Classroom Insights From Educational Psychology

A Developmental Approach to Educating Young Children

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Developmentally Appropriate Classroom Practices

Fostering Learning in the Classroom

Window Into Practice

Krystal Smith had always wanted to be a teacher. Even from a young age, she envisioned what her classroom would look like—where she would set up the reading corner, which animals she would have for children to care for, and how she would take the time to get to know each child. Upon completing her teaching credential, Krystal accepted a teaching position for a third-grade class in a poor school district near her home. This district served a large population of Native Americans as well as Latino/a and White families. Many families were from low income groups. The school principal valued teacher-to-teacher communication, peer coaching between teachers, and facilitated discussions about transition between grades. Krystal met with her students' previous teachers to discuss academic assessments, behavior plans and modifications, and strategies that had been successful

and unsuccessful with individuals the past year. Krystal felt that this type of collaboration was invaluable to her as an educator and she was grateful for the support and information that was shared.

Krystal gained access to her classroom weeks before orientation, just so she could set up her room and begin planning. She took great care to create a physical environment which would appeal to third graders. Everything in her room was child height and the different reading corners were her pride and joy. Krystal had scoured garage sales and used bookstores to find just the right "classics" that would surely capture her young readers' interest and ignite a love for reading. She had soft couches and fun, comfortable chairs to create a warm atmosphere to explore books. Krystal arranged the desks in "table groups," which had their own tub of community supplies to be shared by the table (i.e., glue, crayons, markers, scissors). The children would have their own pencils and erasers, but the remaining supplies would be shared using the table "tub." Krystal felt strongly that the class needed to learn how to function as a community and take care of each other and the classroom they shared. Next, Krystal created name tags for each child and files that would hold valuable, personal reflections as she observed and assessed their growth.

When the first day of school finally arrived, Krystal could hardly ignore her pounding heart as she greeted students at the door, handing them their name tags and instructing them to hang up their backpacks and find seats on the carpet. Throughout the next few weeks, Krystal learned to adapt her teaching practices and classroom management style to her students. She and the children created simple signals, such as a finger on their nose, when they were to become quiet for instructions. The children created a simple set of classroom rules such as, "no name calling" and "talk to your neighbor about the problem." The children were rotated through a series of classroom "jobs" as well. Everyone participated in keeping the classroom running efficiently. Student jobs consisted of filing, taking attendance, recycling, caring for class pets and plants, and cleaning (the sanitation crew). These tasks contributed to the classroom "community," which Krystal felt was important for children's growth and development of a sense of responsibility for their classroom.

Krystal also met each of her student's parents long before parent conferences either in person, by phone, by e-mail, or through notes. As the school year progressed, she was careful to convey positive information to parents as well as ask for assistance with more difficult behaviors.

Krystal's greatest challenge was interacting with Alex. Alex had been placed in her classroom because he needed extra care, extra help, and lots of patience. Alex had been diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, obsessive/compulsive disorder, and other sensory disorders, which resulted in a 504 Health Impairment Plan. He was not assigned an instructional aide. Alex

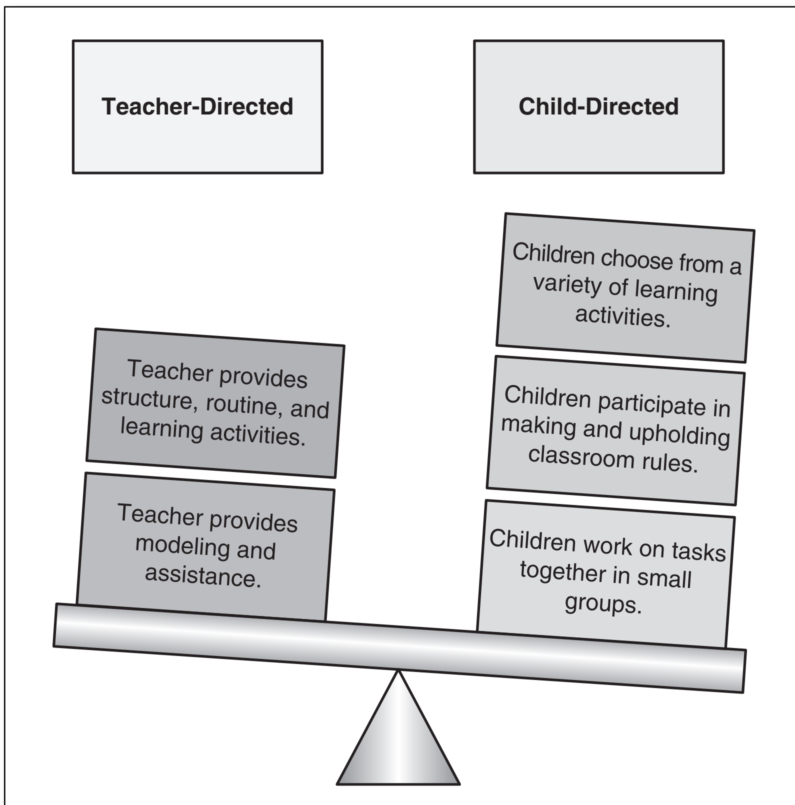
only left the classroom for 10 minutes each day to work with a specialist on literacy skills, so for the vast majority of his day, he was in Krystal's third-grade class. Krystal was determined to include Alex in every activity and learning opportunity. She wanted to show him that he could excel beyond his expectations, and she wanted the rest of her third graders to experience and adapt to differences in other people. Krystal felt that this was a life experience that most of these children needed, and she enjoyed working beside them to model respect, kindness, care, and selflessness. On a daily basis, Alex drew attention to himself by singing loudly, talking out of turn, and tapping his pencil uncontrollably. Krystal would respond by capturing Alex's attention eye-to-eye and then engaging him in a brief conversation about the particular behavior that needed correction. The rest of the third graders learned to communicate with Alex in the same manner. Through Krystal's modeling and guidance, Alex's classmates began to express their feelings and give Alex the opportunity to respond, rather than yell at him to stop or constantly tattle to Krystal to fix the problem. The classroom climate beamed with student-to-student support, collaboration, and constructive debates. The children figured out how to solve conflicts respectfully and how to seek solutions of compromise. By having Alex part of the classroom, the rest of the children learned how to practice empathy and community and how to take responsibility for their own actions. Alex learned that the social world he lived in wasn't always so patient and that he had a responsibility to put forth his best effort to listen and respond to the requests of his peers. Alex also began to realize that he couldn't use his disability as an excuse to cause disruption when things got tough for him. Instead, he began to feel empowered to want to change those behaviors that caused the classroom to become disrupted.

By the end of the year, Krystal had adapted her instructional practices to mold to her students. She passed on a group of new fourth graders who took pride in their classroom community and who possessed the skills to resolve conflicts respectfully and demonstrate empathy for others. Krystal was proud of their academic accomplishments, and she beamed while recounting stories of mutual respect, trust, and collaborative efforts that appeared beyond average behavior for the typical third grader.

Krystal's experience illustrates a teacher adapting her practices to fit children's developmental needs and skills. She was determined from the beginning to make a difference for this class of children, and she succeeded in keeping a balance of child-directed and **teacher-directed** classroom practices. The adaptation process that Krystal experienced her first year has its roots in contemporary **developmentally appropriate**

or **learner-centered** approaches to education (also referred to as **child-centered**). The NAEYC is a leader in providing current guiding principles for teaching children through age 8 supported by sound research. NAEYC's guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice stem from beliefs that both *child-directed* and *teacher-directed* practices are necessary for children's optimal learning and development. A successful teacher can apply clear expectations, explanations, and directions while allowing children hands-on experiences and opportunities for decision making (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The figure shows the "balance" that is necessary for teachers to adapt practices to fit the developmental needs of children in their classrooms (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Balancing Child-Directed And Teacher-Directed Approaches



> At the heart of constructivist perspectives is a focus on the mind of the child or learner.

The chapter begins with an introduction to basic ideas about how children develop intellectually from **constructivist perspectives**. These theoretical explanations provide the foundation for many contemporary approaches to education advocated today. At the heart of constructivist perspectives is a focus on the mind of the child or learner. Thus, the terms child-, learner-, or student-*centered* are often used to describe constructivist practices. Constructivist, child-centered practices are considered "developmentally appropriate" because they begin with attending to the development of the child; thus, they are advocated by educational psychologists and organizations like NAEYC, as noted throughout this book. Oftentimes, child-centered practices are contrasted with *teacher*-centered practices ("traditional"). These practices are based on beliefs that teachers mold children's learning primarily through direct instruction and rewards and reinforcement; the teacher is the center of attention rather than how children interpret experiences or construct their own learning. (Note that teacher-*centered* practices are different from teacher-*directed* practices, which are used in conjunction with child-directed practices in constructivist classrooms.)

After introducing theoretical approaches and briefly highlighting the importance of play in development, we attend to three major components of quality educational practices: (a) classroom climate, (b) classroom organization, and (c) classroom instruction. We make a few general recommendations for practice here to add to those provided in previous chapters (they cannot "stand alone"). Readers are encouraged to look to other books in the *Classroom Insights* series for specific instructional practices and guidance in teaching particular subject areas (e.g., science).

SOCIAL-CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACHES

Approaches that attempt to balance child- and teacher-directed learning activities stem primarily from a **social-constructivist**

theoretical perspective. Lev Vygotsky, a noted Russian psychologist, proposed a sociocultural theory of children's development and learning. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is socially based and children master meaningful cultural activities (i.e., literacy) through guided participation by adults and more sophisticated peers (e.g., Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Rogoff, Turkanis, & Bartlett, 2001; Wilkinson & Silliman, 1997). Within the "**zone of proximal development**" (ZPD), an adult or competent peer intentionally supports development within the scope of tasks children cannot achieve by themselves but would be able to accomplish with assistance. Based on Vygotsky's conception, Bodrova and Leong (2007) referred to the "zone" as the area of development between a child's present point of skill and those skills that the child would be able to develop in the near future. Children need less assistance as they develop competencies in one area and more as they encounter new areas or tasks. Constructivists believe that children play an active role in acquiring knowledge rather than a passive "waiting to be filled" role.

Many teachers have integrated social constructivist practices into their instructional approaches. For example, **scaffolding** is a common strategy introduced in teacher preparation programs. Teachers "scaffold" children's learning beyond what they can accomplish on their own to what is currently just out of reach by providing models, hints, and cues as well as other means of assistance. However, there is a level of accomplishment beyond a child's current ZPD in which the child will not be able to benefit from instruction. For example, a 5-year-old beginning to learn to write the letters in her name would not be ready to write a sentence or a paragraph even with appropriate instruction. Teachers also use *instructional conversations* by listening carefully to children, making assumptions about their meaning, and adjusting their responses to help children develop more sophisticated understandings of concepts (e.g., Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). These conversations often occur in small groups.

Social-cultural researchers, such as Roland Tharp, Ron Gallimore, and William Doherty, have incorporated these

ideas and processes into standards for effective teaching practices. The *Five Standards* were derived from many years of research with children of all ages, particularly those at risk for academic failure due to poverty or cultural or language barriers (e.g., Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence, 2010; Doherty & Hilberg, 2007). The Five Standards can be summarized as follows:

1. Learning is facilitated when teachers and students work together in joint productive activity.
2. Students must develop competence in the language and literacy of instruction.
3. Curriculum must be meaningful, based on previous knowledge, and connected to students' lives (e.g., home, community).
4. Learning activities must be challenging, requiring complex thinking.
5. Teachers need to engage children through dialogue, especially instructional conversations.

These standards are consistent with recommendations made by other constructivist educators, and they are often included in assessments of classroom quality; instructional practices such as these are discussed later in the chapter.

Educators have also relied on another prominent child development theorist, Jean Piaget, to help understand and support children's development and learning. Piaget (1926, 1960) asserted that children create their own knowledge through interactions with their environment and others; his views and descriptions of thinking in childhood have provided the impetus for constructivist educational practices or child-centered approaches (Elkind, 1976; Sigel, 1978). Children construct input from the environment through assimilating and accommodating information into their own mental models, thereby deepening their understanding as they gain experience. Piaget also emphasized the importance

of children's *active* engagement with materials and others and their learning through play.

Engagement in variations of play (physical, social, pretend, and constructive) has been associated with advances in memory, language abilities, social skills, self-regulation, and success in school (see recent reviews in Elkind, 2009; Hirsch-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009). The different types of play include the following:

- *Physical Play (with or without rules):* Running, jumping, swinging, and sliding are typical physical play activities not accompanied by rules, and they provide obvious physical and psychological benefits to children. Physical play with rules such as soccer, basketball, or hide-and-seek are useful in promoting associations with "laws," which children must learn to follow to live productively.
- *Social Play:* Through all forms of play with others, children learn how to interact in a prosocial manner. Cooperation, sharing, and compromise are present in social play where moral reasoning develops. These interactions prepare children for collaborating and learning with peers and others.
- *Pretend Play:* This type of play allows children to experiment with new roles and scenarios in a safe environment. They "try on" new identities, experimenting with language and different feelings. Children learn to be flexible thinkers and their imagination is stretched, as scenarios take on different directions. Engagement in this type of play is linked to advances in literacy skills.
- *Constructive Play:* This type of play allows children to create things as they interact with their environment. For example, children build cities, castles, and towers with blocks, and they create masterful artwork with chalk on a sidewalk. Constructive play allows children to try out what works and what doesn't work while adding to their basic knowledge, for example, in areas of building, stacking, and drawing. Engagement in this type of play is linked to advances in math and science learning.

Excellent teachers have implemented play into their daily classroom routines to foster children's learning and development.

Developmental and educational psychologists and organizations such as NAEYC provide frameworks based on constructivist and social-constructivist theories for guiding developmentally appropriate practices. Guidelines for creating quality classroom climates, organizational practices, and instructional supports for children in preschool and the primary grades are included. Researchers have developed measures to assess quality practices in each of these three related classroom domains: (a) climate, (b) organization, and (c) instruction. Each of these domains of classroom practices is discussed in more detail later. Major measures of preschool and primary-grade classroom quality include the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), developed by Pianta and his colleagues (see, e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2007); the Early Childhood Classroom Observation Measure (ECCOM; Stipek & Byler, 2004); and the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998). These measures provide specific descriptions of quality practices linked to positive child outcomes. For example, children demonstrate more positive approaches to learning in constructivist classrooms than in traditional, didactic classrooms (see, e.g., Stipek & Byler, 2004). Some descriptions of quality practices from these measures are incorporated in the tables in this chapter as examples; teachers can refer to these to analyze the quality of their own classroom practices.

Classroom Climate

Classroom climate refers to the social/emotional atmosphere of the classroom. Pianta and his colleagues described the emotional climate as the amount of enthusiasm and emotional connection displayed between teachers and their students (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). Research has

Emotionally supportive classrooms have been associated with lower levels of internalizing behavior (i.e., anxiety) and higher competence in children.

supported the importance of the classroom climate. As discussed in Chapter 3, it is imperative that children have a sense of security, respect, and positive relationships with their teacher and their peers in the classroom (e.g., McCombs & Miller, 2007). A quality classroom climate also includes an atmosphere where children are not afraid to make mistakes and enjoy an environment that is physically and emotionally safe. Emotionally supportive classrooms have been associated with lower levels of internalizing behavior (i.e., anxiety) and higher competence in children (NICHD ECCRN, 2003). Furthermore, teacher sensitivity has been shown to positively affect student engagement and self-reliance as well as academic outcomes, such as stronger vocabulary and decoding skills in preschoolers (Pianta et al., 2007). *Sensitivity* can be defined as the awareness of children's needs and responsiveness to address needs in all areas (physical, emotional, social, cognitive). Thus, classroom climate plays an important role in academic success, self-regulation development, and intellectual competence, and it should be regarded as an essential area of classroom quality evaluation.

The physical arrangement of the desks, the décor, and inclusion of items in the classroom such as pets, gardens, and relaxing reading corners contribute to the atmosphere of the classroom. Children and teachers need an interesting physical environment where they feel comfortable, relaxed, and secure to establish relationships and learn. Best teaching practices also include cultivating a caring community within the classroom and taking the responsibility to know each child individually as well as establishing a routine schedule. For example, in the opening *Window,* Krystal carefully planned the physical arrangement of her room to include table groups to facilitate "community" and comfortable "home-like" spaces for relaxed reading. She also cultivated a community in her classroom by assigning classroom "jobs" on a rotating basis. The children were able to share in the workload and feel a sense of ownership of their classroom. Several resources are available to help educators create a community of learners.

In addition, teachers can model appropriate caring behaviors. For example, Krystal, in the opening *Window,* treated Alex with kindness and provided simple explanations for what she

wanted him to do and why, while the other children in the classroom observed. When Alex posed challenges, children mimicked her behavior and supported each other's efforts to help him. Krystal also used specific praise in reinforcing positive behaviors in all the children. For example, she often commented on their cooperation. Alex and the other children noticed the praise and made sure their behavior was noteworthy. (Specific recommendations for providing feedback are included in *Resource C, Guides for Practice;* see also Good & Brophy, 2007; Stipek, 2002b.) Building from secure relationships, Krystal's students were able to establish trust with Alex and model positive interactions. In turn, Alex started to experience the social benefits and improve his behavior.

Table 4.1 provides a list of easily observable teacher and classroom qualities that reflect a positive classroom climate.

Table 4.1 Classroom Climate: Teacher and Classroom Qualities

Teacher Qualities	*Examples*
Enthusiasm	Uses facial expressions to show happiness and tone of voice to communicate excitement about classroom activities.
Enjoyment	Smiles often and regards challenges as opportunities to grow.
Connection	Makes eye contact with children and responds to comments and questions in a pleasant tone.
Responsiveness	Invites children to ask questions and validates opinions with a response (verbally and nonverbally).
Security	Demonstrates fairness and respect for each individual child (consistency). Does not show favoritism. Keeps in confidence the feelings and personal comments made by children.

(Continued)

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Classroom Qualities	*Examples*
Variety and Choice	• Many "interest" centers organized around recent learning themes • Soft, cozy places for reading or quiet activities • Spaces for group work and collaboration (i.e., desks arranged in groups) • Manipulatives accessible and labeled for use • Child-directed, "hands-on" (sensory) learning materials available • Photographs and recent work from the children displayed around the classroom
Movement	• Ample space for movement and accessible to disabled children • Furnishings in good repair and free from causing injury or inhibiting movement • Room to walk between learning areas
Physical Space	• Child-sized furnishings and décor • Lots of natural light in the classroom • Good ventilation • Clean and organized spaces • Well-maintained equipment and furnishings

Classroom Organization

Classroom organization practices consist of many activities, including routines, behavioral strategies, and "housekeeping" tasks. These classroom processes have been the focus of researchers for years. Hamre and Pianta (2007) divided classroom organization into three broad categories:

- *Productivity.* Refers to the classroom routines and organization as well as student engagement.
- *Behavior management.* Refers to the ways in which teachers effectively manage and promote positive behavior in the classroom.

- *Instructional formats.* Refers to the activities and learning objectives in the classroom and student choices in those objectives.

The formation of these practice areas was influenced by the work of many developmental and educational psychologists, highlighting successful processes that promote children's engagement in the learning process, such as provision of meaningful activities and guidance toward more challenging work (see previous *Five Standards*). Practices in these three areas often relate to one another. In Chapter 2, we noted that high quality organizational practices foster children's self-regulation, among other skills critical for school adjustment and achievement.

Children's engagement in *productive*, interesting activities is a central theme for successful classroom flow and organization, as well as for prevention of misbehavior.

Children's engagement in *productive,* interesting activities is a central theme for successful classroom flow and organization, as well as for prevention of misbehavior. Historically, research has supported the premise that children who are bored or left with "nothing to do" will begin to engage in negative and disruptive behaviors that take away from classroom learning and demand precious attention from the teacher (Brophy & Good, 1986). Furthermore, teachers can curtail misbehavior when they implement a few key practices into an efficient classroom routine. Current research also suggests that teachers can be productive by planning worthwhile lessons and individual follow-up activities and working with individual and small groups of children. For example, giving children interesting activity choices when they are finished with their work, assuring that assignments and lessons are challenging and meaningful, and continuously moving around the classroom to provide feedback and attention are ways teachers can keep children engaged. Successful classroom organizers rarely sit alone at teacher desks during class time.

Talking to children about expected behavior and then "living it out" in the classroom speaks volumes to children, and they will gain a sense of the classroom "culture" and practices

which in turn will aid in *managing classroom behavior.* Children's development at school starts with a nurturing relationship with the teacher (see Chapter 3) and learning how to better manage their behavior and collaborate with others (see Chapter 2). Teachers foster collaboration in the early primary grades by providing opportunities for children to work together on learning projects, molding lessons to allow individuals to contribute, and integrating role-playing situations. These practices also minimize negative behavior. In the *Window Into Practice* vignette at the beginning of this chapter, Krystal demonstrated positive strategies by helping her children take initiative to solve their conflicts through role-playing and collaborative input into the "rules" of the classroom. These strategies helped shape the culture of her classroom and provided the foundation for a community of learners to evolve. The shaping of a community of learners is also beautifully illustrated in the book by Barbara Rogoff and her colleagues (2001), *Learning Together: Children and Adults in a School Community* (see Resource C).

Research on constructivist early education also supports providing children opportunities to make meaningful choices (e.g., Stipek et al., 1998). When children are given choices within the perimeters of the classroom structure, they are able to assert some independence and initiative, which promotes their development and success in school (see Chapter 2). For example, Krystal provided many choices after work was completed and checked. Children were able to choose a quiet reading corner, a listening activity, or art center for follow-up learning activities. According to Rogoff et al. (2001), children feel a sense of ownership and enthusiasm when they are able to choose the time and sequence in finishing certain activities. Consequently, children who are engaged in their own active learning see disruptive behavior as a nuisance and a waste of time, much like how classmates took it upon themselves to problem-solve with Alex to reduce his distracting behavior so they could continue their activities (see *Windows*).

Effective *instructional formats* involve making use of instructional time to maximize children's active participation and learning opportunities. For example, in the well-examined

KEEP program, teachers spent much of their time working together with children in small groups on thoughtfully planned literacy lessons, often engaging in instructional conversations (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Other children were engaged in supportive learning activities and assisted one another. These practices are consistent with the *Five Standards* established later on the basis of studying this successful program and others.

Effective instructional formats also allow teachers to delve into their extensive "tool boxes" and choose appropriate tools to facilitate children's learning and development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). For example, a teacher might anticipate a lesson on the life cycle of a butterfly to be interesting and engaging for her class. Upon seeing the larva, the children immediately express a fascination with the tiny embryo. The teacher could change the direction of the lesson (her tool) in order to capitalize on the enthusiasm and interest of the children. The children might spend more time discussing and exploring the attributes of the larva, making connections to other creatures with similar characteristics, and possibly not complete the lesson on the butterfly life cycle that day. Children are engaged in learning activities with materials and interactions with others in a positive, somewhat flexible, classroom organization.

Playful learning is an example of an instructional format essential for optimal learning in childhood (e.g., Hirsch-Pasek et al., 2009). Playful learning is enjoyable guided play that appears spontaneous and encourages academic exploration and learning. It is connected to learning goals set by educators and designed to build on children's previous knowledge and experiences. As noted earlier, providing a classroom that supports learning through play (physical, social, pretend, and constructive) will facilitate children's growth in memory, language, social skills, self-regulation, and school success. *Tools of the Mind* is an example of an educational program that incorporates playful learning in systematic ways to build children's self-regulation and complex thinking skills (see Chapter 2 and Resources).

Table 4.2 provides descriptions of sample practices representing high quality, constructivist classroom organizational practices.

Table 4.2 Classroom Organization

	Examples
Productivity	• Children work in small groups with specific tasks to accomplish. • The teacher moves around the classroom providing feedback and attention to keep children engaged. • The teacher encourages peer conversations about the stories at the reading center. • Children have a sense of ownership of the classroom rules and feel a sense of responsibility to uphold those rules. • Children are engaged in "jobs" which support classroom routines.
Behavior Management	• Children participate in creating classroom rules (i.e., "no talking bad about classmates"). • The teacher uses role-playing to foster interpersonal skills and manage conflict. • The teacher uses both positive and negative consequences depending on the behavior. The tone is calm and nonthreatening. • The teacher models expected behavior such as "inside tone" of voice, manners, and listening to students. • Children work individually or in small groups with plenty of follow-up activities to choose from when they are finished.
Instructional Format	• The teacher provides challenging and meaningful assignments and lessons. • The teacher responds to children's interest in a particular topic and expands the activity to include time to explore their interests. • Children are able to choose materials they prefer to complete a project. • The teacher provides a variety of reading levels while encouraging students to choose books just beyond their current skill level. • The teacher provides time to engage in meaningful play opportunities.

Classroom Instruction

The third major domain of classroom practice is **instructional support.** Based on social constructivist perspectives, quality classrooms have scaffolded practices embedded into the instruction. Teachers provide a "roadmap" of learning outcomes to help guide children along the path (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Instruction in the classroom then assists each child while traveling down the road. For example, to assist children in learning to classify animals, a teacher might provide areas identified as potential homes for the animals (i.e., water, desert, forest). Then, children can place each animal where they feel it would live. Once children have placed each animal in a home, the teacher can engage them in a lively discussion (instructional conversation) about the attributes of each home and why each particular animal needs that home to survive. Quality instruction challenges children to stretch just beyond their current skill level and gives ample opportunities for children to practice their newly acquired skills.

A sample instructional strategy is **reciprocal teaching**. Reciprocal teaching is an excellent example of applying Vygotsky's social-cultural theory in the classroom (Brown, 1997; Brown & Campione, 1990). Reciprocal teaching is a group discussion between students and the teacher (or adult) designed to strengthen reading comprehension skills. The teacher may ask questions about a story requiring children to summarize, infer, make predictions, or explain inconsistencies. As the children gain mastery synthesizing the story, the teacher increases the level of challenging questions. Eventually, children become the leaders of the discussion and the teacher reduces his role to a coach or mentor. Reciprocal teaching allows the less competent student to step up to more difficult levels as the teacher carefully scaffolds. It also supports analysis and reasoning skills as children are reaffirmed and encouraged to explore the elements of the story. Research on the use of reciprocal teaching has shown great improvements in student comprehension, even in a short amount of time. In addition, reciprocal teaching supports a better understanding of science and social studies curriculum content.

. . . quality teachers consistently ask open-ended questions and expand children's responses. They are clearly intentional about their instructional efforts. . . .

Reciprocal teaching has also been shown to support at-risk readers as well. For example, Brown (1997) reported that participants in reciprocal teaching groups improved their comprehension and they maintained their advantage even after 1 year.

Quality instructional support also involves *intentional language stimulation* and facilitation. Teachers display a variety of self-talk, parallel-talk, open-ended questions, and repetitive language while providing positive feedback and focus on the learning process, not just outcomes. Research suggests that in classrooms where such instructional supports are used, such as feedback and language modeling, children show achievement gains (e.g., Pianta et al., 2007). These gains are evident in literacy skills (reading, vocabulary, language), as well as social adjustment. Research also shows that quality teachers consistently ask open-ended questions and expand children's responses. They are clearly intentional about their instructional efforts and they support peer conversations.

Classroom instructional practices are most effective when they contain a *wide variety of activities and interactions.* NAEYC supports instructional practices incorporating close monitoring of individual children's progress and planning purposeful learning experiences based on understandings of curricular goals (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Krystal, in the opening *Window,* took time before the school year started to collaborate with prior teachers and discuss her new students, gaining valuable information about them personally, socially, and academically. With this information, she was able to plan instructional lessons that were flexible and tailored to the children's interests and challenges. In order to guide instruction with intention and purpose, quality teachers recognize children's interests and involvement in the planning process.

Regardless of the curriculum standards, individual teachers can create supportive practices to facilitate academic learning. In addition to aspects of effective instruction discussed so far, key elements of quality instructional practices in classrooms include the following:

- Attending to individual skill levels and making adjustments as needed
- Providing an extension of lessons for children who are ready to move ahead
- Basing lessons on children's prior knowledge
- Rotating learning centers, materials, and books to keep children interested and curious
- Keeping lessons and activities relevant to a child's world

Summary of the Three Domains of Classroom Practice

Balancing child- and teacher-directed classroom practices takes time, reflection, and practice. As teachers focus on classroom climate, organization, and instruction, they can begin the process of seeing the environment through the children's eyes. If teachers are to embrace constructivist practices in their classroom, then their attention must be centered on the mind and heart of the child. Consistent monitoring of feedback from children is essential to understanding if effective learning is taking place. Table 4.3 includes questions teachers might ask themselves to check their instructional intentions and flexibility in a constructivist classroom. Many of these questions require feedback from the children themselves.

Quality instructional supports, classroom organization, and positive classroom climates make great differences in children's learning and achievement. As Alex recalls his experience in his third-grade classroom, described in *The Child's Window,* high quality practices in these three domains were

Table 4.3 Child-Centered Thinking

How many children are interested in this current activity?
Which children need another avenue for learning this activity?
How will I choose that alternative avenue for those children?
Is there a new skill that the children are learning with the activity?
What other impacts on learning might this activity have?
How can I relate this activity to the children's lives and make it relevant?
Is there a change in our classroom schedule that needs adjustment to accommodate this learning?
If so, how might this change in schedule impact the rest of the school day?
How might I engage those children that seem to have difficulty with this activity?

(Adapted from Rogoff et al., 2001, p. 100.)

evident and instrumental in shaping him to become a successful learner and high school graduate.

The Child's Window

Alex looked out over the audience of parents, family, friends, and teachers. It was high school graduation day and he could hardly believe his formal school years were completed. He remembered his elementary days and couldn't help but smile when he thought of Mrs. Smith's third-grade class. He remembered how he felt the first few weeks of class. He was nervous and confused. Alex remembered Mrs. Smith's warm smile and the way she would look into his eyes as if to say that everything would be ok. He remembered his friends, Kevin, Alyssa, and Clint. He remembered how they would take the

time to explain things to him when he forgot the instructions. He remembered how good he felt when he shared the crayons and glue sticks with his tablemates. Alex even smiled when he thought of all the weekly "jobs" he and his classmates participated in to keep their classroom clean and organized. He remembered Mrs. Smith telling them that it was their classroom and it was their responsibility to maintain it so they would be ready to learn. By participating in responsibilities as a "table team," Alex began to understand the power of this classroom process. Although he didn't realize it at the time, Alex felt accepted in his third-grade class. It wasn't perfect; there were many instances of conflict, arguing, and tears. But, through it all, Alex remembered feeling accepted in school for the first time. After that year, he didn't feel lonely or rejected anymore. He understood how to treat people with respect and how to accept differences in others. He also had developed confidence in his academic abilities. Alex could recall how Mrs. Smith used familiar concepts such as drawing circles to help him understand how to write cursive letters. Now, on graduation day, Alex recognized that he understood these things because Mrs. Smith created an accepting environment in his third-grade classroom. Alex felt happy and confident that he could live his life like Mrs. Smith did. Alex was determined to make a difference for others in just that same way!

Chapter Summary

Quality classroom practices continue to be a source of discussion and analysis in the fields of education and psychology. Social constructivist theories point to the use of scaffolded instruction and sensitivity to learners' ZPD; the teacher becomes a guide and participant in the learning process. These developmentally appropriate, learner-centered practices have positive influences on children's motivation, self-regulation, and academic achievement, and therefore, they are central to our understanding of successful teachers. NAEYC and other professional organizations have provided guiding principles for developmentally appropriate practices, which reflect sound research and a strong theoretical base (see Resources). The ECCOM, ECERS-R, and CLASS are effective measures monitoring the quality of classroom climate, organization, and instructional support. These three related domains of

classroom practice are critical to evaluate and modify with intention and purpose as we continue to improve education in the early years and beyond.

Questions to Ponder

1. Reflect on the *Window Into Practice* story at the beginning of the chapter. What types of climate qualities do you see incorporated into the classroom before the school year even begins? How might you incorporate some of these qualities into a classroom climate?
2. Ask yourself the "child-centered thinking" questions in Table 4.3. How can you change a lesson or activity to be more child-centered?

Practice Exercises

1. **Classroom Climate.** Refer to Table 4.1. What do you think children would say about the climate of a classroom?
2. **Classroom Organization.** Examine the organization of a classroom. Do you see evidence of constructivist practices? Refer to Table 4.2.
3. **Instructional Support.** Create a sample lesson for preschoolers or primary-grade children. Rate your lesson from 1 to 5 (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very*) on the following items:
   - Have I based my lesson on children's prior knowledge?
   - Have I provided "hands-on," real experiences whenever possible?
   - Did I attend to individual children's skill levels, making adjustments as needed?
   - Did I provide an extension of my lesson for children who might be ready to move ahead?

How could you improve your responses to these questions?

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