



Constructivist Philosophy of Education

Note: This explanation builds on the description of *del Sol* expressed in other written materials in our information packet wherein we shared our emphasis on the following key aspects of our educational philosophy:

- the richness of 'the whole' child: simultaneously physical, cognitive, social, emotional, personal, and intrapersonal/spiritual.
- the individuality of each child and the multiple intelligences within: Linguistic, Logical/Mathematical, Visual/Spatial, Bodily/Kinesthetic, Musical, Naturalist, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal and Existential/Spiritual.
- our unique environment of freedom and 'possibilities' environment, grounded in caring, supportive, well-structured programs, impels children's co-activity, self-motivation, self-direction, creativity, and engagement in the higher level thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, critical thinking, and creative problem solving.
- strong relationships not only with others but with themselves, cultivating inner resources and skills for developing self-awareness, personal empowerment, moral character, and the honoring of one's inner spirit.

All the above is rooted in a 'hands-on & mind's-on' philosophy of education called *constructivism*, where

"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."

— W. B. Yeats

Constructivism is very different from the prevailing educational philosophy of behaviorism found in traditional public and parochial schools. The "filling of the pail" (behaviorism) in such schools comes from a stimulus-response phenomenon focusing on *accumulating pre-set facts and skills*, where students are rewarded or punished for their mastery of the given material. Constructivism, on the other hand, is rooted in the recognition that human learning is an *internal, mental process focusing on concept development, deep understanding, and creativity*. This internal activity is where the "lighting of the fire" occurs. Simply, constructivism is based on learning from *internal process* rather than by *external circumstance* (behaviorism). Constructivism necessitates students' development and use of autonomy and creative problem solving, which greatly contrasts with the heteronomy (obedience) expected and required of students in behaviorist schools.

In traditional schools, behaviorist philosophy can be seen in classes that are usually driven by "teacher-talk" and depend heavily on textbooks or workbooks/worksheets for the structure of the course. There is a fixed world of knowledge that the student must come to know. Teachers serve mainly as pipelines for transferring the curriculum to the mind of the student that is an empty vessel, a *tabula rasa* to be filled. There is little room for student-initiated questions, independent thought or interaction between students. This approach is largely passive, teacher-directed and controlled. The goal of the learner is to correctly complete assignments and pass tests where the accepted explanation or methodology has been expostulated by the teacher.

Constructivist teachers, on the other hand, play the role of a

Constructivism is based on learning from internal process rather than by external circumstance. (behaviorism).

"midwife in the birth of understanding." Their role is not to dispense knowledge of a fixed curriculum but to provide students with a variety of opportunities and impelling incentives to construct knowledge mentally in direct relationship with meaningful and relevant experiences with the world of objects, nature, people, and ideas.

Constructivist teachers help students to explore, think, ask questions, make guesses, experiment, discover, make connections, be creative, use their multiple intelligences, take risks, do primary research from a wide variety of materials, from people, and from their mistakes, rather than to follow.

Constructivist teachers at *del Sol*:

- allow student responses to drive lessons, shift instructional strategies, and alter content.
- encourage and accept student autonomy and initiative, thereby nurturing students' responsible pursuit of new understandings.
- encourage students to express their observations, ideas, connections, and suggestions so as to foster their development of personal connection and responsibility for their learning.
- encourage students to connect with their observations, evaluations, and needs throughout activities in order to foster their skills as problem solvers, and more importantly, problem *finders*.
- use raw data and primary sources along with manipulative, interactive, and physical materials.
- foster *deep* understanding and facilitate the children's creative expression of it, rather than imitative behavior.
- structure lessons wherein children have opportunity to pursue the content in a variety of learning styles using multiple intelligences, rather than in a controlled sequence of specific directions with pre-set outcomes.
- foster, amplify, and frame the children's deep thinking and creativity rather than having the children be an 'audience' or receivers of the teachers own thinking/decision making/creativity for the kids to 'follow.'

This constructivist learning model is implemented, of course, in every area of our curriculum – in all elements of the cognitive/academic realm as well as the artistic/creative realm, and the interpersonal and intrapersonal realms. (And not just for children, but for all us adult learners, too!)

*What we want to see is the child in pursuit of knowledge,
not knowledge in pursuit of the child of the child.*

– George Bernard Shaw

Comparing Behaviorist (Traditional) and Constructivist Programs

Behaviorist/traditional

Child adapts.

Child is passive recipient of the teacher's didactic teaching; follows teacher's instructions.

Preset material is covered with 3 R's as the instructional focus.

Curriculum is presented part to whole, with emphasis on basic skills.

Adherence to fixed curriculum is highly valued.

Curricular activities rely heavily on textbooks, workbooks, and secondary research.

Teachers generally behave in a didactic manner, disseminating information to students.

Students are treated as "blank slates" onto which information is etched by the teacher.

Reliance on whole group instruction and individual tasks.

School subjects are separated; Reliance on textbooks/workbooks as main curriculum focus.

Correct answers are valued; Mistakes are not valued and emphasis is on avoiding them.

Constructivist

School/classroom adapts.

Child is active collaborator in hands-on/minds-on learning activities; child develops autonomy/self-direction as s/he explores, thinks, asks questions, makes guesses, theorizes, experiments, discovers, makes connections, is a problem finder and problem solver, is creative.

Curriculum emerges out of meaningful, relevant interests and in-depth projects develop in which typical academic skills are learned and utilized as tools to pursue the project. Integrated subjects; concrete materials, quality literature, and a variety of resource materials.

Curriculum is presented whole to part with emphasis on big concepts; basic skills are learned and utilized as tools for pursuing big concepts.

Student responses and interest is highly valued. Student responses drive lessons, shift instructional strategies, and alter content.

Curricular activities rely heavily on primary sources of data and manipulative materials.

Teachers generally behave in an interactive manner, mediating the environment for students.

Students are treated as thinkers with emerging theories about the world.

Balance between whole group, small group, and individual instruction; cooperative and individual activities.

Integrated subjects; Use of concrete materials, quality literature, and a variety of resources.

Questions are valued; Mistakes are highly valued as opportunities for learning.

Students primarily work alone.

Teacher is the arbitrator of what is correct.

Work and play are divided.

Groupings are by ability or age.

Emphasis on paper and pencil representations.

Teachers seek the correct answer to validate student learning.

Assessment of student learning is viewed as separate from teaching and occurs almost entirely through testing.

Assessment is for classification and reporting.

Grades are used as reward or punishment to drive student motivation (External Motivation).

Students primarily work with others in a variety of grouping contexts.

Children are theory builders, problem finders & problem solvers.

Play is one mode of learning.

Groupings are re-organized regularly according to learning needs, interests, a specific purpose or goal.

Various ways of representing knowledge using a variety of multiple intelligence modalities

Teachers seek the students' points of view in order to understand students' present conceptions for use in subsequent learning activities.

Assessment of student learning is interwoven with teaching and occurs through ongoing teacher observations of students at work in the process and products of daily school activity

Assessment is ongoing for purposes of instructional decision-making.

Engagement in relevant, meaningful pursuits drive student motivation (Internal Motivation).