Best Practice from Research

Box 1.1 How Children Learn: A Constructivist Approach to Children

What is the difference between knowledge, as taught in the traditional curriculum, and understanding, as taught with a constructivist approach? In a constructivist context, a child’s understandings naturally evolve and exceed themselves. Understandings acquired at one level, if properly connected to life events, provide the dynamic energy that moves the child to an increasingly higher state of understanding. In a constructivist model of learning, education is not rungs of a ladder that can be climbed in only one direction, but a series of nests of knowledge, with each wider nest enveloping or enfolding those below. Each movement in knowledge and understanding is an envelopment of its predecessors—creating nests of increasing expanse. These integrative learning experiences are the means by which parts become related to wholes and meaning ensues.

An integrative learning activity requires that the child spend time thinking about ideas and playing an active role in the process of learning. A lot that occurs during an integrated learning activity may be “re-invented learning”—the child rediscovering by constructing in his own words and with her own interests the existence of some universal truth or understanding. Re-invented learning opportunities invite learners to make up their own procedures and construct their own meaning, demonstrating that there is not just one way of coming to understand a phenomenon. It is a creative process involving an original and often very personal path to discovering a universal and known truth.

Key elements of an integrative learning activity include the role of the teacher-child relationship, especially the role of mutual trust and confidence in this relationship, its influence on the unconditional acceptance and valuing of the child, and the importance of these elements in awakening the forces of exploration and discovery. These fundamental ideas come together in the form of integrative learning experiences. Integrative learning experiences can be emotional, social, or subject-matter (cognitive) related—and often include all three.
There are four principles of a constructivist curriculum that can invoke integrative learning experiences:

1. The social, emotional, and cognitive development of the child are treated simultaneously.

2. Every subject is related to every other subject. There is no artificial decomposition of subjects; subjects are integrated around real-world problems.

3. Doing is related to learning. Learning occurs in authentic, real life learning experiences. The child learns through projects, investigations, performances, and the creation of his or her own products.

4. Students not only learn from teachers, but students are expected to learn from one another and teachers are expected to learn from students.

These four principles can be fostered in the classroom in the following ways:

- The child is accepted unconditionally. Regardless of outcome, the teacher-child relationship remains unharmed. This is intended to promote risk-taking and exploration.

- The child is encouraged to pursue personally relevant goals, with teacher as resource. This is intended to promote intrinsic motivation and ownership in and enjoyment of the learning experience.

- The child is expected to go beyond the teacher without limits. This is intended to promote a continuous cycle of exploration and discovery.