

Approaches to Learning

While all of the domains are undoubtedly equal in importance, *Approaches to Learning* captures the very essence of children: their inclinations, their dispositions, their attitudes, and their personal styles. *Approaches to Learning* is influenced by such profound constants as gender, temperament, family expectations, and cultural values – constants present at birth and increasingly significant throughout the school years.¹

Approaches to Learning was formally recognized as a separate and distinct domain integral to the development of children to their full potential almost twenty years ago. In 1989, the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) was established to help improve the quality of education in the United States. Its very first national goal, “all children will start school ready to learn,” prompted the release of *Reconsidering Children’s Early Development and Learning*. This widely accepted and still highly regarded work brought together the input of over 350 scholars on what exactly young children should know and be able to do. To the four domains historically associated with children’s development – physical, socio-emotional, language, and cognitive – was added a fifth, somewhat new, domain that required explanation:

*Learning styles [how children approach learning situations] are composed of aggregated variables that characterize ways of responding across situations. Learning styles, in contrast to dispositions, are malleable and include variables that affect how children attitudinally address the learning process: their openness to and curiosity about new tasks and challenges; their initiative, task persistence, and attentiveness; their approach to reflection and interpretation; their capacity for invention and imagination; and their cognitive approaches to tasks.*¹

Since then, *Approaches to Learning* has clearly infiltrated the mainstream thinking of educators. Most State educational agencies that have established early learning standards – what children should know and be able to do before kindergarten entry – have either included *approaches to learning* as a distinct domain or have folded aspects of it, such as curiosity or persistence, into their standards. Studies of school readiness, and even of later success in school, now specifically address *approaches to learning*. For example, the nation-wide *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99* directly assessed the developmental status of children entering kindergarten across five domains, one of which was *approaches to learning*.

¹ National Education Goals Panel, 2002

Since its debut, *Approaches to Learning* has been regarded as the less well-defined of the domains. As scholar's debate and policy makers try to implement, the burning question is, "What does it mean for teachers? . . . for parents? . . . for children? The answer: Teachers and parents must intentionally design learning environments that foster children's natural curiosity, initiative, engagement, persistence, and creativity. The environments must be safe for students to ask questions, to embark on and embrace new tasks, to persevere, and to suggest original solutions. It is absolutely essential that such learning environments are not contrived, but rather, engaging and relevant to the child and reflective of the child's interests. Learning what motivates each child will help teachers, parents and caregivers support individual differences and help children discover their own learning style.

Curiosity

"Why?" "How come?" "What if ...?"

As any caregiver of young children knows, the preschool years are peppered with seemingly endless questions. They are curious about themselves, about their relationships with others, and about the worlds they are encountering. But, even before the pre-school stage, children are expressing their curiosity, albeit nonverbally. A new-born visually tracks interesting objects. An older baby "tastes" anything and everything – edible or not – to find out more about it.

Throughout the early years, children's curiosity prompts exploration and experimentation. They take it upon themselves to learn more – by mimicking, questioning– about whatever has piqued their interest. Research shows, in fact, that self-initiated activity "makes it possible for young children to be involved in intrinsically interesting experiences that help them to construct understandings of their world, remain focused during activity, and develop a love for learning."² By observing where children's natural curiosity leads them, caregivers can create environments in which children can direct their own learning. Scholars in early education concur that "preschool curriculum is most effective when it takes advantage of children's own interests and curiosity."³

² Hohmann & Weikart as cited in Alabama Performance Standards for 4-year-olds: Alabama's Pre-Kindergarten Initiative, 2004

³ Bowman, Donovan, and Burns (2001) *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers* as cited in Head Start Child Outcomes Framework, Domain 7: Approaches to Learning

Initiative

Whereas curiosity may be a characteristic universal to all children, the degree and manner in which that curiosity is acted upon by each child varies tremendously. Initiative is the willingness to take on tasks or reasonable risks to learn more. Consider, for example, two children playing with race cars. Their pre-school teacher comments “Look at those cars move! What do you think makes them go?” The seed thus planted, one child is content to independently look at a book describing the parts of a car, while another’s curiosity isn’t satisfied until an adult or peer helps disassemble the car and put it back together again. Both children have taken the initiative to find out more; at the same time, they may have revealed clues to their preferred learning styles – print-oriented and independent in one instance, kinesthetic and small group in the other.

It is easy to fall into assumptions about learning styles based on a child’s temperament: “Of course, our print-oriented friend chose a book, he’s so shy.” And, there is some validity to this connection between personality and approaches to learning. One pilot study of doctoral students used a five factor model (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness) to explore the relationship between personality and learning. It found statistical evidence that certain personalities adopt either a strategic, surface, or deep approach to learning.⁴ However, other research keeps alive the decades-old argument of nature versus nurture. A study of infants’ exploration of new objects found that “infants who have spent a lot of time with caregivers who name, show, and demonstrate objects typically spend more time with caregivers and objects together,” whereas infants who have not received such interaction will spend more time exploring the objects only.⁵

This finding provokes thought about how influential familial values and cultural expectations can be on children’s initiative. Among different families and cultures, there is a broad spectrum of belief about the role children play in their own learning, whether expected to learn through “observation, imitation, and non-verbal communication,” encouraged to actively engage in discussion with children and adults, or regarded as quiet recipients of parents’ instruction.⁶ In any case, fostering initiative in children can only be effective within the context of both:

⁴ Heinstrom (2000). The Impact of Personality and Approaches to Learning on Information Behavior.

⁵ Wachs and Combs. (1995) as cited in Iowa Early Learning Standards

⁶ NEGP. Reconsidering Children’s Early Development and Learning, 1995

- the children’s temperament – Are there different expectations for different temperaments (e.g., quiet and shy versus people-oriented)?
- the style of care they have received – How children are encouraged to learn at home and through their cultural experiences.

Engagement

“Engage,” as a transitive verb, means “to obtain and hold the attention of.” Transitive verbs express action that is carried from subject to object, such as “To engage her students, the preschool teacher connected the lesson to their holiday celebration.” Alternatively, the intransitive meaning of the verb is “to involve oneself,” suggesting an internal source of action. “Tamika was so engaged in her play, she lost track of time.” For either definition, young children’s engagement – in learning, but also in play as a means of learning – is paramount to their development and success.

As noted earlier, self-initiated activity, or learning more about something already of interest, lends itself to a love of learning. It has been noted that “infants and toddlers usually show pleasure when they are successful at manipulating their environment and at overcoming barriers to reach a goal.” This prompted at least one early researcher to maintain that young children are motivated to explore their surroundings, overcome obstacles, and master their environment – in other words, to engage.⁷

In the ideal world, all subjects are either so appealing by nature, or presented so appealingly by skillful teachers, that learners’ engagement is automatic. Despite educators’ best efforts, however, school tasks and activities are not always of intrinsic interest to every child. Learning to engage in challenging or frustrating tasks is an indicator of children’s school readiness.

How is engagement encouraged? Start by harnessing the pride and satisfaction children gain from self-chosen play or projects. The natural desire to excel in that which they are interested will propel them to overcome challenges. Point out that hard work and effort, rather than intelligence or luck, powered their success. When this is realized, according to researchers, children become engaged and motivated.⁸ When faced with the next challenge – learning something “off the radar” of interest, for example – that sense of accomplishment can be re-invoked.

Persistence

Learning how to persevere is not only key to success in school, but an important life skill as well. A recent study found that persistence “is one of the critical elements in successful learning [and] the ability to foster, nourish, and support the development of

⁷ White (1959) as cited in Iowa Early Learning Standards

⁸ Dweck (1999) as cited in Head Start Child Outcomes Framework, Domain 7: Approaches to Learning

persistence is a crucial skill set for teachers.”⁹ When leaders in business were asked about the characteristics needed to guide companies through change, “perseverance” was most often cited.¹⁰

What does persistence mean for preschoolers? It’s maintaining focus on, and investing energy into, a task. It’s tuning out distractions and interruptions. It’s following a series of steps to create a project. It’s knowing when to accept, and when to seek help from an adult or another child when the next step is unclear or too difficult.

As with all of the components associated with approaches to learning, persistence varies among children. This variation may be attributed, in part, to the child’s temperament, but other factors have surfaced as being influential as well.¹¹ Parents and teachers who participated in a longitudinal study of children entering kindergarten reported that “girls persist at tasks more often than boys, older kindergartners persist at tasks more often than the younger, and children not at risk persist at tasks more often than children at risk.”¹² Based on the study’s definition of “at risk,” it appears that persistence can be impacted by the physical (gender), the developmental (age), *and* the socio-economic (low income, single motherhood, and/or mothers with less than a high school education).

These findings – that persistence is more than what one is born with – are important for caregivers of young children to understand. Both consciously and unconsciously, parents and early childhood educators are shaping this critical skill. Adults are often overheard expressing encouragement (“Oh, what a beautiful picture you’ve colored! What can you tell me about it?”), but do their actions transmit the same message about persistence? According to researchers Stipek and Greene (2001), “toddlers show more persistence in activities when caregivers promptly respond to their requests for help.” If asking for assistance is a signal of a child’s desire to persist, it is important that caregivers be responsive to that need. The value of persistence is thereby reinforced.

⁹ QIA Motivating Skills for Life Learners to Progress, Persist, and Achieve, 2006

¹⁰ Kotter, John P. (1996) *Leading Change*. Harvard Business School Press

¹¹ Stipek and Greene (2001) as cited in Iowa Early Learning Standards

¹² U.S. Department of Education (Fall 1998) Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99.

Creativity

According to Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan, renowned expert on early learning standards and author of *Young Children and Creativity: Lessons from the National Education Goals Panel*, “creativity in American early childhood education has often been understood as a focus on specific activities associated with creative expression: art, music, and drama.” She goes on to say, however, that today’s view of creativity, “embraces it as an approach that encourages invention and problem-solving in all aspects of the curriculum: science, social studies, literacy, and numeracy.”¹³

Creativity, then, is the ability to solve problems. It is creating new connections from previous experiences and applying familiar strategies to new situations. Creative learners seek one or more solutions to a problem by actively exploring through trial and error and by observing and interacting with others. This has been observed in children as young as infants. For example, when unable to reach a toy at the edge of her blanket, a baby might instead tug on the blanket until the toy is in reach. A three-year-old has discovered something stuck in his cup. Having seen his father pry things out with a screwdriver, the boy proceeds to poke his play drumstick into the cup to loosen the object. Both of these children were creative in addressing the task at hand.

Both children were allowed the opportunity to be creative. Had an adult intervened in either case, by handing the toy to the baby or offering to dislodge the object from the cup, the child would have no need to problem-solve.

It is important for caregivers to recognize naturally occurring opportunities for children to problem-solve and to allow children the autonomy to experiment in those opportunities. As concluded by Piaget, caregivers can encourage problem-solving and can promote creativity “by making problem-solving opportunities available with a wide variety of materials, by encouraging infants and toddlers to experiment with solutions, by not interfering too quickly to solve problems for them, and by helping them notice the results of their experiments.”¹⁴

¹³ Sharon Lynn Kagan, Ed.D (2003) *Young Children and Creativity: Lessons from the National Education Goals Panel*

¹⁴ Piaget (1980) as cited in Iowa Early Learning Standards

Domain: Approaches to Learning

PreK Benchmark: Children actively and confidently engage in play as a means of exploration and learning.

Benchmark Indicators:

- Child interacts with a variety of materials through play.
- Child participates in multiple play activities with same material.
- Child engages in pretend and imaginative play – testing theories, acting out imagination.
- Child self-selects play activity and demonstrates spontaneity.
- Child uses “trial and error” method to figure out a task, problem, etc.
- Child demonstrates awareness of connections between prior and new knowledge.

PreK Benchmark: Children approach tasks, activities and problems with creativity, imagination and/or willingness to try new experiences or activities.

Benchmark Indicators:

- Child chooses materials/props and uses novel ways to represent ideas, characters, and objects.
- Child identifies additional materials to complete a task.
- Child experiments and seeks additional clarity to further his/her knowledge.
- Child seeks additional clarity to further his/her knowledge.
- Child seeks out connections, relations and assistance from peers and adults to complete a task
- Child communicates more than one solution to a problem.

PreK Benchmark: Children exhibit curiosity, interest, and willingness in learning new things and having new experiences.

Benchmark Indicators:

- Child asks questions using who, what, how, why, when, where, what if.
- Child expresses an interest in learning about and discussing a growing range of ideas.
- Child actively explores how things in the world work.
- Child investigates areas of interest.
- Child takes objects and materials apart and attempts to reassemble them (e.g. puzzles, models, nuts and bolts).
- Child seeks out activities and materials that support his/her curiosity.
- Child willingly engages in new experiences and activities.

PreK Benchmark: Children actively engage in problem solving.

Benchmark Indicators:

- Child identifies a problem and tries to solve it independently or with assistance.
- Child attempts multiple ways to solve a problem.
- Child communicates more than one solution to a problem.
- Child engages with peers to solve problems.

PreK Benchmark: Children demonstrate persistence.

Benchmark Indicators:

- Child maintains focus on a task.
- Child seeks assistance when the next step seems unclear or appears too difficult
- Child modifies strategies used to complete a task.