

LEARNING CHARACTERISTICS AND PRINCIPLES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING

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A. Characteristics of early childhood

Every educator (parent/teacher) wishes their efforts in stimulating their children would bear fruit and reach the expected goals. When discussing children at an early age as learners, we need to bear in mind that their characteristics differ from groups of other ages. In an attempt to acquire optimal results in stimulating children's intelligence and language, educators need to understand and observe their characteristics. Educators' understanding of early childhood will inspire them to start planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating learning activities.

If we observe what children do during their daily activities we know that they learn whenever and wherever. The theory proposed by Suharyanto (2015) on behavior development explains that children have a high ability of imitation. They tend to imitate whatever they see around them, though without the ability to choose or sort things which is bad or good and which one is appropriate or inappropriate. Such as condition, obligates the adults around them to be on alert. Adults must watch what children do and whom they interact with daily, to ensure their experience delivers a positive impact on their development. As suggested by Shaffer (2005) that children's learning activities occur when they make changes more permanent in their minds and through their behaviors as the results of maturation and learning.

To understand better, educators need to understand several learning characteristics of early childhood;

1. Maturation influences children's learning

According to Santrock in Gordon & Browne (2011), maturation is a period where growth and development reach their peak. The process of maturation depends on the individual. Each child experiences maturation at their own rate. A professional educator will respond to this condition by planning and designing significant learning activities. They will prepare learning media, materials, and methods that are appropriate to their age and their developmental tasks.

The first person to talk about maturation theory was Arnold Gessel in Santrock (2011), who stated that one of the principles in children's development is ***the Principle of Individuating Maturation***. This principle explains that development is a process to shape an orderly sequential pattern and is revealed as the individual becoming mature. Gesell argued that biological factors drive the process of maturity. He asserted that learning can only occur when the structures developed so it allows the adaptation of behavior. It means education stimulation would not work as effectively before the structures developed.

2.Environment influences children's learning

Apart from the process of maturity, another factor contributing to children's development is the environment; the conducive, and the unconducive. The conducive environment means a setting that provides safety and comfort for children's learning activities. Meanwhile, the unconducive environment refers to a situation brimming with pressure, worry, and commotion.

Bredekamp & Copple (1997), emphasized that the environment needs to enable children's learning activities and drive the optimal outcome. Environment, in this context, means a physical and psychological environment. Children need to participate in every learning activity; hence, to achieve the goal, educators (parents/teachers) must understand the learning characteristics of early childhood. Children also need to have opportunities to engage with their peers during the activities with stimulation and a pleasant manner.

3. Children are active learners

Children at an early age are active learners. Educators must be prepared at any condition, considering that children would not sit still and be calm on their seats.



According to Bredekamp & Copple (1997), the word 'active' implies several situations during children's learning activity; 1) When children move, they are looking for stimulation to learning opportunities. 2) Children use their bodies as a learning tool. They exercise their five senses (to feel, to touch, to listen, to see, to seek) to investigate the object they find. 3) Children are active participants with their own experiences. They are not an empty container that needs to be filled with someone else's experience. They will structurally and functionally figure out their potential with their energy.

In brief, 'children as active learners' does not only refer to their physical state but also other aspects. Active children make use of their bodies to acquire knowledge and develop their potential through observation, manipulation, and interaction.

4. Children learn in different styles

No human is perfectly alike on earth, even twins are different. That is why the term individual uniqueness coined. The same concept prevails in children's learning activity. Kovake (1991), an education expert, affirmed that every child has different learning styles, namely visual learners, auditory learners, and kinesthetic learners.

Everyone can learn correctly in their learning modalities. Learning modalities refer to sensory channels (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and expression) used by humans to perceive their surroundings. Take this illustration; several phenomena occur during learning activity in a classroom: 1) children who understand better and easier when the teacher lectures are auditory learners 2) children who comfortably and easily understand the learning material when the teacher uses media such as in-focus and presentation with interesting and creative slide design are visual learners. 3) children who enjoy participating in practical activities are kinesthetic learners. 4) children who enjoy their learning activity when the teacher uses expression, intonation, and body movement are expression learners.

Early childhood educators must be ready for every situation, to overcome the diversity and the uniqueness of children's learning styles. They should not teach with only one method or one media. To succeed in guiding their children, educators must be creative and innovative.

5. Children learn through a combination of physical experience, social interaction, and reflection

Learning characteristics of early childhood are integrated by physical experience, social interaction, and reflection, which contribute to each other. The main aspect is a physical experience, in which children use their five senses to investigate objects around them. The physical experience involves hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, and touching (Gordon and Browne 2011). The physical experience allows them to physically interact with their surroundings, gives them knowledge, and helps them make conclusion about the objects. Thus, children need to be provided the opportunities to explore their environment.

As for social interaction, it enhances information and understanding that children acquired in physical experience. Montessori in Ismaniar (2020), described children as a sponge that is ready to absorb everything around them. They have yet to understand the concept of good or bad and right or wrong, so the social interaction will help to direct, strengthen, and straighten their physical experience.

Vygotsky in Santrock (2011) argued that when children play and work with their peers or their educators (parents/teachers/adults), they will change and develop their interpretation of an idea. Hence, reflection serves as a review and assessment of children's learning activities regularly.

B. Principles of early childhood learning

In an attempt to succeeding in teaching children at an early age, educators need to apply the principles of early childhood learning, explained as follows:

1. Children learn through play

Learn through play is the first principle to accommodate children's learning characteristics. Not only does play is the most interesting activity, but it also exercises small and large muscles. Moreover, it trains language skills, enhances knowledge, practices problem solving, helps in emotional control and socialization, and recognizing math and science (Santrock 2011). Play, for children, is a way to release energy and emotions, and recreation (Yusuf 2012). In a comfortable state, all brain nerves are relaxed and it allows the brain to absorb knowledge and build a positive experience. Accordingly, learning through play will make children enjoy learning.

2. Learning is oriented to children's needs

Every part of the learning activity is designed and conducted for children's potential development. The children are the center and the learning is not oriented to an institution, teachers, or parents. As the learning activities are children-oriented, educators must understand the types of children's needs. The theory of the hierarchy of needs was proposed by Abraham Maslow (Gordon and Browne 2011; Santrock 2011).

Human basic needs like food, water, safety, and love are essential for survival. Maslow's *hierarchy of needs* is a theory that is applied to understand the relationship between basic human needs. The hierarchy of needs is comprised of a five-tier model of human needs. The lowest level is made of the most basic needs, which are physiological needs including air, water, and food. The second-lowest level is safety including physical and psychological security. The third level is love and belonging needs, including friendship, social relationships, and sexual relationships. On the next level is esteem including self-confidence, self-worth, recognition, and pride. The highest level is self-actualization (Aziz 2006). The hierarchy of needs is illustrated as follows:

3. Children's development-oriented

Teachers must drive every aspect of children's development by their age. Children's development depends on their maturation, which is induced by their nutrients, health, upbringing, education, and heredity (Santrock 2011). Children's maturation developed at their own rate. Although children go through similar sequences, the rapidity and pace of their development differ from one another. The aspects of children's development are;

1. Cognitive
2. Motors (gross motor and fine motor)
3. Language
4. Social
5. Emotional
6. Art and creativity
7. Spiritual

In stimulating children's development, educators (parents/teachers) hold a significant role. The potencies manifested in every child will develop appropriately with the educators' support. Vygotsky emphasized that *scaffolding* is one way to support the process of children's potential and development.

Every educator needs to realize and acknowledge that children's development pace is distinctive. Thereby, the stimulation depends on the needs of each child. Further, David Weikart in Eliason and Jenkins (1994) explained that children's development-oriented learning means every approach used by educators to provide stimulation must derive from children's condition. What educators need to do is to understand the needs and characteristics of each child's development as an individual or group.

4. Learning is children-centered

The learning principle that centered on the children is also known as student-centered instruction. The application is marked by giving a huge opportunity to children to learning experience from their environment. It allows children to explore, discover, decide, argue, and gain their own experience.

Furthermore, children-centered learning means every learning activity is designed, planned, and conducted to optimize children's potential development through their physical needs and spiritual needs. To acquire maximal outcomes, the learning design, and planning process must be completed in a pleasant way and appropriate with children's characteristics.

5. Integrated Stimulation

Every child possesses a multitude of intelligent potential, known as *Multiple intelligence*, as developed by Gardner (1983), in his book *Frames of mind*. That is, he also argued that the development is holistic (every intelligent aspect is interconnected one another). For this reason, the stimulation provided for children must be integrated. Educators (parents/teachers) cannot choose only one among all the aspects because one aspect is as important as another and related to each other. Thus, every aspect (cognitive, language, motor, social, emotional, art, and moral aspects) manifested in a child needs to be stimulated. And it also applies to children's needs fulfillment such as nutrients, health, comfort, upbringing, education, and protection.

6. Conducive environment

The conducive environment in this context means children's surroundings, either physical or social. Children learn about life and skills for survival from their surroundings. They, at first, will observe, then try, and finally participate. For instance, they learn about cleanness, independence, and regulation from their playground. To advocate children's process of learning, they should be provided a suitable physical environment, like a clean, comfortable, bright, and safe room that supports their learning process. And also, a supportive social environment, either home or education institution, that brings comfort to children.

A good physical learning environment is not only a place that is facilitated with toys or games but also provided a space for creativity and movement. Take note that the aspects of children's intelligence does not only consist of cognitive aspect and language, but also motors, social, emotional, creative, and spiritual aspects. Thus, all the aspects need space as accommodation for expression.

7. Enjoyable learning

Children at an early age have not acquired self-concept, so they cannot distinguish the good from the bad, as stated by Montessori (Ismaniar 2019). Because they have not realized that learning stimulation is important, learning activity will be unexciting. Researches from early childhood development found one of the characteristics of children at an early age is that they love to play. Playing is enjoyable, and that is the key. What an educator should do is to design an enjoyable learning activity.

An enjoyable learning process must allow children's curiosity and deliver children's energy. The indicators of enjoyable learning activity are; 1) allows children to be active, 2) stimulate children's creativity, 3) innovative, and 4) effective.

Suparlan, Budimansyah, and Meirawan (2009), used the abbreviation *PAIKEM* to explain the principles of enjoyable learning. Educators need to focus on several things when applying *PAIKEM* learning process, as described as follows:

- a. Educators (parents/teachers) must recognize children's personalities. Before creating *PAIKEM* learning, educators need to recognize their uniqueness. Take these illustrations; parents would not be certain if their younger child love one learning activity only because the older child love and did the same activity. And teachers who succeed in applying a certain method or learning media in her class this year cannot assure the success of the same method next year. Therefore, educators, foremost, need to identify with their children in person; their talent, interest, and learning style. Then, they can design an appropriate learning activity that is interesting and enjoyable for children.
- b. Educators need to use an understanding of children's attitudes in organizing the learning process. Children, since born, tend to rely on others (social beings). One of the children's characteristics is their love to play. Hence, educators need to integrate or include a game in children's learning activity. They also need to notice their tendency and recognize their chemistry with their peers when playing in a group.
- c. Educators need to develop children's critical thinking and creativity during the learning process. The learning activity does not have to center around the teacher (teacher-centered instruction). If the learning process is running well and contributing to the intellectual stimulation, even only occurs among the children, educators can be the supervisor or facilitator. The main goal of every learning activity is to teach children how to solve problems by their age and their development level. So long as the activity induces creative ideas and solve problems, educators can be no more than the observers.

- d. Educators need to record children's works to encourage them to be more creative and more diligent. If the other children see their friends' works, they will be inspired by them. Educators can make a portfolio to document the works and it can be used as a reference to find a solution in addressing children's problems.
- e. Educators need to optimize the environment as a learning source. It involves the physical environment, social environment, and cultural environment. As children at an early age learn by their five senses, educators need to ensure that their environment is positively appropriate for their learning process and utilize what is available from their surroundings.
- f. Educators need to give feedback on children's learning behavior. It aims to improve children's learning quality, observe and evaluate children's development. Feedback can be delivered verbally or in written form.
- g. Educators need to ensure children's physical and mental active participation. The two forms of participation must be developed. However, mental active participation is considered a priority.

Suparlan et al (2009), highlighted that to identify the accomplishment of *PAIKEM* implementation, educators will know from these characteristics; children participate actively, they are critical, creative, and productive, their social-emotional maturation is improved, and they are ready to face changes. Thus, educators are expected to apply *PAIKEM* during the learning process.

8. Using a multitude of media and learning sources

Piaget's theory of cognitive development explains that children at an early age are still on the primary stages, namely sensorimotor and preoperational. Piaget believed that children learn from media and the tools they use when playing. Learning media here means not only factory-made products but everything they find from their surroundings. The more preferably media is the one created by educators with the participation of children. The media and learning sources are used to help children explore the objects around them.

9. Characteristics development-oriented

The stimulation during the learning process provided for children intends to optimally develop children's characteristics. The process is integrated with habits and exemplification. It can be implemented in children's daily activities or at a certain planned event. Several characteristics that need to be stimulated in children; accepting and performing their belief/religion, having self-respect and valuing their environment, practicing healthy life, being curious, having the creative trait, appreciating aesthetics, having confidence, discipline, being patient, being independent, being compassionate, being tolerant, self-adjusted, being responsible, being humble and well-mannered.

10. Skill development-oriented

Apart from developing children's characteristics, stimulation also develops children's life skills. The life skill, referring to their age and their development task, is the ability to help themselves, so they would not rely physically and psychologically on others. The process is best applied through habits, exemplification, and planned activities.

11. Independent learning-oriented

The teacher-centered method is no longer recommended in a learning process and stimulation of early childhood. An independent learning process now is a must. It aims to develop mutual respect between educators and children, and children and their peers. The Independent learning process can contribute to children's confidence, self-consistence, as well as encourage them to appreciate others and obey rules.

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