

**INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND
THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATORS IN THE USE OF THE HOLISTIC APPROACH**

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Abstract: "Developmentally appropriate practice requires both meeting children where they are—which means that teachers must get to know them well —and enabling them to reach goals that are both challenging and achievable."

It is practitioner's responsibility to seek out and intentionally plan the best opportunities for children that support their over-all well-being and healthy development. The practices that are used when working with young children need to embrace the most current, effective approaches in learning and development. These can be described as best practices, thoughtful teaching, quality practices, or Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP). DAP comes from a deep history in early education, research, and what many describe as "good thinking."

Developmentally appropriate practice is a comprehensive educational perspective that supports optimal healthy development for every child. Developmentally appropriate practice embraces both continuity and change; continuity because it guides a tradition of quality early learning and change as it incorporates new research, knowledge, and science in regard to children's development and learning.

Key words: well-being, healthy development, YOUNG CHILDREN, KNOWLEDGE, NEW RESEARCH

Introduction

Early childhood is important for the general development of the personality. Theories and research highlight the importance of the early childhood for the intellectual, emotional, speech and social development, thus it is important to create stimulating conditions for development. Theory and practice promote the holistic approach for encouraging early learning and development of the young children. The social processes of democratization reflect in the educational work with the children of preschool age and require adequate use of the professional knowledge and the humanistic-theoretical and the pedagogical-psychological process in the interpretation of the personality of the child.

All of the educational activities in preschool education are focused on respecting and catering to the needs, interests and potentials of each child. All children should be given the

opportunity to develop according to their own personal pace of development. Development is a process of change which is the result of respecting the individual characteristics of the child, observing the internal abilities and the natural development which strengthens the skills for movement, thinking, feeling and speaking.

Same as the other children, the children with difficulties in the development and the early learning have strong and weak sides which are peculiar for each child. Some children display clearly recognizable developmental difficulties, such as the children with sight impairments, but others do not. They can display certain developmental deviations and changes in the behavior which the environment perceives as a limiting factor for their participation in the daily routine or the activities which are carried out in the kindergartens.

The formulation “developmental deviations” means that if the child is given the necessary time and opportunities, he/she can catch up with the peers in the developmental areas which are in question.

In other cases, the children can be in an unfavorable situation regarding certain developmental deviations as a result of an illness or limitations imposed by the environment where the children grow and learn. This means that without the adequate support and early intervention, the children who are at risk can develop permanent disabilities.

*Early intervention in the early childhood*¹ – programs which are developed with the purpose to support the children at risk from difficulties in the development and the early learning.

They are sets of activities that help to:

- Improve the functional development of the child
- Strengthen the competencies of the family
- Promote social inclusion of the child and the family
- Include the children in the regular preschool institutions

Regardless of the type of problems that the children face, it is very important to develop an attitude in each professional (educator) that all children can learn by providing conditions for their participation in the everyday activities.

The modern pedagogical approaches directed to small children with difficulties in the early learning and development demand practices that provide their complete participation in the social life – the family, the preschool institutions and the community. This is based on the fact that the preschool children with developmental difficulties and their families are

¹ UNICEF/WHO A DISCUSSION PAPER: Early Childhood Development and Disability , Geneva , 2012

important members of each community. It also reflects the key values of a society that opposes the practice of isolation and separation of the children with difficulties in the early learning and development, i.e. the children with special needs. With the course of time, the new legal regulations should prevent the old practices and promote the new practices of total inclusion of these children in the preschool institutions. In other words, the children with difficulties should be involved in the everyday activities with children, in which they will be accepted both by the peers and adults.

The definition for inclusion in the preschool institutions implies high expectations for the developmental accomplishments of all children regardless of their developmental level and use of inclusive Programs for early learning and development that promote a holistic approach, participation and support.

It is a fact that each child is an individual with its own pace of progress, meaning that they do not accomplish the expected results and standards for early learning and development in the same way. The educators can also notice that a child does not accomplish according to his/her capacities and potentials. In this case, the educators plan support in the early period of preschool education of the child, i.e. adjustment of the approach or individualization of the educational process. The failure to accomplish the desired results and standards for early learning can be the result of different reasons and circumstances: handicap in the development and disability, insufficient knowledge of the language of communication, differences in the economic status of the families, neglect, emotional problems, long-term diseases, difficulties in learning that are difficult to detect, etc.

The researches show that the children with difficulties in development and early learning learn the best in their natural environment and in interaction with the other children in the group (Allen & Cowdery, 2005; Brown, Hemmeter, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2005). This interaction is also important for the children who do not demonstrate limitations because they learn for tolerance and acceptance of differences from the earliest age.

The educators in the kindergarten should initiate activities in order to create conditions for discovery and learning through games, interaction (child-child, child-adult), engagement in research-discovery processes and solving different problem situations by all children, which stimulates and develops the motor, language, cognitive and socioemotional skills.

How the small children learn

The children need to be interested and engaged in the activities in order to enhance their competencies and to acquire new skills and knowledge.

The games that are based on the interest of the children, the research activities and the considerable participation in the activity are called engagement. The engagement is measured by the time that the child spends in significant interaction with individuals, events and objects. (McWilliam, R.A., 2010)

The process of learning in conditions of a high degree of engagement of the child occurs in the following way:

- When the children are interested about the activity, there is higher probability that they are engaged.
- When the children are engaged in the everyday activities that are adequate to their development, they use all of their competences and acquire new skills. The researches show that the activities which the children are very interested in result in the acquisition of higher competencies. The individuals, events and objects, which the children are interested in, attract their attention more, and this encourages them to get engaged in the games, to research and take part in the interaction with the individuals and objects from the surrounding. The expression of the existing competencies and the development of new competencies are influenced by how (the parents, the educators, the peers, the brothers, the sisters...) react to the children when they express their competencies. When the children understand the connection between their behavior and the consequences that go with it, their feeling that they have mastered specific skills grows.
- The mastering of the skills results in interest for new skills and gives a new impetus to the learning cycle.

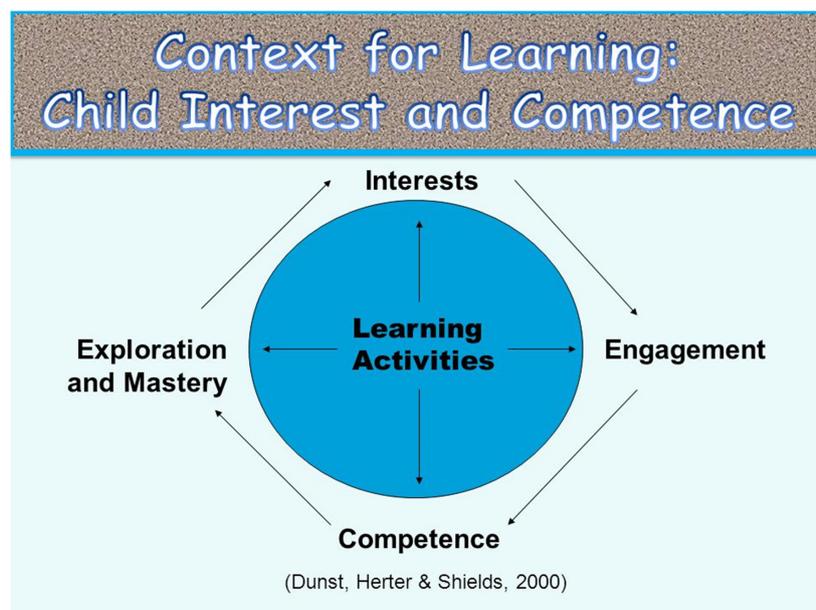


Fig. 1. Learning cycle

The researches show that the child interest for engagement in an activity depends on:

The intensity for **participation** in the activity,

- The level of **engagement** in the activity, the adequate use of didactic means and materials
- **The frequency and duration** of the activity in which the students are involved while they learn new skills
- Development of new competencies and the feeling that they **have mastered a new skill**

The greater the engagement of the children, the more positive the results in their:

- Behavior
- Developmental process
- Communication
- Problem solving
- Interaction with others

The researches show that the children with difficulties in the development and early learning have a tendency to be less engaged than the other children.

A reverse process is present. They are engaged less, they practice their skills less and this decreases their potential for mastering new skills and behaviors.

A study (Mahoney, G. 2008.) shows that the small children with difficulties in the development and early learning have a delay in the motor development of 50% and that they need two times more exercising than their peers in order to master a new functional skill. Two times more exercising should not be replaced with two times increased therapeutic procedure or service, because exercising can be done everywhere and any time.

Mastering functional skills is done through very frequent activities that are done in the everyday context and in different ambient and are related to the everyday activities that happen in the family and outside of it.

(Shelden, M. L., & Rush, D. D. (2001), Dunst, C. J., Bruder, M. B., Trivette, C. M., Hamby, D., Raab, M., & McLean, M. (2001).

The exercising and the continuous repetition of the activities help all children, including the children with difficulties in the development to master functional skills and to advance to the next developmental stage. The inner motivation (which is guided by the interest of the child and the pleasure when doing an activity and mastering skills) increases the potential for exercising and researching, which leads to mastering new functions. (Raab, M. (2005). The potential of the children to exercise increases when the parents/ educators/ adults choose everyday activities that are interesting for the children or encourage the early learning in

specific situations, and relate to games and support the childish games.

Without an adequate exercising for mastering the basic skills, the children cannot advance to the next developmental stage, which takes time and great dedication by everyone who takes part in the development and early learning of the children, which results in increased inclusive capacity of the community.

The promoting of the inclusive practices in the kindergartens depends a lot on the understanding of the educators that this is a process which not only demands an adequate corner for the children with difficulties in the activity room, but their significant participation in all activities that take place there as well, in order for their developmental potential to be completely used so the children can progress further in the early learning depending on their developmental capacities.

Recognition of the children with difficulties in the early childhood development

The educators, and other adults need to observe and evaluate the child's development in terms of the accomplishment of the standards for the specific age.

If there is a specific developmental deviation, regardless whether it is identified by competent individuals or by another adult during the routine activities, it would be appropriate for an additional functional assessment of the development to be carried out (but only in the frames of one's own competence) by identifying the developmental accomplishments, and the developmental difficulties, as well.

The small children differ in terms of how and when they master specific skills and knowledge.

Observing and evaluating the development of the child and preparing an individual plan for each child with difficulties

If the educators, parents or other individuals that take care of the child have noticed or have doubts that something unusual happens in the development or behavior of the child, or perhaps that the child does not demonstrate developmental accomplishments like the other children in the group should engage in additional observing and assessment of the developmental accomplishments in specific developmental domains. The observation and the functional assessment are not a diagnosis, but they help to document the behavior of the child in specific periods and in different situations that take place when the child plays or learns in the everyday situations, in the kindergartens or at home.

These are the general recommendations when observing the behavior of a child:

- Objectivity

- Documentation and taking notes of specific behavior
- Avoid interpreting a particular situation
- Observing the child in different situations several times
- Paying attention both to the positive and weak sides of the child.

All these elements are key determinants in the process of development, learning and accomplishment, further on in the life of the children with difficulties. The holistic approach that is based on the development and learning of the children of preschool age refers to providing a secure and safe environment for learning and development, increase of the developmental preparedness for school, and the forming of proper habits for protection of the health of the child. Special attention should be paid to the laws for development of the children of preschool age, namely: - the two-sided connection between the physical and psychological development.

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