

Principle 1: Effective Teachers Understand How Children Learn
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Understanding how children learn, and particularly how they learn to read and write, influences the instructional approaches that effective teachers use. Until the 1960s, behaviorism, a teacher-centered theory, was the dominant view of learning; since then, student-centered theories, including constructivism, have become more influential, and literacy instruction has changed to reflect these theories. In the last few years, however, behaviorism has begun a resurgence as evidence by the federal No Child Let Behind legislation, the renewed popularity of basal reading programs, the current emphasis on curriculum standards, and the mandated testing programs. . . Many teachers today use an approach that is a balance between teacher-centered and student centered theories.

Behaviorism

Behaviorist focuses on the observable and measurable aspects of human behavior. The believe that behavior can be learned or unlearned, and that learning is the result of stimulus-and-response actions (O'Donohue & Kitchener, 1998). This theory is described as teacher centered because if focuses on the teachers' active role as a dispenser of knowledge. Skinner (1974) explained that students learn to read by learning a series of discrete skills. Teachers use direct instruction methods to teach skills in a planned, sequential order. Information is presented in small steps and reinforced through practice activities until students master it because each step is built on the previous one. Traditionally, students practice the skills they are learning by completing fill-in-the-blank worksheets. They usually work individually, not in small groups or with partners. Behavior modification is another key feature: Behaviorists believe that teachers control and motive students through a combination of rewards and punishments.

Constructivism

Jean Piaget's (1969) theoretical framework differed substantially from behaviorist theories. Piaget described learning as the modification of students' cognitive structures, or schemata, as they interact with and adapt to their environment. Schemata are like mental filing cabinets, and new information is organized with prior knowledge in the filing system. Piaget also posited that children are active and motivated thinkers and learners. This definition of learning and children's role in learning requires a reexamination of the teachers' role: Instead of simply being dispensers of k knowledge, teachers engage students with experiences so that they modify their schemata and construct their own knowledge.

Interactive Theory

The interactive theory describes what readers do as they read. It emphasizes that readers focus on comprehension, or making meaning, as the read (Rumelhard, 1977) Readers construct meaning using a combination of text-based information (information from the text) and reader-base information (information from readers' background of knowledge, or schemata). The interactive theory echoes the

importance of schemata described in the constructivist theories. In the past, educators have argued over whether children's attention during reading moves from noticing the letters on the page and grouping them into words to making meaning in the brain, or the other way around, from activation background knowledge in the brain in examining letters and words on the page. Educators now agree that the two processes take place interactively, at the same time. The interactive model of reading includes an executive function, or decision-making. Fluent readers identify words automatically and use word-identification skills when they come across unfamiliar words so that they can focus their attention on comprehension, and the decision maker monitors the reading process and the skills and strategies that readers use. teachers focus on reading as a comprehension process and teach both word-identification skills and comprehension strategies.

Sociolinguistics

The sociolinguists contribute a cultural dimension to our consideration of how children learn: They view reading and writing as social activities that reflect the culture and community in which students live (Heath, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). According to Lev Vygotsky, language helps to organize thought, and children use language to learn as well as to communicate and share experiences with others. Understanding that children use language for social purposes allows teachers to plan instructional activities that incorporate a social component, such as having students talk about books they are reading or share their writing with classmates. And, because children's language and concepts of literacy reflect their cultures and home communities, teachers must respect students' language and appreciate cultural differences in their attitude toward learning and becoming literate.

Social interaction enhances learning in two other ways: scaffolding and the zone of proximal development. Scaffolding is a support mechanism that teachers and parents use to assist students. Vygotsky suggests that children can accomplish more difficult tasks in collaboration with adults than they can on their own. For example, when teachers assist students in reading a book they could not read independently or help students revise a piece of writing, they are scaffolding. Vygotsky also suggests that children learn very little when they perform tasks that they can already do independently; he recommends the zone of proximal development, the range of tasks between students' actual development level and their potential development. More challenging tasks done with the teacher's scaffolding are more conducive to learning. As students learn, teachers gradually withdraw their support so that students eventually perform the task independently. Then the cycle begins again.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy grew out of Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy with called for a sweeping transformation in education so that teachers and students ask fundamental questions about knowledge, justice, and equity. Language is a means for social action. teachers should do more than just teach students to read and write: Both teachers and students can become agents of social change. The

increasing social and cultural diversity in our society adds urgency to resolving the inequities and injustice in society. Think about these issues:

- Does school perpetuate the dominant culture and exclude others?
- Do all students have equal access to learning opportunities?
- Is school more like family life in some cultures than in others?
- Do teachers interact differently with boys and girls?
- Are some students silenced in classrooms?
- Do teachers have different expectations for minority students?

Literacy instruction does not take place in a vacuum; the content that teachers teach and the ways they teach it occur in a social, cultural, political, and historical context (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1988).

Luke and Freebody's model of reading includes critical literacy as the fourth and highest level.

1. **Code Breakers:** Learning phonics, word identification strategies, and high frequency words
2. **Text Participants.** Students participate as they learn about text structures and genres in order to comprehend what they read and as they learn to develop coherent ideas in the texts they write.
3. **Text Users:** Students use text as the read multi-genre and compare the effects of genre and purposes on texts.
4. **Text Critics.** Students examine the issues raised in books.
(They question the accuracy, perspective of the author, and think about whose perspective is NOT represented. They identify stereotypes and look at issues of injustice.)

Critical literacy emphasizes children's potential to become thoughtful, active citizens. The reason injustices persist in society, Shannon (1995) hypothesizes, is because people do not "ask why things are the way they are, who benefits from these conditions, and how can we make them more equitable." Through critical literacy, students become empowered to transform their world (Bomer and Bomer, 2001). They learn social justice concepts, read literature that reflects diverse voices, notice injustices in the world, and use writing to take action for social change.