Reading Assignment

Child-Oriented Lesson Plans: A Change of Theme

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It's "Yellow Week" at Everytown Day Care. The lesson plan posted by the door lists many activities, materials, and experiences that the adults have planned to help the children learn about the color yellow. Some of the planned activities include making yellow modeling dough, putting yellow paper on the easel, telling the parents to dress their children in yellow clothes during the week, and reading stories and singing songs about things that are yellow such as the sun, corn, and flowers. In creating the plans for this year's "Yellow Week," the adults used curriculum resource books, materials they had stored in a curriculum file cabinet, and last year's lesson plans.

Every teacher of young children faces the challenge of planning what to do the next day or week in the classroom. One of the most common ways to create lesson plans is the theme-based approach, in which adults choose a theme (e.g., "community helpers," "dinosaurs," or "yellow"), then plan their activities and materials around this focus.

This theme-based approach to planning is used in the majority of early childhood programs today. Early childhood educators often cite many advantages of using themes: They are a convenient vehicle for organizing and planning activities; they insure that the program has tangible educational content; and they enable adults to expand children's horizons by introducing new topics and materials.

But despite the widespread popularity of theme-based planning, the themes adults choose are not always developmentally appropriate or meaningful for young children. For children to make sense of a theme, it must be relevant to their interests and experiences. There is no guarantee that a theme invented by a teacher, chosen from a book, or taken from last year's lesson plan will match children's interests, experiences, or developmental levels. Sometimes, adults may be so preoccupied with the chosen theme that they fail to recognize the children's own interests and preferred play activities.

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"Blinded" by the theme, adults may miss opportunities to support and extend what children are doing and thinking about.

Let's return to the Everytown Day Care for an example of the pitfalls of overemphasizing a theme. *A group of children were using cardboard tubes, shoe boxes, and small counting bears of many colors, pretending that the bears were "cave exploring." Because it was "Yellow Week," the teacher working with the children was more interested in having children identify which bears were yellow and what the yellow bears were doing than in participating in children's cave-exploring play. The children's interest in cave exploring presented many possibilities that the teacher could have extended later in the week: for example, by bringing in big boxes to "go exploring" in, by finding books on caves or songs about bats, and by using flashlights as planning or recall props. Instead, the adult focused on her agenda, yellow, and missed these opportunities for building on the children's play.*

An Alternative — Child-Oriented Planning

In an alternative approach to lesson planning that we have developed at HighScope, adults identify children's interests and developing abilities, then build their lesson plans on these observations. Throughout this process, adults use the HighScope key developmental indicators (KDIs) and/or COR items to help clarify the developmental significance of children's actions and to suggest related experiences that may be appropriate for children.

Making the transition to a child-oriented planning system may be difficult for teachers and caregivers accustomed to planning in the more traditional way. This requires that the adults in the classroom

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become daily observers of children to discover what is meaningful and important to them, asking these questions: What kinds of objects and materials do children like to play with? What books, songs, and finger plays are they familiar with? How complex is their play? What kinds of roles are they enacting? What ideas, experiences, or events do they talk about the most?

Once such observations are made, adults need a systematic way to record and discuss them. To do this, teachers trained in the HighScope curriculum meet daily after the children have gone home (or during rest time) to discuss their observations of children. Adults are also developing objective observation skills, relating what they observe to the curriculum content, and using the anecdotes they have recorded as a starting point for discussions with each other. The next step in establishing child-oriented planning is developing plans for the next day that build on these observations.

A Typical Child-Initiated Play Theme

An illustration of how teachers incorporate their observations into plans occurred recently in a HighScope classroom. A telephone repair crew arrived one day to fix some telephone wires connected to the classroom building. The children were fascinated as they watched the crew climb up the telephone poles and use the lifts on the truck. They were also interested in the crew's special equipment and clothing: their spiked boots, hard hats, and tool bags. For the rest of that day, the children represented the experience of the telephone repair crew in a variety of ways: pretending to be repairmen themselves by wearing hats, making and wearing "tool belts," and climbing on chairs to fix the "wire." During that day's planning session, the teachers noted the children's obvious interest in this experience and made plans to support telephone-repair-crew play.

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The adults' role during lesson planning was similar to their role during choice time: they explored ways to support and extend children's interests and abilities, using the KDIs as a reference for understanding the children's actions. All during the telephone-repair-crew play, the teachers had observed what the children did and how they did it. They recognized that the children had been engaging in the creative arts KDIs (e.g., *imitating actions and sounds; pretending and role playing*) so they recorded what they had seen the children do. The teachers had also observed that when some children watched the repair crew at work and climbed up on chairs to imitate them, they were involved in the cognitive KDIs (e.g., *experiencing and describing positions, directions, and distances in the play space, building, and neighborhood; observing people, places, and things from different spatial viewpoints*).

In planning ways to extend on this play, the adults decided to create additional opportunities for children to continue their representational and spatial learning in the context of the telephone play. For planning time, for example, they decided to ask children to plan by talking to one another on old cell phones and by stretching "wires" (pieces of string) to the places they wanted to play in. They planned to observe whether children's interest in representing the telephone experience would continue and whether they would describe positions, directions, and locations as they discussed their plans. They also decided to give children additional opportunities to represent the telephone experience by planning two small-group times: one in which children made "construction belts" (the adults brought in old belts and children fastened objects from the classroom on them) and another in which children used thin telephone wire to create sculptures.

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In conclusion, it is important to note that the telephone play was not the only focus for adults and children that week. In fact, children engaged in many different kinds of play, both individual and cooperative, that the staff also supported. Some children were interested in making spiders from pipe cleaners; others were attracted to a new computer program that was available; and several spent time wrapping "presents" for family members. Staff recognized and supported all these interests as they interacted with children. The telephone play stands out because it was the basis for so many classroom activities, but adults didn't focus exclusively on working with children involved in telephone play.

Whether or not a child's activities reflected a popular idea, the guiding principle for these adults was to be responsive to children. When adults use children's ideas and interests as the source of inspiration, either for interacting with children individually or creating lesson plans, they insure that the resulting activities will be developmentally appropriate and in tune with children's needs and interests.

Adapted from: Tompkins, M. (1991). "Child-Oriented Lesson Plans: A Change of Theme." In N. Brickman and L. Taylor (Eds.), *Supporting young learners: Ideas for preschool and day care providers* (pp. 213–219). Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press.