

Teacher Memories

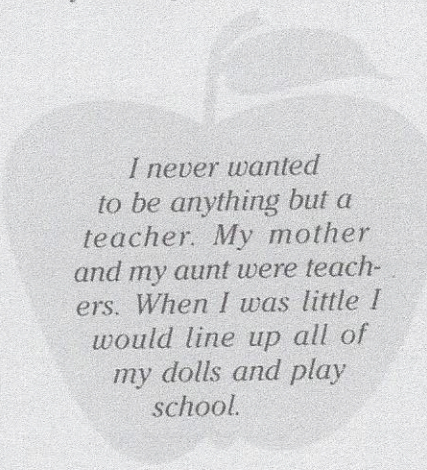
Support or Hindrance to Good Practice?

Nancy Loeb Jacobs and Bobbie Jo Eskridge

Memories are the subjective historians of the knowledge we gain from our experiences, from our feelings about our experiences, and from what we learn from others. Many skills are involved in memory. It is not a single process but a series of cognitive processes. Memory is closely intertwined with intellectual as well as social functioning (Kail 1990).

Evidence suggests that memories of childhood and early schooling have an impact on teachers' motivations, expectations, and values in the classroom (Hollingsworth 1989; Calderhead & Robson 1991). Teacher memories "do not constitute objective truth but a

kind of personal truth upon which belief systems are built" (Rothenberg 1994, 370). This article explores the effect that school and early learning memories can have



I never wanted to be anything but a teacher. My mother and my aunt were teachers. When I was little I would line up all of my dolls and play school.

Nancy Loeb Jacobs, Ph.D., is assistant professor emerita of child development at the University of Akron in Ohio. Prior to instructing early childhood teachers, she served for 16 years as director of early childhood services at Bellefaire J.D.N. Child Care Center in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

Bobbie Jo Eskridge is a researcher at Ohio's Kent State University and the Family Child Learning Center. She has coordinated and participated in several federally funded research grants concerning early childhood education and is working on her master's degree in child development.

on teachers' interactions, decisions about classroom environment, and curriculum choices.

In a review of the research done on developmentally appropriate practice during the past 10 years, Dunn and Kontos (1997) examine the complex relationship between teachers' beliefs and teachers' practices. Charlesworth and colleagues (1993), for example, found that kindergarten teachers' beliefs are more consistent with

developmentally appropriate practices than are their behaviors. Dunn and Kontos conclude that research findings reflect incongruity between developmental knowledge and beliefs and classroom application. They suggest that we need to learn more about how to effectively help early childhood teachers implement developmentally appropriate practice.

Why would professionally trained teachers express support for developmentally appropriate practice yet still use teaching strategies and make curriculum choices that are contrary to their beliefs and their knowledge of child development? We propose that teachers' personal recollections may be a support to appropriate practice or may be a hindrance by overriding their knowledge and training.

To discuss this subject we address two questions: In what ways does memory impact teachers' beliefs, sensitivity to learning environments, teacher-child interactions, and developmentally appropriate curriculum choices in the early childhood classroom? How can teachers analyze and evaluate their memories so that they become useful tools for supporting and increasing their classroom skills?

The very earliest learning memories occur in informal experiences with family, caregivers, and friends at home, at play, or during traumatic events. But our clearest impressions of formal education and teaching styles are based primarily on later elementary, middle school, and secondary school classroom experiences. Earlier events are not always easily recalled because happenings that occur early in life are less accessible to us as adults (Usher & Neisser 1993). When the context of original learning is similar to a later experience, however, recall of events is considered more likely (Myers, Clifton, & Clarkson 1987).

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Many preschool classrooms are in buildings with an environment similar to that which teachers experienced as students in formal elementary classrooms. The challenge for the preschool teacher is to resist the temptation to apply the more easily evoked memories and associated pleasures of elementary school activities, because in the early childhood classroom most of these recollections do not apply.

Teachers who recognize their own memories of how they learned when they were very young can heighten their perceptions of children's feelings and increase their understanding of children's behavior. However, errors in applying recollections sometimes can interfere with teachers' established knowledge of what young children need for healthy development. This confusion often leads to mistaken conclusions and inappropriate choices.

Take the new, well-trained teacher who expressed resentment over the school expectation that teachers prepare lesson plans. Because she fondly remembered the spontaneous classroom of a favorite elementary schoolteacher, she believed that such planning interferes with spontaneity. After discussing her memories of the teacher and the classroom activities that seemed so "spontaneous," she realized that many creative opportunities in the classroom are based on foresight and only look and feel spontaneous because of detailed planning. By clarifying her memory, this young teacher was able to understand the purpose and importance of lesson planning.

Appropriate awareness of the timing of early memories is a critical variable in their usefulness in the early childhood classroom. Memories can be blurred by time or distorted by other events and misconceptions. Memories of early learning and

schooling can impact the application of developmentally appropriate practice in the early childhood classroom in three important areas: learning environments, teacher-child interactions, and curriculum choices.

Learning environments

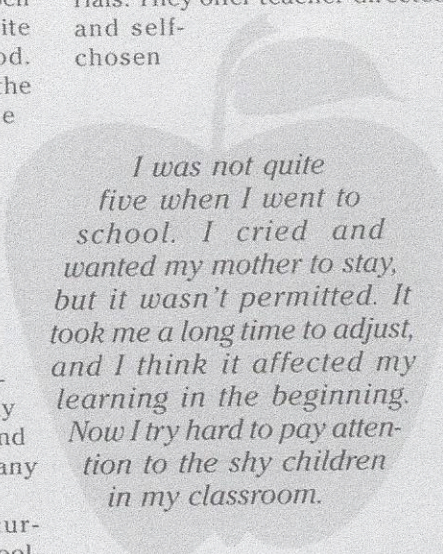
No one who has ever returned to a former elementary school or a childhood home with memories of how big it seemed when they were young can deny that size is perceived differently in retrospect. Some teachers mistakenly expose groups of young children to learning experiences in very open and impersonal classrooms. This is a sign that memories of later school experiences, in which large spaces are appreciated, impact teachers' sensitivity to young children's perspectives of increased space. Developmentally, young children want to be close to those they care about, and they need boundaries.

A Head Start teacher was concerned because her children constantly ran up and down the center of the room and seemed disinterested in other activities. The teacher had designed an open room plan to resemble a favorite classroom from her childhood. Contrary to her expectations, the preschoolers viewed the wide area as an invitation to race; the openness seemed exciting and similar to their playground. When the teacher recognized that the plan she remembered was designed for the needs of older children, she installed bookcases and dividers to form small areas. The children were quickly attracted to the cozy spaces and settled into exploring the many activities offered.

Memories of exciting excursions in later elementary school-

ing prompt some teachers to take young children on long trips to the zoo, the firehouse, or museums. These recollections conflict with the developmental knowledge that young children do not learn well when they are tired and overstimulated. If teachers can remember the impact of new experiences and exhausting class trips or can learn this in their internship, they will recognize that trips for young children are more beneficial if done close to school, in small groupings, with quality focused observations.

Other teachers associate busy elementary school activities with young children's learning, resulting in the creation of a preschool classroom with an overabundance of displayed material, continuous background music, and a hurried activity schedule. There is no time or place for children to talk quietly, look at a book, or just sit and rest. Teachers who remember the satisfaction of thinking and creating in a calm secure classroom—or who come to appreciate it during their training—provide opportunities for children to make choices from a suitable number of materials. They offer teacher-directed and self-chosen



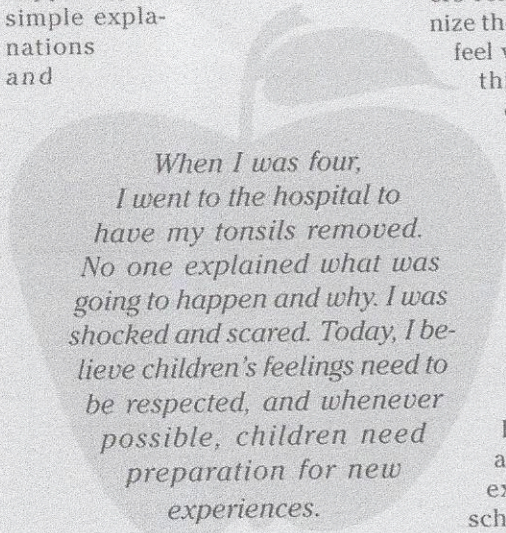
I was not quite five when I went to school. I cried and wanted my mother to stay, but it wasn't permitted. It took me a long time to adjust, and I think it affected my learning in the beginning. Now I try hard to pay attention to the shy children in my classroom.

activities and encourage children to take the time to complete what they are doing.

Teacher-child interactions

Although early memories can support our intent to be kind and friendly teachers, focusing only on past impressions may prevent appropriate analysis of a current incident that calls for a firmer and more constructive approach. For example, if a child is frustrated about being excluded or teased, some teachers distract the child with another activity rather than confront the problem by getting all the children together and helping them articulate, listen, and solve the difficulties. Alternatively, teachers who remember how others firmly yet patiently encouraged their early efforts at accomplishment will support young children in developing independence and building new skills.

With overemphasis on the joys and innocence of childhood, a teacher may disregard a child's concerned inquisitiveness about sexuality, the death of a pet, or a physical condition the child has observed. If adults believe that young children are unaware of happenings, clear, simple explanations and



*When I was four,
I went to the hospital to
have my tonsils removed.
No one explained what was
going to happen and why. I was
shocked and scared. Today, I believe
children's feelings need to
be respected, and whenever
possible, children need
preparation for new
experiences.*

respectful preparations may not be made for the uncomfortable experiences in life. Teachers who remember their own early curiosity and astute observations or who learn to recognize signs of children's curiosity respect young children's ability to notice their surroundings and provide simple, clear explanations for them.

When teachers mistakenly associate young children's learning with more organized style of later schooling, they may inappropriately transfer memories of formal methods to early childhood environments. Emphasis on too many rules and excessive expectations for orderliness or quietness can interfere with young children's natural enthusiasm and creativity. Early childhood teachers who remember learning through a variety of informal activities or who are taught the critical importance of learning through active experiences seek to provide a positive atmosphere of exploration and experimentation.

Pleasant memories of receiving trophies or certificates for school accomplishments can lead early childhood teachers to inappropriately emphasize concrete rewards such as stickers, candy, and prizes. However, when teachers remember or learn to recognize the pride that young children feel when they first learn something new, they realize that children are self-motivated by the pleasures of acquiring skills and by teacher-child interactions.

Curriculum choices

Memories can also influence teachers' curriculum choices. When early childhood teachers want to repeat activities or themes that they experienced in elementary school, they can impose a cur-

riculum that does not relate to the lives of young children. For example, some teachers introduce young children to a confusing curriculum about exotic countries and unrelated cultures when the children have had little experience with or knowledge of their own neighborhood or community.

Developmentally appropriate curriculum themes relate to children's questions and interests and are based on their individual lives and group situations. Teachers who recall their own childhood *confusion about happenings* in the everyday world, or those who are trained to recognize children's need for clarification, develop themes with the children that give them needed information about their daily lives and surrounding environment.

Many teachers have fond memories of academic accomplishment in elementary school. However, these lingering memories can cause early childhood teachers to mistakenly emphasize separate formal language acquisition skills (alphabet memorization, phonics, and worksheet practice). When this occurs, memory interferes with the knowledge that young children need many different *hands-on* explorations to integrate experience and the meaning of language. When teachers can remember or observe the happiness of being read to and the fascination of hearing a story, they offer children many creative opportunities emphasizing the usefulness and delights of language.

Recollections of the joys of holiday festivities in elementary school influence some teachers to plan marathon celebrations in the preschool classroom. The result is a flurry of events and products that dilute the true meaning of the holiday.

For example, a preschool teacher with happy memories of school parties planned a Thanksgiving

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I remember Mr. Danforth, the man next door. He had a garden, and he showed me how to grow a sunflower. I was so proud. Today, I love teaching science.

Reynolds 1992):
 structively (Smith 1991; Holt-

1. List early memories about learning at home and at school and place recollections into a timeline (before five years, six to ten years, eleven years and older).
 2. Note your impressions of what was learned from the experiences. Ask yourself about how the memory impacts your self-awareness, motivation, interests, curriculum choices, and teaching style.

3. Confer with colleagues to compare childhood recollections and timelines. Determine if the timeline seems accurate or if it may have been distorted by other events that occurred in later years.
 4. Continue to monitor memories and feelings as they occur in response to events in the classroom. This ongoing analysis can support teachers' appropriate responses and choices in the classroom.

Conclusion

Memory records the events of life in early childhood, later childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Recollections may be rich and rewarding, negative and troubling, or a combination of impressions. By analyzing school-related memories and placing them in proper perspective, early childhood teachers can avoid repetition of inappropriate learning experiences. By combining clarified memories with professional training, teachers become free to apply developmentally appropriate practice in the classroom.

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The elaborate preparations lasted several days and were the focus of all the children. On the day of the festivities, the teacher was surprised that several children appeared out of control and tearful. In assessing the children's lack of satisfaction, the teacher recognized that his own memories of celebrations related to elementary school. The buildup of expectations for his own young children obviously had been too stressful to leave much room for their enjoyment.

Recollections of the excitement and challenge of elementary school competition can lead to some teachers applying this concept to the play of younger children and promoting ability comparisons or introducing competitive games with winners and losers. On the other hand, when teachers recognize that young children enjoy practicing new physical skills, they provide challenging, non-competitive motor and movement experiences for them.

We see how memories can affect early childhood teachers' application of developmentally appropriate practice by impacting learning environments, teacher-child interactions, and curriculum choices. The situations we have discussed are illustrative of the powerful positive or negative consequences that result when teachers' memories are applied to the early childhood classroom. As teaching professionals, we must know more about the relationship between memories and developmentally appropriate classroom practice. How can we analyze and evaluate our memories so that they become useful tools for supporting and increasing classroom skills? Listed here are some helpful guidelines to ensure that teachers' memories are recalled accurately and used con-

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