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Disability Awareness in Young Children

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Raising Awareness About Disabilities in Young Children

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A Capstone project for the Bachelor of Arts in Human Development and Family Studies

Introduction

Young children who attend schools nowadays are likely exposed to many more types of diversity ranging from race, ethnicity, religion, and social class to name a few in comparison to the past. One area of diversity in specific is the inclusion of individuals with disabilities, and because children are so young in age, they may not be aware of disabilities or even identify when a peer or a surrounding adult has a disability. In schools the idea of raising disability awareness to an extent where students not only understand but recognize disabilities, perhaps, is one of the most challenging aspects for schools today (Hurst, Corning, & Ferrante, 2012). To help address the deficiency of disability awareness in young children, I designed a curriculum about disabilities based of 3 sessions that will be distributed to a group of preschoolers at Boronda Meadows Elementary.

Needs Statement

Young children have poorly differentiated views of developmental differences, including disabilities, among peers and adults. Therefore, they may not be aware when someone around them has disability whether visible or not. Young children then walk into grade school without much knowledge about differences in the abilities of surrounding peers and adults, making it harder for them to adapt and understand. Children's attitudes about their peers with disabilities depend on how much they understand the individual disability (Hurst, Corning, & Ferrante, 2012). Young children may not understand assistive devices, identify physical limitations and accessibility issues, and recognize similarities between themselves and someone with a disability.

Assistive devices (e.g, glasses, wheelchair, hearing aids) are forms of support for functioning for people who have disabilities. Although young children have been around assistive device or seen them, most do not have know what they are and how they are used. Meaning the child cannot use logic and has an inability to see a situation from another person's point of view (McLeod, 2018). If young children do not have understanding of what these disabilities and assistive devices are, they may grow up to develop a stigma against those with disabilities (Parette & Scherer, 2004). In turn, for persons with developmental disabilities, stigmatization has varying effects, including, but not limited to less-than-ideal treatment, anxiety, and depression (Parette & Scherer,

2004). Young children then may grow up with a perspective that the differences between them and people with disabilities who might use an assistive device is something confusing and scary, which makes it harder for acceptance to occur. Assistive devices become a signal because the sight of a person using assistive technology sends a message that this is not an ordinary person and that one needs to behave differently around this person (Parette & Scherer, 2004). This leads children to possibly being fearful or reluctant to interact with someone who might look different.

Now the comprehension of limits and accessibility that people with disabilities have to face is also something that schools are lacking in instruction with young children (Hurst, Conning, & Ferrante, 2012). Therefore, children assume that, if someone is in a wheelchair, he or she cannot go to the park like them or do certain things that they do. They don't fully understand the concept that people with disabilities can do many things only with certain limitations. This tends to happen when young children are not instructed enough on diverse topics like disabilities, for that reason they go into higher grades and grow up with a misconception of what disability really is.

Recognizing similarities between young children and people with disabilities is also a concern that needs to be addressed. The idea that children do not comprehend the similarities they have with disabled people or peers in their classroom can impact the way they view, think and even communicate with them. In preschool, children's choices of play partners can be influenced by a number of different factors related to physical and social features of the preschool setting (Diamond & Young Hong, 2010). It is likely that when young children encounter someone who has an assistive device at a similar environment they may experience a sense of confusion and curiosity. The deficiency of disability awareness in young children could be a reason why they find it hard to accept and understand certain things that people with disabilities can participate in similar things.

Since disability awareness in young children has become a contributor to their lack of comprehension on assistive devices, limitations and similarities between peers and people with disabilities I aspired to design a curriculum on disabilities based of 3 sessions that will be distributed to a group of preschoolers at Boronda Meadows Elementary.

Theory Application

Preschool years are a time when children begin to display negative reactions towards individuals who seem different (Dyson, 2005). Negative attitudes towards people with disabilities at this age arise from a lack of knowledge about disability and people with disabilities, which can lead to stigma and stereotyping of those with disabilities. Jean Piaget in his preoperational stage of cognitive development believed that young children ranging from 2 7 years old are thinking at a symbolic level but cannot use cognitive operations just yet. During this stage young children are still in their egocentric thinking, meaning that it is difficult for them to accept others' viewpoints or perspectives (McLeod, 2018). So when children encounter someone with a disability who is using an assistive device they might feel confused and not understand why that person is using that device. Children at this age have little or no idea of what disabilities are or what assistive devices are used for. Students view people who use assistive devices like wheelchair, glasses, cane, etc. as not normal or different. The lack of knowledge and age does not allow them to pass their egocentric thinking.

Children can't use logic or transform, combine, or separate ideas, according to Piaget, so children might have a way different perspective or idea of what disabilities really are (McLeod, 2018). Therefore, children would need to be able to get out of their egocentric stage to be able to see more than their own point of view. My project will allow my participants to see and understand a little about people who might look different to them. Providing them with lessons like the ones I presented will be used to help children understand and change the stigmas that come with disabilities.

Consideration of Diversity

Considering the diversity of my targeted audience, will help identifying needs and accommodations for the targeted participants. According to the School Accountability Report Card (SARC; 2016), the ethnic composition of Boronda Meadows Elementary School students is comprised of 0.9% Black/African American, 0.4 % Asian, 1.3% Filipino, 2.3% white, and 93.5% Hispanic or Latino. In addition, 62.7% are English Learners, 86.8% considered socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 9.9% have a learning disability. Although the report card is ranged from K to 6th grade, the majority of the Kindergarten students are made up of preschool students transferring from the

preschool within the same school. Due to the majority of students being Hispanic, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and with one or both working parents who might have minimal education, it is likely that the participants may have little or no knowledge of what disabilities or what assistive devices are. The lesson will be conducted in English, meaning the participants will have to know or at least understand English to fulfill the activities and understand the material. Also, some of the students with disabilities will have more of a challenge when it comes to understanding the content and completing the activities. The project is intended for preschool students; however it is probable that it can be applied to older children and adolescents with age-appropriate modifications.

Learning Outcomes

I plan to give a group of preschoolers at Boronda Meadows Elementary a three, 20-minute lesson during large group.

By the end of my project, participants will:

1. Identify one purpose of an assistive device.
2. Indicate one limitation and one accessible activity that a person with disability cannot or can participate in.
3. Identify something in common with someone who has a disability.

Method

Day 1

On the first day, I had children sit in a large group and began by asking them if they knew what disabilities were and what assistive devices were used? After hearing some ideas and having my co-teacher write down the answers, I briefly defined those terms for them and read a story called, *Don't call me special* (Thomas, P., 2002). The book explores questions and concerns about physical disabilities in a reassuring way for children. Giving them the opportunity to find out about individual disabilities and special equipment that is available to help accommodate disabled people. During the story, I asked specific questions from the book. After the story, I had a whole group discussion about the book asking them a specific question based on my learning outcome. I listened and wrote down student responses. Then, I led students to small group and

gave them a white blank paper and markers and asked them to draw a picture of something they had learned about in the story, followed by dictation. See appendix A.

Day 2

The second day, I began by recapping what disabilities were and talking about what kind of assistive devices were used or seen in the last book. Children were able to remember some of what they talked about from the previous day. So I continued by showing the students a couple of pictures of different children with different assistive devices followed by pictures of different community places in a Powerpoint. See appendix B. Children then were asked to describe something a disabled person could and could not do in those places. Answers were being recorded by the co-teacher.

Day 3

On the last day of the project, I began again by talking about what they had learned the day before. Then, I asked children if they knew any similarities between themselves and a person with a disability. Students didn't quite understand the question, so I moved on to reading a book called, *Special People Special Ways* (Maguire, A., 2000). This story based on portraying positive images of children with various disabilities, demonstrating that beyond their physical limitation all children can get along and be friends. During the story, I made sure to point out the types of things that someone with an assistive device or disability could do. I also asked children specific questions about what they were seeing. After the story, I asked students what they had seen in the book and wrote down the answers on chart paper allowing children to see that I was writing down their responses. I ended the lesson by recapping a question on day 1 to compare answers from day 1 and day 3. See appendix C.

Results

Learning outcome 1 was that the participants would identify one purpose of an assistive device. Before the story was read, none of the participants could describe what a disability was. Right after reading the story and asking questions, 6 out of 8 participants were able to tell me one purpose of at least one assistive device. Furthermore, 5 out of the 8 students correctly drew a picture illustrating someone with a disability who was using an assistive device. Although it is unclear if their understanding was longlasting, the book might have not been enough for the participants because it

was the first time they learned or heard about this topic. However I believe that this outcome was fully met.

Learning outcome 2 was that participants will to be able to indicate one limitation and one accessible activity that a person with a disability cannot or can participate in. This outcome was partially met because even after a presentation and having a discussion about the pictures shown, only 3 out of the 7 participants were able to answer the question correctly. The subject was also something new for them, and, for their young minds, it might have been too much information to process. This learning outcome was only partially met.

Learning outcome 3 was that the participants would identify something in common with someone who has a disability. After showing specific pictures and reading a specific story about things that people with a disability can do together, only 3 out of 7 participants were able to identify a similarity with a person with a disability. During the story, they got confused in naming purposes for certain devices, instead of looking for similarities. Therefore, I believe his outcome was also partially met. See figure 2 for participant answers.

Discussion

All in all, I believe that this project was successful. The participants, despite their young age and the hard topic that was discussed, seemed engaged. Due to the fact that my participants are in Piaget's preoperational stage of cognitive development, I perceive that the project was helpful to support their development out of egocentrism and being able to see past their own perspectives. They were able to realize that certain people have certain disabilities, and, therefore, they need special devices to help accommodate their needs. Being able to see and learn about something that they might have never heard or seen was a challenging for them, but they were able to see past their own experience and open up to learning something new. The participants even brought up personal examples and compared them with they story they heard by stating that someone in their family has a disability and also uses an assistive device.

On the other hand, the language diversity in my project could have been a factor of why some students did not fully understand the concept. The lessons were all in English, and two of the participants come from a Spanish-speaking home, where

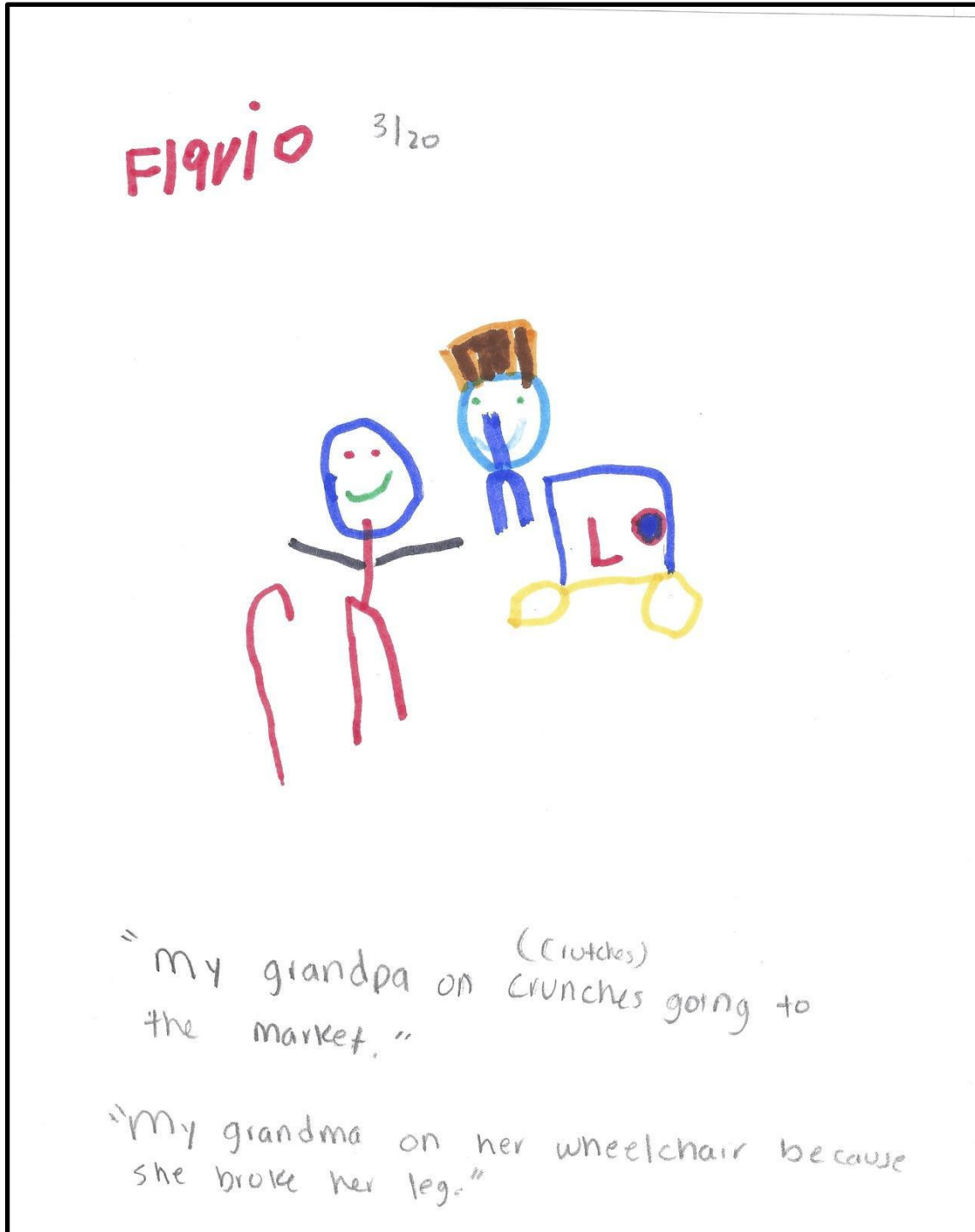
Spanish is the dominant language. Also, because the participants come from families with both parents working and with little or no formal education, it was likely that disability is a topic that is not really shared or talked about in the home unless it may involve a family member.

If there was an opportunity to do this project over again, I would have translated and presented the lesson in English and in Spanish. By presenting the lesson bilingually, I think I would have gotten more responses and more data. The participants who did not understand English might have possibly participated more. I would've also brought in actual devices so students had the opportunity to see and touch, and maybe get a better sense of what the real purpose of the device was. This would have probably been helpful for students to get an even better understanding of what the lesson was about. It is always known that hands on experiences have better outcomes. In spite of that, I perceive that the participants learned about disabilities and assistive devices and now have an idea of what a disability is and for what some assistive devices are used.

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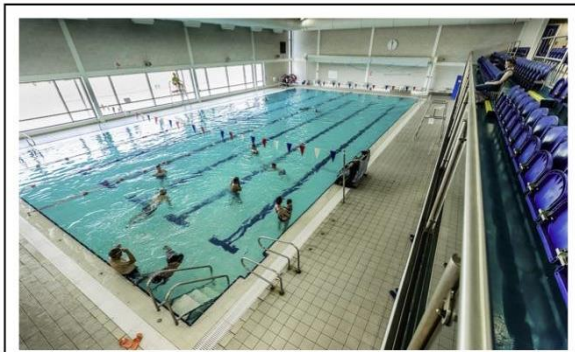
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Appendix A

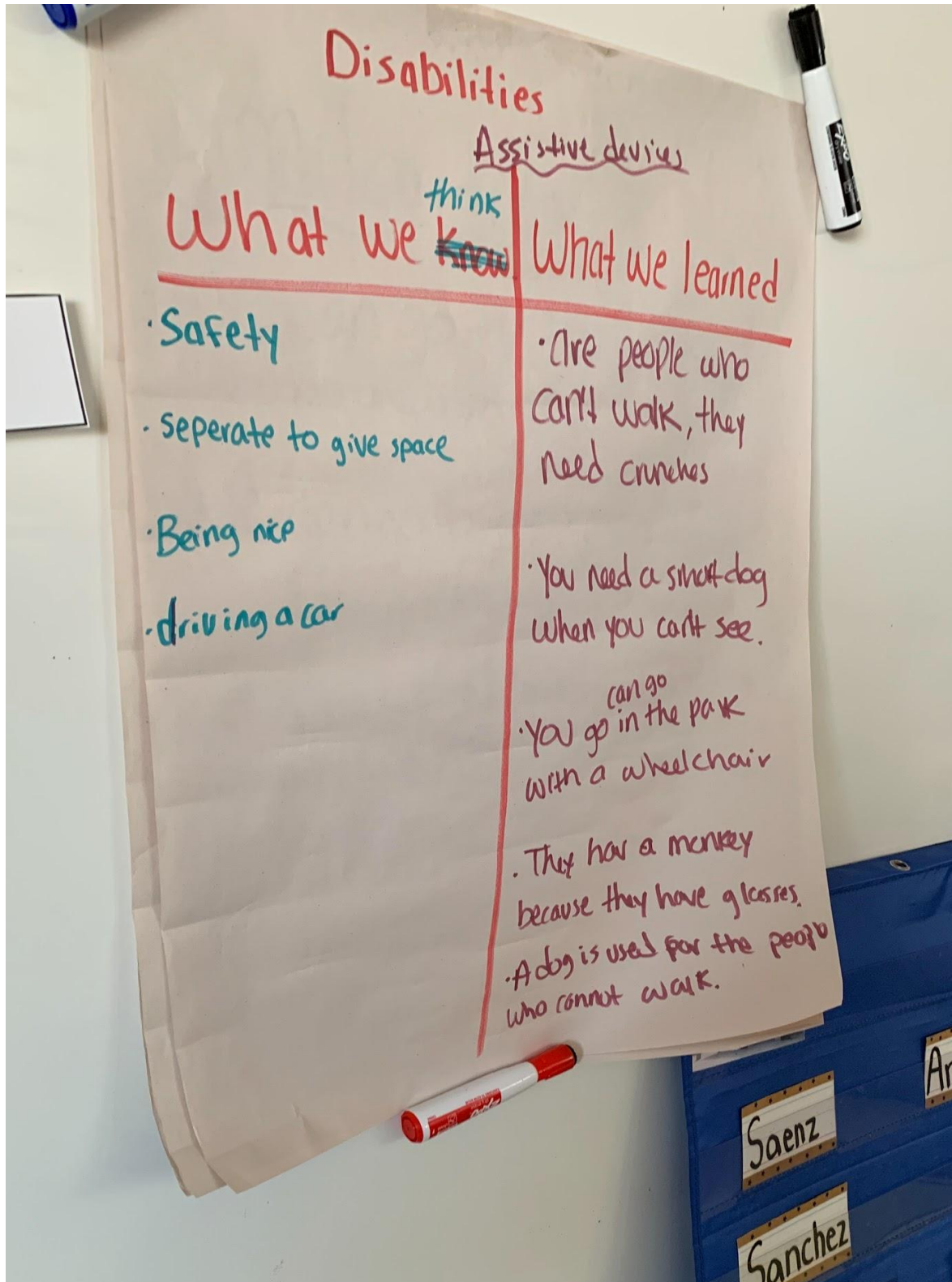


Appendix B

Visible Disabilities



Appendix C



*Table 1**List of responses of what participants thought a disability was*

Before the book was read	After the book was read
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Safety● Separate to give space● Being nice● Driving a car	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● People need a wheelchair to walk● When you can't see, you use glasses● When you can't hear, you need earplugs● Somebody who can't see needs a smart dog● My grandma can't walk. She needs crutches and glasses

*Table 2**List of responses of similarities between participants and someone with a disability*

Similarities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● We can go to the park with someone with a wheelchair● We can go to the beach with someone with a smart dog● We can go to the beach and the park with kites with someone who has crutches(crutches)