

# The Importance of Knowing Your Interactive Teaching Style

©By Dr. Marilyn Chipman

Metropolitan State College of Denver

Region VIII Equity Assistance Center



Interactions are the exchanges that individuals have through words, facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, body language, and physical activity whereby they communicate together. Interactions may be something as simple as waving or pointing, or as complex as sitting down for a face-to-face, hour-long dialogue. Interactions can convey approval or dislike, happiness or disappointment, total engagement or total disinterest.

Teachers of young children cannot take their daily, routine interactions lightly. It is important to analyze their interactions carefully because *what* they say and do, and *how* they say and do it, can make a difference in the way children learn about themselves and about the world in which they live. It has been said that every interaction which takes place within the classroom has the potential to make an impact.

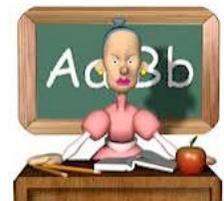
Lev Vygotsky, the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian psychologist whose research and writings dramatically influenced the rhetoric of early childhood education, found that the social interactions of children play a key role in how they learn to think, reason, and communicate. If this indeed is true, then there is just cause to believe that while teaching children how to read, add and subtract, put together a puzzle, build with Lego blocks, put the events of a story in proper sequence, understand the musical staff, identify planets, or locate the seven continents, the type of interactive exchanges that they experience with their teachers may help or hinder their academic progress. Vygotsky's constructivist findings have been replicated and validated to the extent that the field of early childhood education

includes his philosophy as part of the canon. Cognitive development is enhanced and the range of knowledge and skills is increased when a child is interacting positively with an adult or peer. The educational benefits achieved exceed those which the child can attain alone.

In light of this, teachers of the young should take time at the end of each day to reflect upon the types of interactions which have taken place in their classrooms. Actually it would prove quite beneficial to journal with at least four or five names and faces in mind, writing down definite happenings that day in which your interaction with the particular child had an effect either for good or not.

The daily recording of honest, sincere reflection notes will enable you to find your interactive teaching style. Do you see an evolving pattern where you repeatedly write about the same names and faces? Could it be that there are other children whom you unintentionally ignore? What are the characteristics of those children? Is there a pattern relative to ethnicity, social class, or special needs? Are there more boys or more girls whose names surface in your reflections? Are the children being regarded in an equitable manner regardless of cultural diversity? Is there evidence of lower expectations for some children as evidenced by the types of interactions you have with them? If you find that these questions need answering, then your journaling is having the very positive outcome of pinpointing these facts for you so that transformative change can take place in your interactive style.

Some teachers have videotaped themselves as they provide instruction to their students and then watched it later. Effective change can be accomplished through this method of honestly evaluating the types of interactions captured through the lens of the camera. However, one must be aware that often teachers subconsciously modify their behavior and tone of voice because they know it is being preserved on film. There must be a sincere desire to analyze what is taking place within the classroom environment.



With increasing diversity within the demographic make-up of our school settings, culturally-responsive teaching requires that teachers recognize and validate the integrity of their student's home life. To do so they must be willing to

learn about and support the culturally-appropriate interactive styles of the community they serve. A child should not be reprimanded in school for not responding in a manner different to what he has been taught at home. One example is if a child has been socialized to understand that he must lower his head in respect when an older person is speaking to him, culturally-illiterate teachers may think the child is being obstinate by not looking directly at them whenever they are talking. They may even go so far as to write the child up as being disrespectful! An awareness of the culture of the community will ensure that the child's upbringing and sense of cultural identity are not being negated by the teacher's facial expression, body language, gestures, or any other interaction that conveys irritation or disapproval.

Reflective journaling can help you pinpoint aspects of your interactive teaching style which you may wish to alter. In the same way that good teachers seek to improve their delivery of lesson content, good teachers also seek to develop better methods of interacting with their students. Making a conscious decision to do this will lead to many benefits. What are some of these benefits?

First, each day the atmosphere of the classroom is determined within the opening minutes. Every child in every classroom is worthy of a warm smile and a friendly greeting upon entering the room. These simple interactions send positive messages that can set the tone and even can lead to a lessening of behavioral incidents. Why? When children feel important, valued, and listened to by the adult in the room, they no longer are focused on drawing attention by acting out or rebelling against directives. It is important to note that this is reciprocal. When there is less disruption, the teacher will benefit by feeling important, valued, and listened to as well.

Secondly, as teachers reflect upon their journal entries and the names and faces of the children there, they will begin to concentrate more on each child's individuality. They will start to notice a specific child's range of emotions and reactions in response to activities, events and stimuli. The result could be that they will formulate classroom curriculum and management strategies based upon new perspectives.



A third important success may be removing lower expectations that can hinder children from gaining their full potential. This alone should result in more gracious interactions, thereby improving the learning experience for them. When teachers expect the best from all students, they will teach in such a way that expectations become reality. By extension, this can cause a teacher to be more enthusiastic about what transpires within the class, and children (not to mention administrators as well) will notice the difference.

Still another benefit is that positive interactions at school will filter back to the home when parents see that their children are happy and learning. One outgrowth of good daily exchanges with the students may be stronger connections with the family. Even in settings designated by some as being high-risk, the teacher may become more familiar with the situational needs involving any particular child. A result may be the strengthening of relationships between school and home, between parents and teachers. This may overflow into community engagement as well.

Is it really worth the effort? I challenge you to try reflective journaling of your interactions for ninety days and see for yourself. The caliber of teaching and learning takes on a new dimension when teachers continually are “in the moment” and aware of their interactive teaching style. Most importantly, you and your students will reap the benefits of transformative change within your early childhood classroom.

***Marilyn Chipman, Ph.D., is an administrator in the federally-funded Region VIII Equity Assistance Center at Metropolitan State College of Denver. She also is an affiliate associate professor within the Department of Teacher Education. Her main areas of focus are early childhood learning, family engagement and school/community partnerships, and the impact of cultural diversity on students of color from Pre-Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.***