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# Perfectly Adaptable

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# TLT/SPED 411 (EDUC 491): Early Childhood Education

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Perfectly Adaptable

Immersed in the day-to-day life at the Lehigh University Childcare Center, one is welcomed into a supportive environment where many educational strategies are implemented under a loose curriculum which works to foster child development both cognitively and socially. The students in the preschool program are children ranging from three to five years old about half male and half female. Children come from a variety of socio-cultural backgrounds, however most appear Caucasian and upper middle class individuals. All students are the children or relations of staff, students or faculty at Lehigh University which accounts for some of the lack of diversity. The school, nonetheless, cultivates children in a variety of ways using mindful classroom setups, allowing for various types of play, teaching to multiple intelligences, partaking in behavior management techniques and giving direct social skills instruction. With this toolkit, the Lehigh University Childcare Center achieves success and promotes effortless learning in students.

The school is organized into age-specific areas with the preschool area being nearest to the front of the building. The learning area is completely carpeted and includes a "circle time" area with mats and bean-bag chairs, a coat and cubby area for belongings and various play centers including blocks, computers and dress-up. Adjacent to this area is a tiled room used for arts and eating. The room has two half-moon tables with a nook in the flat side for a teacher, sinks, and bathroom access. Both rooms are adorned with classroom expectations, pictures of the students and their families, and student artwork. Some areas have seasonal posters related to what the students are learning about, but these seem to change often. The classroom has plenty of resources and is well organized; however, the lighting is poor at best. The rooms are lit with mostly natural light and get dark on rainy days. The jackets and cubbies are a bit out of the way and often out of sight. When personal items would distract students, the lack of visibility seems helpful, however teachers cannot effectively monitor the belongings to keep children out of them either. Overall, the room setup is advantageous despite some minor setbacks.

The room setup makes various kinds of play simple by having block centers to facilitate constructive play, computer centers where games may lead to rule-governed play, and a dress up center allowing for both functional and symbolic play. Consistent with the research of Gmitrova, Podhajecká, and Gmitrov (2009) students seemed to prefer pretend play with male students choosing more occupationally-based imaginative scenarios such as being firemen. A female student was pretending to be Tinkerbell® and another her sister. Such use of relationships in play suggests social learning in conjunction with the cognitive learning typically expected of pretend play (Bergen, 2002). The different play centers seemed to be effective; however, many students were not using the centers at all and simply milling about. Teachers could have increased their involvement in play with the idle children and encouraged them to explore other areas of play. Perhaps by taking a role such as stage manager or co-player, teachers could have seamlessly guided these children into more cognitively simulative play areas.

Despite some uninvolvement during student play, teachers at the Lehigh University Childcare Center pay special attention to including all students by teaching to multiple intelligences. At the school, teachers allocate time for physical fitness, music, natural learning and verbal sharing which correlate with bodily-kinesthetic, musical, naturalistic and linguistic intelligences, respectively. Rettig (2005) suggests that incorporating multiple intelligence learning into the classroom is easy and helps to involve both left and right hemisphere learning. The Lehigh University Childcare Center clearly demonstrated the ease of implementing multiple intelligences into daily learning. For bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, teachers led calisthenics where children reached up, down, left and right with their arms. For musical intelligence, teachers sang songs with children during walks or allowed them to explore various musical instruments such as bells and drums. For naturalistic intelligence, teachers gave students ample time to explore and manipulate nature while outside on nature walks or simply at the park. For linguistic intelligence, students were often invited to tell the teacher and their peers about events that happened outside school. Teachers at the Lehigh University Childcare Center clearly met children where they were and provided them with opportunities for growth through multiple intelligence development.

Unfortunately, the behavior management techniques used by staff at the Lehigh University Childcare Center were not as ideal as multiple intelligence instruction. Teachers often seemed to have trouble with student behavior at the school. During the only instance of behavior management during the observation, a teacher provided a student with the negative punishment of losing ten minutes of television time in response to not being nice to a fellow student. This punishment was applied after at least ten verbal warnings and suggestions to discontinue the unfavorable behavior. Once the student was in punishment, the teacher sat down with the student and discussed what happened and why it was wrong for the full duration of the missed television time. Although the student was provided with clear social instruction as to why she should not be mean to other students and how to act in the future, providing this one-on-one feedback during the punishment time seemed to be a possible positive reinforcement. The student seemed happy to have one-on-one time with the teacher and perhaps would behave poorly to gain individual teacher attention in the future. Due to the shortness of the observation, it is impossible to tell whether the behavioral consequence was effective. Nonetheless, the teacher could have more appropriately administered the punishment and afterwards talked to the student during a different activity about her behavior or maybe only taken two minutes of the ten minute punishment time to discuss the behavior. Either of these scenarios may have made the punishment retain prevalence as the behavior modifier.

Despite issues with behavior management, the techniques used divulge one of the Lehigh University Childcare Center's most valuable aspects: direct social skills instruction. Both when presented with bad behaviors or given opportunities to highlight good behaviors, teachers at the Lehigh University Childcare Center take time to notice the behaviors and what is positive or negative about them. Teachers model appropriate behaviors and use manners to teach social norms such as saying please and thank you or excuse me. Additionally, teachers instruct students on social-emotional thinking skills as is suggested by the position statement of the National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC). For instance, during lunch John is poking Mary in the side and Mary starts to cry. The teacher tells Mary not to cry but to tell John in words that she does not like being poked. In this scenario, two students were having a negative interaction which may have been avoided by using appropriate social skills. By teaching Mary to ask John not to poke her because she doesn't like it, not only will Mary end the current situation but she may be able to avoid similar situations in the future. Clearly, social skills instruction is vital in an early education setting and the Lehigh University Childcare Center is following NAEYC's suggestion of making sure it is included naturally and whenever possible.

Lehigh University is a backdrop to a wide variety of intellectual individuals as well as home to an effective early educational establishment using research-based strategies to enhance their teaching. Through effective classroom design, access to a variety of play, instruction highlighting multiple intelligences, behavior management and direct social skills instruction, the school successfully educates each student at his or her own level. Unfortunately, the school is not the epitome of all early childhood education centers; however, the Lehigh University Childcare Center brings to light the challenges involved in such a wide-eyed goal. The school unveils the clear message that regardless of students and resources, no school for early childhood education can be perfect. Preschools must be designed to fit the individual needs of their students rather than perfectly adhering to every research-based strategy for education. Adaptability is far more important to effectively meet the needs of students where they are and where they will go. The Lehigh University Childcare Center lives this message by adapting research-based methods such as multiple intelligence learning and a variety of play that can meet the needs and wants of different kinds of students. Children are different and grow into different children and the most important part of effective early instruction is to meet those children where they are and use strategies that can do just that. The Lehigh University Childcare Center is not the perfect preschool but it is perfectly adaptable and ready to meet children where they are and follow them as they grow.

**References**

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