

The Constructivist

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Sitting Down with Rheta DeVries

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Rheta DeVries is well known around the world for her contributions to early childhood and constructivist education. Members of the Association for Constructivist Teaching look forward to her presentations at their annual conference where she regularly shares her perspective on her current research. We were privileged to sit down recently and ask a few questions about her research and her ideas about constructivist education today to share with *CONSTRUCTIVIST* readers.

C&J: What do you consider your greatest accomplishment up to this point?

RD: Oh, that's easy. It's the demonstration programs that show people what constructivist education is like. But, of course, this is not just my accomplishment. It has resulted from work with so many talented teachers at the University of Illinois at Chicago's Child Care Center, the Merrill-Palmer Institute's Child Care Center, the University of Houston's Human Development Laboratory School, and now Freeburg School that all of us at the Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education at the University of Northern Iowa worked to build from the ground up.

In each of these places, I have done classroom research with teachers, and I have learned so much from just observing what they do and what their children do. If you introduce teachers to Piaget's theory and some of its general educational implications, they take it and run with it.

They always go beyond what I could imagine by their elaboration of activities I suggest, by activities they create, and especially by the ways in which they interact with children—their questioning and other interventions, and the ways they deal with problems that arise.

C&J: What have you learned in your work at the Freeburg School?

RD: Two main things: First, as I expected, children in poverty and children from what Carolee Howes, Sharon Ritchie, and Barbara T. Bowman call “difficult life circumstances” respond just as well to constructivist education as middle-class children. In Chicago and Houston, we worked with mostly middle-class children, and some people said that constructivist education works only with children from these advantaged homes because they are able to provide many special life experiences that poor families cannot. A number of people have assumed and suggested that school experience for poor and/or minority children must somehow address the difference in their “readiness” for academic work in a traditional school setting by making them do more of the tradition type of work earlier and earlier. However, it has become clear that constructivist education is just as effective with children from poor and/or minority families as it is with children from families with more money.

A caveat to that, of course, is we do not have the outcomes research. I am really talking about the way children use the activities and learn in the classroom setting.

Second, as I have become more familiar with the term, I have learned how hard it is for some children from homes with “difficult life circumstances.” Of course, children from richer families have many problems, too, but in terms of difficult behavior, in many classrooms it might be one or two children. At Freeburg, during our first year, we had many children in each classroom with challenging behaviors that disrupted the entire class almost continually. Of course, not all children with difficult life circumstances present challenging behaviors, and some children from seemingly advantaged life circumstances do.

In Houston, there were only a few children who challenged the teacher’s resourcefulness in maintaining an atmosphere of mutual respect. The teachers did many wonderful things with these children, and we gave some examples in the *Moral Classroom*, *Moral Children* book. Because they did it so simply, I didn’t have to think about the teaching principles or I didn’t have to think

about how they needed to be elaborated. Our experience at Freeburg required me to go deeper into the implications of what Piaget had said about the kind of teacher-child relationship that promotes all aspects of development. One can understand the difference between a coercive teacher-child relationship and a cooperative teacher-child relationship in more or less superficial ways. I was challenged to go deeper into that implication. Obviously, Piaget did not answer this for us. He provided only the general guidelines.

C&J: Would you say that you are now thinking in more practical ways about how to develop that relationship?

RD: Yes. Our kindergarten teacher had to go beyond superficial notions of what we had said about the teacher-child relationships in the Moral Classroom book. Since we at Freeburg had more children with challenging behaviors, it required the teachers to develop deeper relationships with the children.

There is not a cookbook with, "If a child does this, then the teacher should do that." The teacher has to think about what is it at this moment to help a child develop. I think we could talk about specific ways in which a teacher can do that. I do not think it is possible for us to give strategies. We can say this is what worked with this child in this situation. We need to ask, what is the real goal of any strategy. It is not just to have the child change his behavior, but it is to help the child construct him or herself in a new way. What we want to do is to help the children gain more self-control and reduce impulsiveness.

I believe it is within the context of a cooperative teacher-child relationship that children have the possibility to develop intellectually, emotionally and in every other way.

It seems then that if the goal of a respectful, sociomoral classroom is cooperation, you can cooperate more readily with a person you can trust than with a person you do not trust.

Maybe you cannot cooperate at all with a person you distrust - you just kind of give in. Children will not learn as readily if they do not trust the teacher or if they feel unsafe psychologically - and they do feel psychologically unsafe with a teacher who is continually threatening their autonomy. They cannot feel safe when the teacher requires them to give up their own wills or requires them to be submissive for the sake of submission.

Obviously, there are fundamentals that the children are required to learn but we try to adapt that to how the child wants to learn.

C&J: What do you consider the most important aspects or the most useful aspects of Piaget's theory for teachers?

RD: These are most useful for teachers:

- Heteronomy and autonomy
- Children construct knowledge
- Mental relationships

C&J: What are some misconceptions about Piaget's theory that trouble you or that you believe are obstacles to its influence?

RD: There are many:

- Piaget's theory is only stages of development.
- The use of the term "children construct knowledge" without an understanding of what this means or its connection to the stages.
- Piaget's theory means that children should just play without consideration for whether the play is worthwhile.
- Piaget's theory is only cognitive, with no consideration of the social or affective aspects of development.
- Autonomy means nothing more than independence.
- Children need adults to be heteronomous all the time.
- Children never need adults to be heteronomous.
- Self-regulation means only compliant behavior or emotional control.
- Piaget's theory is meant to be a comprehensive theory of child development.

C&J: What are some misconceptions about constructivist education that trouble you and are obstacles to its influence?

RD: Again, there are many:

- Constructivist education does not prepare children academically.
- Constructivist activities are nothing more than play.
- Constructivist classrooms are permissive and chaotic.
- Children in constructivist classrooms do not learn self-control.

C&J: You and your colleagues have been working hard during the past several years to develop workshops on constructivist education. Can you tell us about them?

RD: Yes, the Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education received a 1.5 million dollar grant part of which we used to develop and disseminate constructivist curriculum modules detailing constructivist practices in early education. Each module consists of a presentation including a theoretical rationale for the activity, constructivist teaching principles, videos of children and teachers engaged in the activity, and materials for participant experimentation during the presentation.

As we developed the modules, I discovered that I had to let go of my proprietary feeling about my presentations and transparencies that had belonged to me for so long. What happened was that the presentations got better because our whole team, teachers and researchers, worked together to develop and present what we are doing at Freeburg.

We shared the modules with a cadre of constructivist leaders with whom we have been working for the past twelve years. They are using the modules to conduct constructivist workshops and have reached far more teachers than I could have reached alone. I learned that teacher participants prefer presentations given by teachers who are actually engaged in these activities in their classrooms. In the past 18 months we have had over 2000 participants across the state of Iowa attend our workshops and we continue to receive requests to schedule more.

C&J: What are the sources of your writing?

RD: I find it exciting to collaborate with educators in their efforts to put constructivist theory and teaching principles into practice. Their questions, struggles, and disagreements inspire me to delve more deeply into Piaget's theory and question my past interpretations. For instance, I am now thinking a little differently about knowledge, intelligence, and logico-mathematical relationships than I have in the past, but I will tell you about that another time.

C&J: What are you working on now?

RD: For a long time I have wanted lesson plans to include something about how children are reasoning as they engage in activities as a means of

assessing and reporting to parents. I had to think about aspects of curriculum that I had not thought about before.

In Houston, the teachers and I wanted children to reason about specific problems in group games and physical-knowledge activities. We analyzed how teachers were thinking about how children thought. They began to reflect and write about what happened last week—showing part of their accountability. In their lesson plans, they would say that children worked on a particular problem, that an individual child had an idea, or that a child reasoned in very specific ways. For example, they might state that a child made a relationship between the size of the end of a tube and the size of a ball that could roll down it--between this and this.

When I got to Iowa and, later, established Freeburg School, we worked on lesson plans and documenting projects. I tried to figure out how to write about how children reason as they engage in the activities. Returning to Piaget's writing, I began reading with that particular question in mind. I searched for how Piaget talked about mental relationships in his body of work. I want to know the deep meaning of how the child constructs knowledge.

To answer these questions for myself, I am observing children's actions to determine the mental relationships they are constructing. In particular, I am attempting to identify specific mental relationships that children have the possibility to construct as they engage in physical-knowledge activities. I hope to show empirically how children learn physics in constructivist activities.

At Freeburg, our teachers are now adding mental relationships that children have the possibility to make to their lesson plans. Thinking about possible mental relationships children can make guides their interventions. Children's behaviors give indications about what mental relationships they have or have not made. Therefore, identification of specific mental relationships can be a tool for assessing children's learning.