playing on the Varsity Football Team. All of this while maintaining a 3.0 GPA. Being aware of his background, the principal, teachers, and some parents in the school supported Jamal and offered guidance when needed, including providing resources for him to attend college, sometimes providing clothes that were needed for prom and receptions and making sure that his high school experience continued to be positive. As a result, Jamal graduated from college and is now matriculating toward a master's degree. Jamal is black and the principal and staff were white, and it is a clear indication where a school staff refused to prejudge a student and offered support to allow him to reach his optimal potential. This scenario demonstrates how teachers can stay on task with children and help them to meet challenges by collaborating with parents and families. Although it may appear that some parents are not involved with the school or their child from the teacher's perspective, it is paramount that teachers be aware of their biases toward some parents and these biases may keep them from implementing best practices (Jalongo & Isenberg, 2008). Some teachers have the motto "parents who care" and "parents who don't care" and often the "don't care" groups would be those whose race, class, culture or language differs from the teachers. (Jalongo, 2008) The best goal is to create a plan of communication and positive interaction with all parents (Hartle, 2007).

A second scenario of teacher bias was with Kyle (a Black male in third grade) who was in the ninetieth (90th) percentile on a standardized test. When the teacher received the results she not only asked Kyle if he was of Spanish descendant but asked him if he had taken the test at a prior time. This being a clear example of teacher bias and a preconceived notation that Kyle being a Black male would not be capable of scoring so high on a standardized test. The behavior of this kind of teacher is unacceptable and must be eliminated in schools. Teachers are expected to treat all children fairly and equally and not be allowed to prejudge a child because of his skin color or race.

A Nurturing Environment

Children are sensitive individuals and they are very aware of who accepts them and those who are

indifferent to them. Teachers can make a world of difference by making each child feel special and wanted by showing empathy to their children. Allowing children to make-up missed work when circumstances occur can be very helpful to children. Greeting children cordially on a daily basis, talking to children and finding out how they are feeling and if everything is fine with them, telling children to always do their best work, and demonstrating that the teacher has confidence in children's' excelling at school, are ways to demonstrate that teachers are being understanding and supportive. The simple daily conversations can be helpful to children. It gives students a sense of belonging and a feeling that the teacher does care about their welfare. For some children, the teacher may be their basic support mechanism and in this case the teacher will provide the children with the necessary skills to reach their optimal potential.

Bonding with the teacher and building trust with the urban learner can be very significant in the learner accomplishing and completing assignments. Once the teacher has bonded with his/her children, the teacher will know what children really have a lot on their plate and those who are lazy, and who may just want or need special attention. As students bond with their teacher and build trust, this kind of relationship will build confidence and self-esteem with the urban learner. Of course, these characteristics are very important for children to build and develop so they will meet their optimal potential. Scaffolding can be very helpful with these students and minor mistakes continuously repeated can be caught and corrected. In this way, the teachers can continue to assist the students and help to build every child's academic talents.

Teachers must recognize learning differences and remember Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI). This theory discusses how there are eight different intelligences---intrapersonal, interpersonal, musical, logical/mathematical, linguistic, bodily/kinesthetic, visual/spatial, and naturalist. For Gardner, each form of intelligences involves unique cognitive skills that can be demonstrated through solving problems and creating products that are culturally valued. (Jalongo &Isenberg, 2008). Gardner suggests that while certain intelligences dominants, all of the intelligences work together to help individuals solve problems and accomplish tasks. Teachers would need to recognize this theory and apply various teaching applications so that students would be able to learn through the application of their different intelligences.

Appreciating and Respecting Cultural Differences in the Classroom

An example for supporting children is teaching the students to know about differences and similarities within the classroom and school. An example, one English Language Learner (ELL) was speaking to her four-year-old classroom peers. Once she completed speaking, one little girl said, "What did you say?" Well, the ELL stopped talking out loud in the class. She felt offended when the students could not understand her. That was a teachable moment. The teacher could have explained that the student was from a different country (named the country) and named the language that the student speaks and now the student is learning English and will soon be able to speak two languages.

That explanation from the teacher would demonstrate sensitivity to the child, exposing the other child to

another country and language. In addition, this incident made the English Language Learner feel good about herself and also showed that it was fine to be different. Even if there were no cultural differences within the classroom, the children could be exposed to other cultures by literature, media, field trips and having special guests come into the classroom who may be able to share their various cultures with the students.

It is extremely annoying and unfair when children are from a different cultural group and they are referred to as “those children”. No matter where students are from they all need love, respect, hope and the reassurance they can learn and that their school environment is a caring place where teaching and learning takes place and they are a valued member of this learning environment. They must feel that the learning environment has been put in place for their enrichment and their social development and is a place where they look forward to being part of a learning community. Even adults, when they enjoy something, they want to do it and do it well.

To be effective, teachers should actively research the cultures of each child within the classroom. One of the best ways to become familiar with a child’s culture is to invite parents into the classroom to talk with the other students about customs, bringing in artifacts, pictures, books, and maps. Sharing how holidays are celebrated and other things that would give the student’s classmates a respect and appreciation for another culture. When teachers are aware and familiar with a student’s culture, it makes the student feel comfortable and welcomed in the environment. Most cultures celebrate a holiday in December, this would be a great educational experience for the children to celebrate and to be exposed to different holidays.

When cultures are celebrated it is important to start with the different cultures within the classroom. These kinds of diverse lessons give students a cultural perspective and will assist in eliminating any biases that the child may have been exposed to or may not be exposed to. As a result, the child has formulated a perspective about differences in cultures. This is also a perfect opportunity to demonstrate in lessons how people are alike and different. Teachers may want to prepare graphs on differences such as eye colors, hair colors, height, and teachers demonstrate things that we like that are the same such as foods, hobbies, favorite television programs or places to visit. Upon completion of a unit, the classroom can always have meaningful pictures (real photographs), language experience charts, globe and maps, family pictures for each child, multicultural picture books and other kinds of artifacts. The different skin tones of crayons, markers, paints, and papers are ideal for students to select and make pictures of themselves and family members. These cultural activities should be completed throughout the year, not just during Black History Month or Hispanic Month and should be integrated throughout the curriculum. Once the children have been exposed to their own culture in the classroom then the teacher may begin to introduce other cultures to the children.

So often with culture we celebrate a specific month or day and never discuss culture again until the designated day or month comes again. Culture should be recognized on a daily basis and should be part of the learning experience of all students (Sparks 1989). Teachers should teach students how to appreciate different cultures that will influence a student’s learning experience and also how the student feels about themselves.

The Child's Sanctuary-School

A child's school should be a safe and fun environment for students. Certainly, special treats such as a popcorn party, field trips that are developmentally appropriate for the child, infusing technology and creativity throughout the environment, and allowing children to think outside the box would be a developmentally appropriate environment.

Teachers should not make a child feel badly if their response to a question is incorrect. Instead, if a child gives the wrong answer, a teacher can say that is one way to answer the question, but the teacher can continue asking other students until the appropriate answer is given. If students are constantly told they are wrong or to repeat an answer, they are going to shut down and not respond anymore. The student will feel embarrassed and will feel that they will be wrong again and so it is no longer any reason to respond. Sometimes teachers forget about children's feelings. What could be very meaningful to a child may be quite insignificant to an adult or better still the student may be hurt over something the teacher or parent may not even consider.

Children will act the way they are treated. If students are treated as being smart and told that they are smart, they will act accordingly. That whole self-fulfilling prophecy is one to be dispelled. That is the preconceived notion that some students are not that smart so we will not teach them like we would teach other children that teachers consider smart. Sometimes that notion is developed because of environment, race, or children may be low performing.

Some strategies to eliminate this Prophecy would be to assist children in reaching their optimal potential academically and to understand, appreciate and respect every child's culture. Having parents or other family representatives to share and expose their culture in the classroom will reinforce the respect of the culture, in addition to showing students that their families are a part of the educational experiences. Children are more motivated to learn when they are comfortable and they feel that the learning environment respects who they are.

Teacher Engagement is essential in developing a child to their optimal potential. Teacher engagement falls into four distinct types, two of which are affective and focuses on human relationships in the school, and two of which are instrumental and focuses on the goals of teaching and learning (Firestone & Rosenblum, 198; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). Each form of engagement is vital and must be present for teaching to remain effective for all students (Williams,2003). Williams (2003) describes four types of engagement:

1. Engagement with the school as a social unit. This type of teacher views children as friends and family. This kind of engagement, the teacher attends after school events and cares about the adults in the school and integrates personal life and work life.
2. Engagement with children as unique, whole individuals rather than as "empty vessels to be filled". Leads classes so that children are acknowledged and responds to children's thoughts and knowledge. Many types of informal and formal coaching, sponsoring, mentoring, and counseling activities are additional examples of engagement with children. These teachers involve themselves in the children's personal and school lives, and in general makes themselves available to children who need support or assistance.

3. Engagement with academic achievement. Curriculum writing and sharing with other teachers, makes good and creative use of class time, expresses high expectations for academic performance, provides useful feedback to students, and actively considers children's assessments are all ways teachers can engage in their children's achievement.

4. Engagement with a body of knowledge needed to carry out effective teaching. Keep current in their content fields and incorporate new subject related ideas into their classrooms. Expresses one's personal passion for a subject, seek ways to connect the subject to children's lives, being involved in professional organizations, and pursuing advanced degrees in one's field can be examples of this form of engagement. Respecting the urban learner is the best way to integrate school and culture into the classroom. Children will be motivated to learn and families will know that they are a part of the learning experience. This will be the beginning of the bonding and trusting relationship with school and home. From this experience, teachers can continue to engage families in the learning process that will be occurring on a daily basis in the child's classroom.

Training in Multicultural Education/Diversity

Many times teachers and teacher assistants will have to be trained to integrate multicultural education within the classroom setting. It is important that the teaching staff know who they are and know that they possess a positive perspective on culture. Culture within the classroom can only be integrated and be positive if the teacher is positive and appreciates culture. Teachers must be willing to have training in multicultural education and be ready to admit their biases. Once teachers can be honest with their own feelings regarding culture, they will be in a position to learn about, respect, and appreciate other cultures. Multicultural training will help teachers to begin to expose all children and families to the exposure of appreciation and respect for culture, in addition to demonstrating the importance of multicultural education. This cultural process will help rid the belief of the the self fulfilling prophecy. This prophecy is the preconceived notation. that some students will not learn and that it is not necessary to challenge these particular children.

It is important to know that many times it is the teacher who makes a difference in a student's learning experiences. It is only fair that teachers are given the appropriate skills that they need to promote continuous growth in the learning environment. Academically, building on a child's strengths is the beginning of this process. When children are respected and they know that they are in a caring and loving environment, they will be ready to learn and do their best. Teaching does involve knowing the child and being familiar with the student's strengths and weaknesses. This beginning is the foundation of learning and gives the child a positive sense of self. As learning begins, children feel they are appreciated and acknowledged for who they are and what they bring to the learning environment is valued.

It can be very significant that some assignments that teachers give children can be about the process not the product. In cases where every assignment is given a letter grade some students who are not working on grade level continue a downhill battle. However, if some assignments can be about the process, it can give all students an opportunity to excel. When children receive the bonding, nurturing and verbal praise from teachers, it can motivate the child to work harder and excel with all assignments and overcome

challenges that may seem difficult for the student.

Helping Families

When parents are viewed as being deficit, the school should provide information on how to become better parents (Linn, 1990). This view of parent involvement is often directed toward minority and low-income parents (Jennings, 1990). This approach often makes parents feel they are the cause of their children's failure in school. Teachers are presented as more skilled in parenting than parents (Banks & Banks 1997). Parents and teachers may even become rivals for the child's affection (Lightfoot, 1978).

In some situations, families have challenges in their lives such as marital problems, financial problems or health concerns that would affect the productivity of the child in the learning environment. It is necessary that the school assist the families in order for the child to continue to learn without distractions. Some other things that the school might include for families could be field trip cost, provide lunches for children, provide school supplies, provide proper clothing, food and shelter. The school should have a fund for these necessities and the school should partner with agencies who can help and assist families who may be having these challenges. This is a challenge that all school systems have not taken into account, however, it is necessary for the education system to develop a mechanism that will enable all students to have their basic necessities met and to be able to attend to school without carrying this kind of "luggage" with them on a day to day basis. This mechanism would allow students to be ready to learn and to excel in school.

It is important to remember, to recognize, and to acknowledge that the parent is the first teacher of the child. Parents need to be welcomed and embraced. It can make a teacher's job less difficult when a parent is involved in the learning process of their child. Although every parent will not attend PTA meetings or Back to School Night, but teachers should reach out to parents and discuss how they can be helpful in the learning process of their child. A personal phone call or an email can be helpful. Remember that every home may not have a computer, so it is important that we find out if the child has tools to work with when we communicate with the parents. Once parents feel that the teacher really values their child and parents wants the involved in the teaching and learning process, it can be a rewarding parental/family experience. Having a checklist that all parents fill out can help parents feel connected. This checklist should have something that all parents can be a part of, even if they cannot come into the school. Parents have to bond and trust the teacher before they can be supportive. Sometimes parents do not feel welcomed or they feel intimidated by the school so they stay away.

Making parents feel a part of the school and contacting them can be a first step in building a necessary rapport. Sometimes, it is the grandparent or another family member who may be the person who represents the child and supports school activities. That family member representing the child should be welcomed just like a parent without any prejudging.

Summary Analysis

Children are products of their environment. When the learner comes to school, they bring their environment with them. It is important that educators help the learner adjust to the school environment and make the learner feel a part of the school. Allowing the children to develop the classroom rules, accommodating, and involving parents /family in the school environment is the beginning of a collaborative teaching and learning experience. Nurturing, bonding, and scaffolding with the urban learner is pivotal for the learner to excel to their fullest potential. In addition, appreciating and respecting cultural diversity is critical in helping the children reach their optimal potential.

Remembering the nurturing experience of Jamal who was in high school and how the teacher and school staff became his support mechanism is critical in helping students be successful. The school staff and other parents understood that he had limited family participation and assisted him and motivated him to do well and to reach his optimal potential. This gives one an idea of how critical the teacher and school are in the development, motivation, and the ultimate success of students.

The teacher and parents will need to remember the following:

- Children are products of their environment.
- Students should be allowed to develop the rules for the classroom (no more than five rules).
- Every student in the classroom is unique.
- Some children may complete many tasks and challenges before they arrive to school.
- Utilizing the Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Approach Theory and scaffolding can be instrumental in developing a supportive, enriching environment.
- Jamal's scenario demonstrates the outcomes of teacher, and school staff and other parents' motivation and encouragement.
- Creating a plan for parent/ family collaboration.
- Bonding and communicating with children on a daily basis is very necessary in developing and instilling a positive self-concept.
- The importance of Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory is crucial. The application of diverse teaching strategies would meet the learning styles of all children.
- Recognizing, appreciating, and respecting culture daily, not only for special cultural weeks or holidays.
- The four types of teacher engagement are critical in order to develop the school as the child's sanctuary.

With the school, teacher, child, and parent/family collaborating together, the student will have the critical support mechanisms in place to excel academically and reach their maximum development and academic potential. It is very significant for the school, teacher, child, and parent/family collaborating together. The child will have the critical support mechanisms in place to excel academically and reach their maximum developmental and academic potential. It is very significant for every child to have a family member support their academics and be involved in the school. School, family and child collaboration are key components for children to excel academically.

References

- Banks, J.A. & Banks, C.A. (1997). *Multicultural Education. Issues and Perspectives*. Hoboken, NJ: John & Wiley & Sons.
- Bryk, A. S., Lee, V. E., & Holland, P. B. (1993). *Catholic schools and the common good*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Firestone, William A.; Rosenblum, Sheila (1988). *Building Commitment in Urban High Schools*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, v10 n4 285-99.
- Gardner, Howard. (2006). *Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Jalongo, M. & Isenberg, J. (20012). *Exploring Your Role in Early Childhood Education*, 4th ed, Pearson.
- Jennings, J. (1994) *Understanding the Nature of Poverty in Urban America*. Westport, Conn: Praeger.
- Kozulin, A., Gindis, B., Ageyev, V. & Miller, S. (2003). *Vygotsky's Educational Theory in Cultural Context*. Cambridge, United Kingdom. Cambridge University Press.
- Linn, S. (1990). *Anger Management for Parents: the RETHINK Method*. Campaign, Il: Research Press.
- Lightfoot, S.L. (1978). *Worlds Apart: Relationships between Families and Schools*. New York: Basic Books.
- Morrison, K. (2008). *Educational Philosophy and the Challenge of Complexity Theory*. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 40: 19–34. doi:10.1111/j.1469-
- Sparks, L.D. (1989). *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Williams, D. J. (2012). *Urban Education and Professional Learning Communities*. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 79(2), 31-39.
- Wright, K., Stegelin, D. A., & Hartle, L. (2007). *Building family, school, and community partnerships*. Prentice Hall.