Teacher Memories

Support or Hindrance to Good Practice?

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Memories are the subjective historians of the knowledge we gain from our experiences. They are the fabric that we weave together in our minds to form a coherent narrative of our lives. Memories are not just a record of past events; they are a living, breathing part of who we are. Our memories can shape our behaviors, influence our decisions, and guide us through life's challenges.

Evidence suggests that memories of childhood and early schooling have a significant impact on teachers' motivations, expectations, and values. In their study of early childhood teachers, Hollingsworth and associates (1989) found that teachers who had positive memories of their own childhood education were more likely to have positive attitudes toward their work and to feel more efficacious in their teaching practices.

To discuss this subject, we address two questions: in what ways do memory impact teachers' beliefs, sensitivity to learning environments, teacher-child interactions, and culturally 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. Our earliest memories 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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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.

64

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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-

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 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 curriculum 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 their 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
I remember Mr. Danforth, the man next door. He had a garden, and he stood under the sunflower. I was so proud today. I love teaching.