

Prompt: Name three theorists/educators/clinicians who have influenced your professional work and discuss how they have affected it.

When I was nine years old, I visited one of my father's commercial retail spaces. He was renting this particular space to a woman who was starting a daycare center. While there were no children in attendance, she did offer us a tour. I noticed the careful attention to detail she provided in each classroom space. I knew at that moment that I wanted to educate young children. Beyond putting crayons and paper on a table, I did not know what educating young children meant exactly.

I started college as a declared Education major. I chose this because at the time, I did not realize that there was formal training for educators of children younger than five. I just assumed that I would teach kindergarten. This would be close enough to the preschool age to satisfy my certain calling. I took "Philosophy of Education" as one of my very first classes. It was here that I learned to articulate my beliefs in how young children learn. This was possible because I read Rousseau's Emil. Emil is the story of a young, French, bourgeois boy who is sent to live with a private teacher. Emil's teacher's educational pedagogy does not include the traditional paradigm of teacher imparting knowledge through rote instruction or memorization. Rather, he educates Emil by providing opportunities for Emil to discover, make connections and question his observations. This notion- that the teacher can teach by providing an environment which challenges the child to question his/her understanding of his/her world- was completely revolutionary to me. For example, at one point Emil's teacher places large rocks outside of the door of their home at the start of winter. Emil accidentally kicks over one of the rocks while on a walk the next spring. He noticed that worms, centipedes and other creepy crawlies had made their home under the rock.

Rousseau influenced my professional work because I realized that I could never teach in a traditional classroom with desks lined in rows and duplicated worksheets. Rather, I needed to work in a school which valued exploration, curiosity, creativity and opportunities for children to question. An educational environment such as this was difficult to find.

My first teaching position following graduation was a hybrid of a traditional and my imagined replication Rousseau's. In this position, I learned that other people valued this type of educational pedagogy as much as I. Specifically; I had the pleasure of hearing Bev Boss speak at the Chicago Metro Association for the Education of Young Children conference. Her eloquent presentation included descriptions of filling her entire preschool with two dump trucks worth of sand for the month and giving a young boy's father five dollars to purchase a watermelon because this boy declared that he needed to explore watermelon upon drop off. This father was late for work, of course. He explained as much to Bev but she would not accept his protest. His son needed a watermelon. This boy mashed, stomped on, threw, cut, microwaved, and tasted, etc. the watermelon until he had satiated himself in the essence of watermelon. As Bev concluded her speech, I realized that I wanted to emulate Bev in my classroom.

Much time has passed since forming my foundational educational philosophy. In that time, I have owned and operated a Group-Family Child Care Home, an Early Intervention practice, been a faculty member in a community college's early childhood program, placed student teachers and visited many educational settings. Until the onset of Covid and subsequent shut down of businesses, I was a Director of a preschool, which was founded over ninety years ago by Rose Altschuler, one of the original founders of The National Association for the Education of Young Children. I feel the weight of responsibility for her legacy every time I sit at my desk. Through all of these professional experiences, I have come to realize that it is naïve to think that I can *just* be a teacher who puts sand in her classroom or carefully places rocks in conspicuous places for children to "discover."

Well-trained educational professionals need to know child development milestones. They need to understand cognitive theories. Lev Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development allowed me to bridge my hopes that children would learn through the experiences and environments I provided to them with the very real skills that children need to know but might not otherwise learn through discovery

learning. The idea that I could observe what skills a child had mastered; pair that with what I know to be the next, emerging skill set and provide an experience to scaffold the two was remarkable to me. I had found, in Vygotsky's theory, the missing link between being idealistic and practical.

While I identified three theorists or theories that influenced my professional practice, there is a fourth that is pivotal. The theory of sensory integration is a vital component of my professional practice. This is because I work with children in the stage described by Piaget as the sensory motor stage of development. This means that the children with whom I work are learning about their worlds through sensorial experiences as they move through their environments. To have an effective discovery-learning classroom environment, I must also be able to identify how the child(ren) is processing all types of sensory input. Said another way, I can create opportunities and experiences, which scaffold new skills and from which children will learn if I am able to embed them in sensory experiences that are meaningful to the child(ren).