What It Really Means to Teach a Child

by Ellen Fisher-Turk

For the past 15 years I've worked with preschool children as a special educator. The position is called Special Education Itinerant Teacher (SEIT). In this capacity I travel, working with children in their preschools and homes. These children, ages 3 to 5 years, are assigned to Special Educators who are responsible for supporting the education of these children.

Multi-domain evaluations, classroom teachers' referrals, and parents' concerns are used to assign and allocate specific hours per week for these children seen by a SEIT. This practice is followed across domains for physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech. A legal document. The Individual Education Profile (IEP), describes the areas in which the child needs support. The child's educational goals are specified as annual and short-term goals (for example, the annual goal might be to expand the child's expressive language and the short-term goal could be to answer who, what, when, and where questions).

In 1975 I completed my graduate training in Learning Disabilities. I began working solely as a SEIT in 1995. Over the years I've worked with many children whose diagnoses ranged from learning disabilities to autism, Down Syndrome to Auditory Processing Delay. Some needed help with language, listening, following class routines, transitioning, or making eye contact. Others needed help with the social skills to engage another child in play or to sit among other children in a group, or to answer questions or follow directions.

The children I work with are preschoolers and they need to learn what their peers already know. Without these skills they don't learn what is most important: how to succeed at what is asked of them and how to feel good about themselves. Everything falls into place when a child understands and succeeds. Let's look at James.

James is a four-year-old boy. When I worked with him last year he rarely spoke. I've worked with him for one year now, 10 hours each week. In the beginning he'd venture into conversations with me when we were out of earshot of his classroom. He'd offer information and speak in jargon. I'd hear a word or two that made sense and guess from there what he was trying to tell me.

James's diagnosis is auditory processing delay. He understands what is being asked of him. Mostly he cannot answer questions. It's difficult to assess whether he can't retrieve the words or can't sequence them in the appropriate order. Ironically, information he offers on his own is in perfectly sequenced form. In a year's time, his use of jargon in place of organized speech has decreased markedly.

What James doesn't have are adequate social skills. On his own he doesn't have the language to enter into play with other four year olds. His being shy, combined with his inability to retrieve the words to ask another child to play, stops him before he's begun. If I model the request for him, he'll repeat my words and say, "Wanna play?" Mostly he says he wants to play computer or to draw a clock. These are all solitary endeavors. James's six-year-old sister has Down Syndrome so James hasn't learned how to play with another child at home, either.

What follows here is a description of how I expanded James's academic skills and attempted to help him engage socially with other children.

I wanted to help him as he stood off to the side with a sad look on his face.

Ellen: *What would you like to do, James? Do you want to sit in the circle with the children?*

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James could never make up his mind what he wanted to do during his free time. As his SEIT, I voiced the choices available to him.

James: *No (shaking his head).*
Ellen: *What would you like to do?*

The class sat on the rug waiting for the teacher to tell them what was next.

James: *Clock. (He ran over to the shelves of paper, taking out a brown piece of paper waving it like a flag, then choosing a brown marker to write with.)*

James is a child who enjoys repeating the same activity each day. As his SEIT, I was aware that he was using this repetitive activity to improve his expertise (drawing numbers, pictures, telling time). He also used the activity as a transitional object that he could take from the beginning of his school day and use it (the activity first, then the clock he drew) to integrate himself into the day and the classroom activities.

Ellen: *How about another color? She held up markers in various colors for him to see: red, yellow, purple, black, blue.*
James: *No, brown.*

There is a fixed quality to James. He needs to have his way. Deciding on what color he wanted was his way of having power. James is a timid child among his peers.

Ellen: *How about white? (Thinking that at least white would show on the brown paper and understanding that white crayons and pencils were special to the children. She tried to avoid repeating last week's white on yellow, so light that you couldn't make out the drawings.)*
James: *Yes (giving her his ready smile).*
Ellen: *It needs to be sharpened.*
James: *I do it! I do it! (He ran for the chair to stand on.)*
Ellen: *Tell me if you need help.*
James: *Help me. (The pencil wobbled, the crank was hard to push.)*
Ellen: *(helping him) What do you think? Is it sharp enough?*

I wanted him to know when he needed help and when he could carry out the task on his own. I wanted him to make the request for help.

James ran to the table and drew. First the computer, then the sun; he told me it was sunny outside.

Ellen: *Look! No clouds. It's not raining like yesterday. What are those? (pointing to his drawing)*

I was using a floor time approach: meeting the child where his interests were and scaffolding skills and information in my response. He recognized that what he was doing was important to me and responded. The conversation about the clouds confirmed joint interest.

James: *They're lights. They're squares.*
Ellen: *Are those the doors, with the stopper and the windows? What are those? Are they up there?*

He had attempted visual perspective and placed the fire alarm and exit light at the top of the paper. When his drawing was acknowledged he wrote EXIT and FIRE over each of their squares, placing each letter over the next.

I watched how he wrote letters and showed him on another piece of paper how they don't touch each other. He remembered that when he later wrote his name J A M E S. Only the S was reversed. Intentionally, I elected not to correct him.

As his SEIT, I wanted to teach him to write and space letters correctly. I'd never alter his paper. It was his creation. Using a second piece of paper gave me the opportunity to model letters from which he could compare and copy.

Ellen: *I know what this is. It's a cookie, a chocolate chip cookie. They're my favorite. Did you eat one today?*
James: *At home.*
Ellen: *That's fun. And now you get to eat breakfast at school!*

I was acknowledging his home life and extending it to his day at school.

He drew his plate and milk representing his breakfast and followed that with a drawing of the children in a big circle as I'd drawn for him another day. I could see how happy he was drawing pictures about his day. It helped him communicate and make real the things that were important to him.

I led him toward his classmates where the group was singing "Wheels on the Bus" and "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes." I joined in the singing. He joined in with the songs' gestures.

When the songs were finished, he resumed his drawing. He drew the compuer, a stroller, and put James in it.
Ellen: *Who pulls it?*
James: *DaDa (but felt no need to draw him).*
Ellen: *I know you like the computer.*

He'd drawn the computer, the screen, the mouse, and two letters on the rectangular keyboard. He smiled.

Ellen: *What will you do today? Do you want to read with the other children?*

James: *No.*
Ellen: *What shall we do?*

I was looking for an opportunity to integrate him into the class's activities. He wasn't ready yet. He told me. He needed to complete the transitional object (the clock) that would comfort him as he went through his day. James had been drawing clocks for the past month.

> Following the child's lead allows us to teach the child what and when he's ready to learn.

James: *A clock! A clock! (He bolted for another piece of paper and quickly drew a circle and asked for help writing the numbers.) I need help. (He was up to the 2.)*

I slowly drew the numbers on a separate piece of paper. He attempted to replicate each number where I'd indicated its place on the clock. I gave him verbal directions and gestured: Around and back for the 2. This method continued with the other numbers. When he couldn't draw a number himself he'd ask, "Help me!" And I did. Following the clock, he drew a rectangle with a stick figure.

James: *It's my bed. It's for nap time. Then comes snack.*
Ellen: *I see.*

He drew what he understood and what gave him pleasure. I wanted to assure him that he would be safe in his world.

I saw him assess his work. He was finished. He was pleased. I saw an opportunity to bring him back among the other children. He was ready to join them. He'd expressed what he needed to say about his life for now. Now he could paste and paint another pizza alongside his classmates.

At lunch a short while later James shared his book. His teacher pointed to each picture and encouraged him to describe his book to the children.

A girl: *It's a mouse.*
James: *No, it's James.*
A boy: *That's the computer.*
James: *Right.*

The teacher wanted to give James an opportunity to speak to the class. When children heard him talking they'd comment, "He talks." They were surprised. As his SEIT, I also wanted him to engage other children in conversation, to engage in social language, and to possibly make relationships.

In this retelling of my experience with James, I hope to draw your attention to the exquisite beauty that exists in permitting him to have his needs met (his world brought to life through his drawings) and his willingness afterward to enter into the activities in his classroom. He wouldn't have entered their conversation without his book of drawings; it fortified him. And even without his SEIT, James fared well because the SEIT was in constant communication with the classroom teacher and assistant. We were able to show James his clock and picture when he resisted (for example going into the restroom with the other boys to use the toilet and wash hands before lunch). Occasionally he'd add some image to his picture and, holding it securely, would follow the boys to the washroom.

My question is: How do children learn? Do they learn when teachers sit with children in a circle and instruct them? Or do children learn best when they have the opportunity to direct their play and the trained adult (teacher, therapist, volunteer) adds what is appropriate for their learning in the moment? The answer is clear. Unfortunately, this kind of attention is not always offered in preschool classrooms. Teaching and learning in many environments consists mostly of what is shown or spoken to children.

James has been learning to write letters and numbers, to draw, and to express his thoughts and what's important to him. His shyness and difficulty expressing his needs have been addressed. With due credit, this has been possible because his classroom teacher has recognized each child's needs and allowed this specialist the flexibility to work with James as creatively as each of James's abilities allow. This does not generally happen.

As his SEIT, what I offered was good not only for James, it also benefited the other children. I advocate this approach for all children. As it happened, other children did join James and me in making clocks. In groups of four children, each child learned to choose their favorite color, to retrieve a pencil, how to make a large circle, and how to write each of the numbers they needed for their own clock. James was joined. He was now part of a group. The other children didn't need their clocks as transitional objects, but they surely needed to learn these pre-K skills, and James was provided an opportunity to socialize. He couldn't socialize on his own. The group naturally formed around him. These children later became line partners, dance partners, and catch partners when the class went out on the playground.

James could well have drawn 50 clocks and 500 drawings of his life; each one would have given him the opportunity to learn and perfect it more. Facts and skills were taught at the time he was ready to hear them. His emotional needs were addressed. Following the child's lead allows us to teach the child what and when he's ready to learn.

If a preschool classroom teacher thinks a child in his care (between the ages of 3-5 years) needs special services, he can request from the parent that they permit a preschool evaluation and file a request with the local school district. The evaluation will be conducted by the school district or an outside agency and will include a psychological evaluation, a speech evaluation, and an educational evaluation. The referral for an evaluation can be made by a parent, a pediatrician, a concerned adult, or a teacher who is familiar with the child. The children who benefit from having a SEIT demonstrate delays in cognitive abilities, perceptual, sensory, social, adaptive skills, auditory or visual domains. In order to qualify for services, a child's delay must be 25% below their age level expectancies. (Note: The degree of delay varies by organization and funding.)

Otherwise, we teach only facts and skills. This does not serve children. Children are active learners. If we pique their interest, they seek out learning. My experience confirms that the key that opens children up to learning is to join in their learning: I joined James in his drawing. 'Joined' as in modern psychoanalysis whereby an environment is created where the person feels understood, neither right or wrong, just understood. I commented on what I saw in his drawing and he was endorsed. I never said that's good, that should be written or drawn this way or that. Instead I gave him the opportunity to explore and create. He gained confidence and could then venture forth.

The final step for James would be to join the class as they progressed through the day, not to always need his own agenda. His teachers and I would address how to include him by encouraging friendships. He'd get to play on the computer and be asked to choose another child, would play a board game and would choose children to join the game, would play catch, first with the teacher and then with other children. James would be the book collector, milk distributor, the table cleaner. All his jobs would include other children and would give him the opportunity to be seminal among his peers. It's not clear if James would fare well in a regular classroom. Perhaps. We don't know how he'd be best served except that his placement in this Head Start classroom allowed him to learn from normally-functioning children and to build bridges over his delays.

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