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Creation of prosocial play experiences
inspired by Noddings's ideas of centers of care

Summary

This paper describes the implementation of Noddings's ideas of creating centers as a platform for developing in children caring, prosocial behavior. Different centers such as a veterinary center, grocery store, house, baby center, woodworking center, hairdressing, block center, and composting and recycling activities based on play, provide opportunities for stimulating the social development of children and create a caring community of learners based on sharing, helping each other, working as a team and caring for others' wellbeing.

Keywords: caring communities, prosocial play, centers of care

Introduction

In Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood programs we can find ideas of "creating a caring community of learners" (Copple and Bredekamp 2009). Researchers demonstrate that, by age five, children identify two ways of being moral: one is to be fair or just and the other is to help (Scoresby 1991). According to research, the reasoning behind the caring characteristics of children ranges from biological inheritance, such as a predisposition, to environmental factors, such as identification with others (Kagan & Lamb 1987). There is a need to teach children to care as a part of their moral development. There is also a need for teachers to model and practice caring and to be able to develop it in children.

   V. Shabatay (1991: 138) looking at caring communities stresses our attitude towards others: *The way we treat strangers reveals as much about us as it does about them. Meeting the stranger requires of us that we respond in one way or another: with indifference, disdain, and suspicion, or with interest, friendship, and openness. Further, the stranger may represent that which is very different, and how we respond to his or her distinctive-*

ness affects not only the personal realm, but the social and political as well. How we respond is a reflection, also, of our ethical and religious views and commitments.

F. Vogt (2002) stresses that caring within teaching can be understood in a range of ways: caring as commitment, relatedness, and physical care, expressing affection, such as cuddling, parenting, and mothering. She argues that caring as relatedness can be linked with the concept of the ethics of care. Her research challenges the view of caring as normally related to women caring. She proves caring to be a characteristic of men also. Caring is developed in stages, and at first children must learn to care for themselves and significant others in their surroundings, then progress toward caring for other people whom they do not know but who need help, and the final stage is planning to help strangers in need.
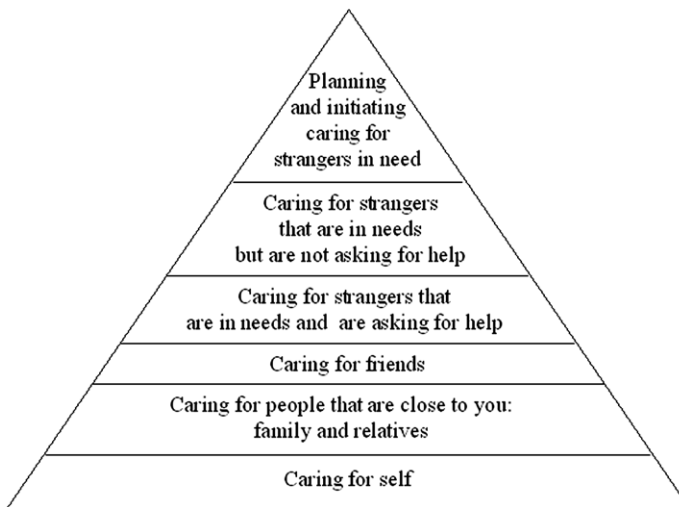

Figure 1. Caring is developed in stages (Nowak-Fabrykowski 2010)

If we further assume that the school is a caring community then what are its characteristics? Friedman quoted by V. Shabatay (1991: 138) stresses that: *The very existence in genuine community is already a common concern, a caring for one another. The caring begins with understanding from within the actual people present. Only then does it extend to gather other people in and then have a dialogue with other communities*. N. Noddings (1991: 166) stresses that: *It may be impossible for regular schools to provide the sort of care required by children who have never experienced caring relations, but schools can help most children to learn more about how to care and be cared for, and our society ought to make education for caring a top priority*.

D. Ceglowski (1997) emphasizes that early childhood educators have raised concerns about early childhood programs that have adopted more academic programs (incorporating worksheets and largely teacher-directed experiences) since research demonstrated that this type of approach makes children less creative, more text anxious and having

a less positive attitude toward school. R. Bailey (2002) stresses the importance of play in a child's development as a way of experimenting with possible feelings and possible identities without risking the real biological or social consequences calling this process of understanding someone's mind "playing social chess". A. Sterling-Honing (2007) stresses the relationship between play and learning as: play enhances dexterity and grace; peer play promotes social skills; sharpens cognitive and language skills; helps to acquire number and time concepts; promotes spatial understanding, reasoning of cause and effect; socio-dramatic play clarifies the world of pretend versus real; enriches sensory and aesthetic appreciation; extends attention span, persistence, and sense of mastery; helps children release emotions and relieves separation anxiety.

D. Ceglowski (1997: 108) quoted the research of King (1979, 1982) who observed children's play and asked them later which activities they considered as work and which as play. Children categorized play as freely chosen activities in contrast to teacher's assigned activities that they labeled work. Also children view play as less important than work.

Children are less and less involved in play. Many reasons are given for this situation such as increased demand to sit for academic lessons and standardized tests; watching television and playing video games; very short or lost school recess; rushed and over-scheduled lives; the glut of toys that control play (Ferguson 2007). Therefore children don't have as many opportunities as in the past to participate in social interactions and learn prosocial skills. In the existing situation when children are more and more experiencing violence and bullying, the development of friendship, team-work, and problem-solving skills is a necessity.

D. De-Suza and J. Radell (2011) described their experience of promoting superheroes as an opportunity to develop prosocial play and stressed that children embraced the idea about helping, caring, and being kind to the people they came across. According to C. Rogers and J. Sawyers (1990), children's fantasy play is often called socio-dramatic play, make-believe play that involves social interactions. However, to be able to engage in this type of play children must have the necessary knowledge of social rules. Prosocial behavior demonstrated in young children's play is based on rules and behaviors established by the teachers and children, their ability to communicate with social partners, including other participants so as to focus on others not just on oneself. Children develop prosocial behavior in their play actions, social situations, and cultural events.

J. Kagan and Sh. Lamb (1987) stressed that some empirical findings suggest that children are biologically predisposed to moral standards. Some standards are established through identification with others and some are unconscious. According to T.E. Wren (1991), morality involves self-regulation. Hume suggests that feelings, not reason, lie at the heart of morality, and therefore, emotions guide our actions. For T.E. Wren (1991), moral motives relate to connotative dispositions such as kindness, courage, fidelity, and piety. Moral motives function as mediators between thought and action.

Reggio Emilia philosophy

C. Edwards, L. Gandini and G. Forman (1998) writing about the role of space in Reggio Emilia schools stress the *instructive power of space* that in addition to welcoming, fosters encounters, communication, and relationships. She also points to the arrangement of structures, objects, and activities that encourage choices, problem solving, and discoveries. This philosophy is becoming very popular around the world since Loris Malaguzzi a creator of the Reggio Emilia philosophy together with many teachers and parents started a new preschool for young children in Italy in 1945. The first preschool – inspired by his philosophy – was created in the city of Villa Cella and the first preschool in the city of Reggio Emilia in 1963 (Fraser & Gestwicki 2000).

These preschools implement a philosophy of democracy, cooperation, parental involvement, art and projects, and are based on constructivism seeing children as protagonists able to create their knowledge under a guidance of a teacher (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). An innovative approach that is making this preschool special is the idea that children learn and express their knowledge using 100 languages: gesture, drawing, painting, words, and songs etc. (Hendrick 2004).

Methodology

A qualitative approach based on naturalistic inquiry of studying real-world situations as they unfold naturally (Patton 1990) and grounded theory study to derive theory from data collected in a natural setting with the focus on understanding human actions and interactions, and how they result from and influence one another (Leedy & Ormrod 2001).

Population

Sixty four children, three and four year olds, playing in the centers in the Child Development and Learning Center.

Collection of data

We applied strategy developed by L.R. Gay and P. Airasian (2000) who suggested that to ensure reliability of observation, the observer should observe for few minutes and then record for few minutes. This alternation of behavior controls for the fact that the observer pays complete attention while observing.

Procedure

N. Noddings (1992) suggests that the curriculum should be organized entirely around centers or themes of care: care for self, care for intimate others, care for strangers, and distant others, care for animals, care for plants and the living environment, care for objects and instruments, and care for ideas. This idea influenced the staff of the child laboratory to create some centers helping children to develop their prosocial skills through play. The pilot study with the centers was implemented successfully in 2012 (Nowak-Fabrykowski 2012).

Analysis of data

According to L.R. Gay and P. Airasian (2000: 247) the qualitative researcher must both deconstruct the field notes into data pieces and then reconstruct them into meaningful and relevant data categories and patterns. To verify meanings of observed events and provide validation we have applied two strategies, recommended by M.B. Miles and A.M. Huberman and quoted by G.D. Shank (2002), based on "checking the meaning of outliers" – people that are acting different and getting feedback from informants (cooperating teachers and preschool director).

Results

The Reggio-inspired Child Development and Learning Center focuses on developing prosocial skills in children. There are many activities that focus on friendship and the development of caring dispositions in children. In the hallway there are posted research questions that help teachers and students answer or raise their inquiries about the child's development.

The observed examples of caring behaviors

There were the following centers that stimulated certain actions and behaviors.

Baby Care: The children fed, clothed and washed the baby dolls. Children ensured the baby dolls safety by buckling them in strollers and car seats when they would travel around the classroom. While covering up a baby doll in a car seat with a blanket, a child said, "So it doesn't get sunburned." The children also made toys for the baby dolls at school and gifted them to a local daycare when they visited.

Grocery store: Children learned to behave in a prosocial way in the store being polite and learning good behavior.

Woodworking center: helping each other to choose a good piece of wood, lending tools, holding material, sharing materials and tools.

Veterinary clinic: taking care of animals by giving them a bath, feeding them, giving shots, playing with them, taking them for a walk.

Hair salon: washing the hair of their friends, coloring hair, drying and styling hair, being concerned about their friend's appearance. Children asked "Who needs a haircut?" – not the real one – just pretend.

Blocks center: building together (example: a long bridge), developing team work and co-operative play, sharing blocks and ideas. Children also learn to solve problems peacefully. For example: In one instance a boy knocked down another boy's tower. The boy looked at him and instead of being angry just said "you destroyed my tower, I have to build it again… it is hard for me." The other boy just looked and started to help rebuild …… it together. In this instance the few prosocial behaviors were presented: forgiveness, persistence, and peaceful problem solving followed by cooperation.

House: cooking for each other, taking a baby doll for a walk, changing baby, feeding baby, cleaning the house, inviting other children to the house, using good manners when setting the table, dressing up baby, taking family for concert of Hanna Montana. One girl blocking door to the house saying to a boy, "You cannot come in if you forget to clean up."

Another activity is helping children to work together to understand how recycling and composting are necessary to save our planet.

Discussion

Organization of centers that provide opportunities for care and cooperation stimulate the social development of children and create a caring community of learners based on sharing, helping each other, working as a team, and caring for others' wellbeing. Caring for others involves asking if someone needs something like, "Who needs a haircut?" Children also learn to appreciate work when they proudly announce, "I am a working girl" (girl working in the hair salon). Every center such as "Hair salon", "Woodworking", "House", "Veterinary clinic" provided activities that focused on caring for others and working cooperatively.

Teachers also use "social language" and beside the "Please" and "Thanks" they sing songs like, "I am making a shape for you", or "Who is cleaning the room?" and the children reply, "I am". Children learn to give compliments such as "I like your jacket" or "I like your hair". They ask nicely for help, saying, "Would you like to help me?" or "Could you help me, teacher?" The books the teachers read reinforce empathy. For example in "Clumsy Crab" children learned about helping others (when a crab untangles an octopus from a net).

In conclusion, if we would like to guide children into the development of caring dispositions we have to organize some opportunities that will stimulate certain actions and behaviors, and give both teachers and children a platform to advocate desirable dispositions.

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