Perspectives of Young Children: How Do They Really Think?

Publication Date: June 15, 2010

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When we as adults talk to very young children, it is interesting to see what they are taking in. Are children only taking in their own perspective, or do they at times take in other children's perspectives? There are many textbooks on the market on guiding young children toward pro-social behaviors; however, the author, Marian Marion has very unique perspectives on young children. In her textbook titled, *Guidance of Young Children,* Marion addresses this concept clearly in a straightforward, understandable manner. Her keen and shrewd observations of children, theoretical applications, and child scenarios delight readers of all ages. The author answers questions often unanswered and commonly not addressed in other child development textbooks.

In his well-known monumental research, Piaget discusses how children operate in the developmental stages; however, it appears that his primary focus was not on the perceptions of children and how they think. As a first grade teacher with three graduate degrees, I never fully understood young children's thinking processes. I had a good grasp on their developmental stages, yet not on how they thought and processed information. Even fourteen years as a co-director of a preschool, I did not understand. As a Child Development instructor at a local university and a parent of two children, I still lacked understanding. Through all of these life experiences, I thought I understood children's thinking processes; however, after teaching at a new position developmental psychology full-time at a university, the reality struck me; I did not have a full understanding of Marian Marion's principles of children's perceptions. I only had a narrow understanding of the developmental stages and the sequence of developing young children.

University child development classes tend to focus primarily on *what children can do* at different age levels. What can teachers and parents expect to see at different stages and ages? Most children go through all of the same stages at approximately the same time; however, there are variations for different reasons with different children. The shrewd observer sees that regardless of the stages, all children are different. Yet, my previous undergraduate and graduate training and did not include *how children think.* As a first grade teacher, I desperately grasped in utter frustration to understand why children were constantly concerned with themselves and themselves only. Everything with them was about, "me, me, me," Every day in my classroom, I would view children as being selfish. Although they said they loved me and after many discussions said they knew I too had needs, their very self-centered actions and reactions told me a much opposite story. Due to my lack of understanding, I would go home day after day, baffled and feeling defeated. Why could not they understand my needs?

According to Piaget research, as a teacher, I knew that 2 to 6 year old children in the Preoperational Stage are preoperational thinkers having some limitations. I knew they had less life experiences than older children. However, I still thought that young children acted selfish and demanding. All they thought about was *me, me, and me*.

I then came to a deeper understanding concerning children's perceptions when I began to teach the course "Guiding Young Children, ages 3 to 5" full-time at the university level. Marian Marion's textbook, *Guidance of Young Children" gave me the* answers I needed to hear. In teacher training classes, it has been gratifying to share these ideas with future teachers. University professors at scholarly conferences have shown appreciation for this information also. One foundational important idea Marion

emphasizes is in defining and fully explaining the difference in a child being egocentric and selfish. *Marion notes that egocentric thinking is not the same as being selfish.* The selfish person understands the other person's perspective, but chooses to ignore it. The egocentric thinker cannot take in the other person's perspective. It is impossible! Preschoolers and first grade children cannot understand the other person's feelings and perspectives. They don't understand how others think, even including their friends and classmates, yet alone family members and their school teachers. Sadly, some children and adults never develop this kind of understanding, which is basis for healthy social relationships later on in life. Marion believes that this type of understanding (the understanding of other people's beliefs, needs, and feelings) is first evident when children are about the age of 8 years old. Most third graders have the ability to understand that they do not live on an isolated island; the world is not their own. They have to "give and take" and learn how to share and understand the needs of others. Marion advocates that a child must get older before perspective-taking can develops. Although I enjoyed teaching first graders and much learning took place in my classroom, if I had fully understood the thinking process of first graders, I would have been a more contented and relaxed teacher.

Other Perceptions That Early Childhood Pre-Service Teachers Do Not Know Until They Are Full-Time Practitioners

Young children often have trouble paying attention. Often, caregivers and teachers believe that children choose not to pay attention. In other words, they choose not pay attention because they don't want to pay attention. Marion warns that this is not necessarily the case as many caregivers and teachers believe. Young children often try to

pay attention; they simply have the inability to do so on a regular basis at a very young age.

Young children do not search or scan very well. When a toy or an item is lost, a very young child will search seriously a long time to find what is missing, yet the child's search is not productive because his search is not systematic. Older children are much more efficient in searching and finding what is lost.

Young children have difficulty tuning out irrelevant information. Any first grade teacher will agree that interruptions during teaching need to be held to a minimum in the classroom. Other staff in the room walking in the room, the intercom suddenly coming on, a lawnmower by the window and/or a loud sustained car horn in the street can get children off track. Suddenly these unwanted distractions, out of the control of the teacher, become the major event in the room. It is difficult then to get first graders quickly back on the learning activity at hand.

Young children are often impulsive. Their impulsiveness affects perception. It is natural for young children to be impulsive. The reason being: young children have had fewer experiences in life and less time in to learn when and how to make appropriate choices. They need much time to learn to *think*, before they *talk* or *act*. Very impulsive first graders often work very quickly; therefore, they make more mistakes which are unnecessary mistakes. Although teachers thoughtfully and efficiently set up classroom procedures and rules, since young children are generally impulsive, they often break these procedures and rules. Marion makes the point loud and clear; it is very difficult for young children to stop any behavior *they want to continue*. The first grade teacher must

be firm, yet understand that appropriate choices are difficult for some children to make because of their impulsivity.

In contrast, older children think differently. ***Older children (third and fourth graders) get better at selecting things they ignore or to which they pay attention.*** Older children learn to tune out things they should tune out. With maturity and more acquired life experiences, children learn eventually to tune out distracting sounds. When a loud plane flies over the school, while reading a book, a third and fourth grader may very well think, "Oh well, that's just a plane." This child continues reading the book regardless of the loud, distracting noise. He can do this because of multiple previous experiences hearing loud planes.

Older children are able to spend more time "on task" as they get older. The older child can shift his attention to several different aspects of the task at the same time. Older children can multi-task and think of several things at one time. Younger children generally need to work on one step at a time before going on to the next step. Older children can get art supplies from the art table, bring them back to their desks, begin the art project, finish the art project, and return the art supplies to the art table. The younger child would need to do all of these steps separately with several procedural repetitions from the teacher before being able to execute all of these steps at one time.

Children can better control themselves when they look at another's behavior and decide whether the person acted intentionally or accidentally. Very young children cannot differentiate between intentional and accidental behavior. For example, first graders in hot weather often come in the school building from recess hot and sweaty telling stories of who *did what to whom.* After the teacher carefully listens to both sides

of the story, the teacher realizes that some inappropriate actions were done on purpose and some were done accidentally. One example of an older child would be the story of a third grader named Susan. Susan shouts, "John didn't run into me on purpose. He accidentally tripped on a rock and ran into me." Susan, at a much higher cognitive and developmental stage, saw what really happened and had the ability to clearly determine that John's behavior was truly an accident, not anything done to hurt her on purpose.

Marian Marion's textbook has many child scenarios, child research, and grounded theories. This textbook is recommended for all early childhood majors and practicing teachers, especially those who have been frustrated with *normal children*'s behaviors. True, teachers learn to understand children more clearly and accurately as they observe children over long periods of time. Also, university child development courses are helpful in understanding the developmental stages of children. Effective teachers understand their readiness levels and use developmentally appropriate practices. However, even the most effective, experienced, and knowledgeable teacher could benefit from Marion's philosophies. For me, discovering Marion's principles of child development was enlightening and a life-changing experience. Marion's unique style of presenting information adds a much greater dimension to previous child development information presented in teacher training institutions. Indeed, I can now say the statement, "What I know now, I wish I'd known then!"

Reference

Marion, M. (Eighth Edition) *Guidance of Young Children:* Columbus: Merrill Prentice Hall.