A SELF-REGULATED LEARNING APPROACH FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING/BEHAVIOR DISORDERS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

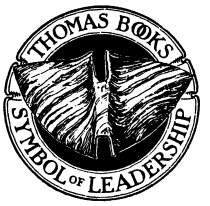
Dr. Joan A. Benevento completed an undergraduate degree (Southern Connecticut State University), a master's degree (University of Connecticut), and doctoral degree (Catholic University of America) in special education, and taught special education youngsters in Connecticut, Alaska, California, and Maryland. She also holds a graduate degree in guidance and counseling (Boston College) and completed a postdoctoral program in Gestalt therapy in New York City. Recently retired from St. John's University, Queens, New York, Dr. Benevento has been involved in the training of special education teachers for thirty years.

Her ideas about constructivist education, which she has been developing for over twenty years, derive from a synthesis of Piagetian concepts of child development and Gestalt concepts of self-regulation. Dr. Benevento has given several presentations at national and international professional organizations describing this approach.

A SELF-REGULATED LEARNING APPROACH FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING/BEHAVIOR DISORDERS

By

JOAN A. BENEVENTO, PH.D.



CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
Springfield • Illinois • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62704

ISBN 0-398-07535-2 (hard)
ISBN 0-398-07536-0 (paper)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2004051663

With THOMAS BOOKS *careful attention is given to all details of manufacturing and design. It is the Publisher's desire to present books that are satisfactory as to their physical qualities and artistic possibilities and appropriate for their particular use.* THOMAS BOOKS *will be true to those laws of quality that assure a good name and good will.*

Printed in the United States of America
GS-R-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Benevento, Joan A. (Joan Ann), 1934-
A self-regulated learning approach for children with learning/behavior disorders / by Joan A. Benevento
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-398-07535-2 (hbk.) -- ISBN 0-398-07536-0 (pbk.)
1. Learning disabled children--Education. 2. Problem children--Education. 3. Self-control. I. Title.

LC4704.B45 2004
371.9--dc22 2004051663

PREFACE

> *. . . [the learner is one] who is more than just the theater on whose stage various plays independent of him and regulated in advance by physical laws of automatic equilibration are performed; [the learner] performs in, sometimes even composes, these plays; as they unfold, he adjusts them by acting as an equilibrating agent compensating for external disturbances; he is constantly involved in self-regulating processes.*
>
> (Piaget, 1970b, p. 59)

Research over the years indicates that standard intervention approaches for children with learning/behavior disorders* have not been sufficiently preparing them for the world they enter as adults. Unlike problems faced by adults that may be mitigated by their ability to manipulate and change a hazardous environment, the problems of these children may be centered on interactions with environments they cannot control or readily change.

Most children in need often do not receive the full range of necessary and appropriate services to treat their academic and affective problems effectively.

Adequate help may not be given until they clearly deteriorate and manifest significant academic failure or emotional disturbance. These children must be helped to generate more rewarding actions, thoughts, and feelings that will, in turn, result in more adaptive behavior (Combs, 1981; Elias & Maher, 1983; Dougherty, 1988; Saxe, Cross, & Silverman, 1988).

Since the 1970s special education has shown increasing interest in professing the relevance of constructivist bases for understanding human growth and learning and has strongly endorsed it as being effective in the treatment of children with learning/behavior disorders (Giordano, 1981; Heshusius, 1989; Poplin, 1988a; Skolnik, 1990).

Being qualitative in nature, constructivism is interested in the kinds of mental operations children acquire as they mature and interact with their environments. Through a process of self-regulated activity, more advanced forms of cognition are constructed anew. An account of these self-regulating processes underlying the construction of these interactions is of crucial importance because it provides the critical vehicle for the application of these concepts to educational intervention (Kuhn, 1981).

---

*The term "learning/behavior disorders" has been chosen to conform to the process approach presented in this book. It incorporates all the traditional labels usually assigned to the motor, sensory, cognitive, and affective problems manifested by special education children. It includes all ranges of disorders from mild to severe as defined by federal law.

Constructivism sees all children as biological systems consisting of gradually developing internal structures that form the architecture for decoding and encoding information. Different levels of cognitive structures underlie the strategies used for problem solving. The systems are open and accessible to structural change regardless of any cause, degree, or level of development of the learning/behavior disorder (Piaget, 1968, 1970b, 1971, 1972).

Children are actively involved in organizing their motor, affective, and cognitive experiences into patterns of behavior that are meaningful to them. They accomplish this organization through a child-environment interaction in which they actively explore and discover the natures of their surrounding worlds. Children come to view themselves as being in charge of their own decisions and choices, and as being responsible for the consequences of these decisions and choices (Kamii, 1975; Henley, 1980).

The processing of knowing prompts children to strive to enlarge the knowledge base in their biological systems. It motivates them to seek changes in the basic structural nature of their cognitive processes that determine functioning. They actively make use of self-regulation, awareness and thinking, contact and dialogue, along with the presently available cognitive organizations, as they select information to be processed. Information is selected based on its relevance and meaningfulness to the individual doing the selection.

The underlying assumption of a constructivistic-developmental approach is that:

> . . . each person has a customary orientation to self and world and that there are stages and transitions (independent of age) along which these frames of reference can be arrayed. (Noam et al., 1984, p. 86)

Children are self-regulating systems and not merely a collection of cognitive, physical, and emotional subsystems. Reality is constantly being reconstructed from an interaction with the environment. All behavior is an active, meaning-making adaptation built on a sequential unfolding of emerging capacities. In any given situation, specific levels of maturity and comprehension differentiate and restructure self and environment. Children thereby gain and/or change insight (Sadler & Whimbey, 1985; Elkind, 1989; Keating, 1991).

Children's perceptions, memories, and problem-solving abilities are determined specifically by cognitive structures. Developmental changes happen through maturational processes stimulated by self-directed exploratory experiences. Actively sought stimulation and problem solutions promote mental growth (Gelfand & Peterson, 1985).

> The developmental approach suggests how a person "organizes" his experience and is in a sense the connection or "experiential pathway" between etiological circumstances and various manifest symptoms. (Greenspan, 1997, p. 416)

Throughout its history, special education has been seriously challenged by the problems of assessing and treating children with academic and emotional adjustment difficulties. It has increasingly and dramatically professed the relevance of developmental epistemology as a basis for understanding human growth and learning as well as frames of reference for explaining the behaviors of children. It incorporated the ways in which the knowledge of developmental concepts enhanced the ways in which treatment is administered to children with learning/behavior disorders (Harter, 1983; Gelfand & Peterson, 1985; Westman, 1990).

When the spectra of difficulties faced by children with learning/behavior disorders are seen from a developmental, constructivist perspective within sociocultural contexts, special implications for prevention and intervention are indicated (Saxe, Cross, & Silverman, 1988).

What is set forth in this book is an intervention model based on the concepts of Piaget's genetic epistemology. Believed to be applicable in educational settings, its focus is on children who experience academic and affective problems. As a learning theory approach, it is designed to help children with learning/behavior disorders actively participate in a fuller integration of their own psychomotor, affective, and cognitive information-processing skills and adaptation. This results in richer meanings of self and environment.

Intervention built upon these principles would:

1. foster acquisition of basic skills necessary for living in a multicultural society including academic, personal, interpersonal, communicative, and economic proficiency;
2. accept the learner's needs and purposes and develop experiences and programs around the unique potential of the learner;
3. facilitate self-actualization and strive to develop a sense of personal adequacy in all children;
4. personalize decisions and practices by including children in the process of their own treatment;
5. recognize the adaptive function of human feelings and use personal values and perceptions as integral factors in treatment;
6. develop a nurturing intervention environment perceived by children as challenging, understanding, supportive, exciting, and free from threat;
7. develop in children both a genuine concern and respect for the worth of others and skills in conflict resolution (Combs, 1981).

CONTENTS

A SELF-REGULATED LEARNING APPROACH FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING/BEHAVIOR DISORDERS

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The very nature of life is constantly to overtake itself.
(Piaget, 1971, p. 36)

Since the turn of the century many children with known learning/behavior disorders were thought to have special personality and/or social needs considered untreatable by traditional psychologies. At the same time, they were described as not being able to acquire knowledge through traditional curriculum approaches. Consequently, psychology and special education have shown gradual but persistent changes in their philosophies and have given serious consideration to the creation and refinement of new intervention models for children and youths whose normal growth and development have gone awry (Sadler & Whimbey, 1985; Poplin, 1988a).

There has been a worldwide movement to reconstruct the social sciences from personal meaning-making and constructivist viewpoints. Separate strands of study from various professional disciplines regarding children with learning/behavior disorders have been gradually coming together into an accumulated body of knowledge benefiting educators, psychologists, and researchers in their respective endeavors to construct and implement service models. As a consequence of this emerging pattern, new research findings regarding the principles of learning, child development, cognitive psychology, and developmental psychopathology have shaped different instructional and therapeutic approaches for these children. Many reconceptualizations in mental health and learning theory have been motivated by the concepts of Piagetian genetic epistemology. It has become one of the most widely proclaimed exposition of the development of logical thinking. Its general framework for understanding differences in cognitive/affective performance meets the most crucial demands for a theory of human problem solving. The explanation being that such differences could be understood in terms of the developmental capacities a learner brings to the situation (Poplin, 1988a; Beilin & Pufall, 1992; Chapman, 1992). Significant advances resulted in understanding the:

a. biological bases of cognition (Piaget, 1971);
b. developmental, holistic modes of knowledge acquisition (Piaget, 1970a, 1971, 1972, 1991);

c. adaptive, meaning-making intentions of all behavior (Piaget, 1970a, 1971, 1972, 1991; Greenberg & Safran, 1987);
d. integration of motor, cognitive, and affective processes as a necessary condition for healthy functioning (Piaget, 1970b, 1971, 1972; Piaget & Garcia, 1991; Greenberg & Safran, 1987);
e. normalcy as a necessary condition for the study of pathology (Piaget, 1975; Cicchetti, 1984; Gelfand & Peterson, 1985; Kohlberg, 1987);
f. efficacy of programs that foster social adjustment through social-cognitive problem solving (Spivack & Swift, 1976; Kneedler, 1980; Urbain & Kendall, 1980).

Piaget, in close agreement with other organismic theorists, sought to devise an integrated conceptualization of development through an understanding of the organization and interrelationship of the various ontogenetic domains. This perspective makes a multisystem approach to the assessment of developmental processes and outcomes necessary. It further insists that the ability to adapt and show competence results from the successful resolution of the tasks most salient for a given developmental period (Cicchetti & Beegley, 1990; Jarman, Vavrik, & Walton, 1995).

This view of child development is at the same time, phenomenological and objective. In its phenomenology, the view does not entangle growing children in a content-based theory. Rather, it allows children to make meaning of their existence within the context of their personal experiences. In its objectivity, the view presents an impression that children move toward increasingly more adequate ways of knowing-in-the-world and being-in-the-world. As children progressively heighten their awareness with each advance, they constitute a widening, increasingly more objective perspective of self, other, and world. This perspective optimizes the understanding of an academic or affective disorder in terms of the pattern of elements involved (Rosen, 1991).

Piagetian thinking sees human behavior as a reflection of biological processes, interpersonal experiences, and self-regulation. The incorporation of a biological concept of organismic balance into human psychological functioning explains how self-regulation is maintained and honed. Psychological unfolding, anchored in biological/sensorimotor roots, is governed by interactions between children and their environments. The concern is with how children come to know, how they organize information about their interactions with their environments, and how they form their world views. The pairing of certain biological patterns with certain environmental patterns can intensify each other. Biological factors, rather than acting directly on behavior, influence what children bring into their interactive patterns. Environmental factors, in turn, influence what the culture and family bring into the interactions (Skolnik, 1987; Sadler & Whimbey, 1985).

All behavior, actions, emotions, and interpersonal transactions are infused

and enmeshed with thinking. External actions, symbol formation, and language mastery are all coordinated by the same thinking processes. Thinking demands the active participation in the constructing and reconstructing of knowledge concerned with object or social relationships. In normal growth the reconstructed knowledge, in turn, leads to the discovery of the abstract properties of a child's own actions and eventually to objective reality (London, 1990).

Children are born wanting to become aware of, make contact with, and dialogue with information from their environments. They actively organize the information they gain from the moment-by-moment contacts with their worlds and seek excitement, growth, and adaptation. Essentially and initially self-serving biological organisms, children construct their own knowledge by interacting with the environment in a gradually socializing process. Their equilibrated, self-regulated systems seek stability in the changes of daily living. All interactions are governed by the laws of the growing system as a whole. Acquired responses enable children to interpret a wider array of stimuli. The self-regulation process serves as an intermediary for all stimuli that impinge upon it. As the system of behavior becomes more organized and complex, the spiral widens (Piaget, 1971; Reid, 1993). In addition, if children begin from birth to be related and have emotional experiences with cognitive content, consideration must be given to:

> . . . the implications of a theory which gives vital intellectual and affective interactions the primary place in the development of a sense of self and loving relatedness with others. . . . (Skolnik, 1987, p. 24)

Persisting throughout Piaget's genetic epistemology are the characteristic themes that (1) all intelligence and thought manifest a logical structure; (2) cognitive structures are one with biological and social realities; (3) reality is partly subjective in that the observer can never be left out in the construction of knowledge; (4) reality is always partly an externalization of action or thought; (5) all knowledge is mediated rather than copied directly; and (6) mental growth is dialectically determined by maturation, physical experience, and social experience (Elkind, in Piaget, 1968).

Prominent in this constructivist, self-regulated learning position is the belief that knowledge is acquired through organizing principles. The acquisition occurs through the individual organization and restructuring of experiential data according to existing cognitive structures. In turn, these very structures are altered and enriched through interaction with the physical and social worlds. Structures underlie and organize all behaviors and are developed, refined, and transformed by the self-regulatory functions. This is an ongoing lifelong process (Sigel et al., 1981; Smock, 1981).

Piaget's developmental epistemology leads to:

> . . . potential transformational [approaches] that could serve emancipatory ends for individuals and groups by helping them achieve the highest orders of mind and the more adaptable forms or organizational structures demanded by the postmodern world. (O'Hara, 1998, p. 154)

Piaget placed the meanings as assigned by children doing the experiencing at the center of his theory. As children organize their personal experiences into specific, meaningful wholes, their subjective existences advance into ontological truths. For authenticity in life, children must be aware of their own needs and desires, and their environments must be aware of opportunities and obstacles to satisfaction of these needs and desires. For authenticity in intervention, educators need to know the way in which children give meaning to their existences (Crocker, 1983; Jacobs, 1992).

Children are predisposed to organize environmental stimuli in a specific manner in immediate experiences. They make meaning of their worlds through evolving systems, and, in turn, the meaning-making systems drive behavior. Perceptual, cognitive, and emotional experiences are organized through acts of differentiation, selection, and construction. Internal, constantly constructing frameworks incorporate experiences into more or less coherent wholes. All action, feeling, and thinking are organized by these systems of meaning-making. The organization, in turn, gives meaning to the experiences. To successfully learn about these meaning-making systems, it is necessary to observe the way the systems actually work (Kegan, 1980).

The developmental programming of cognitive structures is ordered, complex, and selectively vulnerable at a number of stages. Awareness, contact, self-regulation, and dialogue support the capacity to differentiate self from context through the stages. Self-regulatory requirements of various stages of development place serious demands on children at every age. It is imperative that observations be made of how children privately compose life events. Seen through the eyes of children, all behaviors become meaningful and coherent (Kamii, 1975; Kegan, 1980; Wright, 1984; Skolnik, 1990).

Development may be defined generally as a child's organismic, evolving abilities to make sense of and interact with his or her physical and social worlds. Three important aspects of development include self-regulation, construction of social knowledge, and decentration. Self-regulation guides development from a simple, relatively undifferentiated state to states of greater and greater differentiation and integration. The major concern is with how specific models of adaptation at various developmental stages interact with immediate environmental changing forces to produce further adaptation (Pullis & Smith, 1981; Santostefano, 1991).

Furthermore, social constructions are considered to be as integral to epistemology as are constructions of logical development. Children are not born sep-