


Chapter 5

Teachers Taking the Lead to Help Children Cope With Stress Through the Use of Language and Cognitive Pedagogical Units

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will discuss how teachers use and further develop strategies to help children expand their cognitive abilities, improve oral language, and express their emotions. The work presented was done with young English language learners children ages 2 to 3, within a family childcare home (FCCH) setting in Miami Dade County. During the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers from family childcare homes noticed children with stress created by the many difficult situations their families were going through. The author developed a pedagogical unit based on the storybook called Wimberly Worries written by Kevin Henkes. This pedagogical unit used the teaching for understanding framework and visible thinking routines. It is the author's goal to present this work to inspire teachers in the creation of similar pedagogical units.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood educators have the precious responsibility of working with young children. While many of their daily tasks include caregiving, each one of these educators carries a responsibility to provide an environment where children flourish and grow, developing to their full potential. Each interaction offers the opportunity to shape children's futures. Yet when queried about what they do all day, teachers and caregivers create a list that includes feeding, caring, playing, singing, cleaning, wiping noses, picking up toys, planning, and teaching—often with little thought about how these small, meaningful interactions are shaping children's futures. Taking these individual activities, one by one, it is sometimes forgotten

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that these individual interactions, when compiled on a day-to-day basis, lead to an understanding of how these children feel and how to guide them in expressing their feelings. This has become even more important in today's society where children are bombarded by technology, videos, music, news, politics, and other factors that affect them in both positive and negative ways.

In addition, during the past two years, we have been faced with the introduction of a new virus that has affected the entire world. The COVID-19 pandemic has been described as a "unique multidimensional and potentially toxic stress factor for mental health," which has had a particularly strong influence on children and adolescents due to its interruption of social contacts, which are of eminent importance for psychosocial development (Brakemeier et al., 2020).

The work presented in this chapter illustrates how teachers supported children in the classroom during the pandemic, using strategies that reinforced their socio-emotional, language, and cognitive development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Between 2010 and 2020, the Hispanic/Latino population in the United States experienced explosive growth, increasing from 1.6 million in 2010 to 1.9 million in 2020 (Census Bureau, 2020). This growth in diverse populations has provided both increased opportunities as well as new challenges for the education system, tasked with the need to provide educational opportunities to young children who come to the classroom speaking little or no English and may be considered disadvantaged when compared to their English-speaking peers. To address this challenge, teachers are faced with finding new and innovative methods to meet the needs of these diverse populations of children. The educational barriers experienced by children who are non-English speaking and who also have not been exposed to literacy activities within their families in their home language present both a challenge and an opportunity to the educators providing for them in current-day classrooms.

The importance of language as a foundation for children's school success has been well-documented for later academic success, as well as later success in life. Vocabulary, conversational skills, and children's ability to think critically are required skills for later learning. Research in language learning also documents the use of children's native language as an important tool in helping children learn a new language and strengthening their acquisition of vocabulary, conversational skills, and other important skills in a new language.

According to work from Cummins and colleagues (2001), the use of children's native language strengthens children's abilities in their second language acquisition. Research conducted in Miami Dade County on Head Start children (Lopez & Greenfield, 2004) demonstrated that when young children learn a second language using their first language as a base, it helps them understand the important components of language development such as syntax, vocabulary, semantics, pragmatics, and phonological awareness in their second language.

The study discussed in this chapter provides a qualitative look at a program that makes use of current research and new practices to create a lesson plan for a group of Hispanic children with Spanish as a first language and English as a second language at a family childcare home. A large percentage of the children enrolled in family childcare homes located in Miami, Florida speak English as a second language and Spanish as their first and home language. Teachers were encouraged to speak children's native language (Spanish) while facilitating new vocabulary, scaffolding conversations, and encouraging children to think critically. Language plays an important role in the acquisition of vocabulary.

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