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Promoting Young Children's Social-Emotional Development through Animal Interaction: A Case Study based on Bandura's Social Learning Theory

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Abstract: This study explores the social-emotional development of young children through animal interaction in an early childhood educational context. Drawing on a case study conducted during a farm visit, the research observed a group of 4–5-year-old children, with a particular focus on one focal child's behaviours and peer interactions. Data were collected through direct observation and written documentation and analysed with Bandura's Social Learning Theory as the theoretical framework. The findings indicate that children's social-emotional development was supported through processes of observation, imitation, guided participation, and peer modelling. Interactions with rabbits and lambs provided opportunities for children to demonstrate empathy, emotional expression, cooperation, and responsive social behaviour. Teacher instruction and positive reinforcement further strengthened children's engagement and learning. The study also identifies challenges related to differences in children's comfort levels and engagement with animals and proposes role-play and structured follow-up activities as strategies to extend learning. The paper argues that animal-based learning experiences, when intentionally planned and scaffolded, can make a meaningful contribution to young children's social-emotional development in early childhood settings.

Keywords: Social-emotional Development, Social Learning Theory, Planning Cycle, Case Study.

1. Introduction

This essay analyses the social and emotional learning and development of a child during an interaction with farm animals. Ways in which the learning can be enhanced in accordance with Albert Bandura's Social learning theory (SLT) are also discussed. Animal-based experiences in early childhood settings can provide valuable opportunities for children to develop empathy, cooperation, and emotional expression through observation and interaction. Drawing on Bandura's SLT, this paper examines how observational learning, modelling, and teacher guidance support children's social-emotional development in this context.

2. Observation Context and Case Description

2.1. Description of Learning Observation - Case Study Analysis

This essay uses chapter 3 of the book Child Development in Education Setting [1], how to Observe Children and Apply Theory to analyse Children's Learning and Development, amongst other observational methods. As an observer, the goal of an observational method is to meticulously record and explain what is seen and discussed. Making sure the observer does not taint the study setting and that the observations are written objectively is crucial in this situation [1]. According to Pellegrini and Bjorklund, in this observation, the practice of focal sampling, also known as focal child sampling, is spending a certain amount of time studying a person or group [2]. It is also beneficial to explain the interactions the focus child has with other people when doing focal sampling [2].

2.2. Observation Setting

The location of this observation was a farm called Myuna in a suburb of Melbourne. The observer was situated in the corner of one of the farm's indoor animal rooms, which contained lambs, rabbits and reptiles (snakes & lizards etc.). And the observer is not getting in the way or involved in any of the children's behaviors and activities. The observation was conducted with a small group of 4–5-year-old children who were led by two teachers from the same children center. In it, the observer's focus is on a child named Alice (pronoun). Observations will take place on 17 May 2024 between 11am and 12pm, children who were led by their teachers will engage and interact with the animals in the activity room, including petting lambs and rabbits and feeding them specialized feed. The observer recorded the observation using paper and pen, using a written form.

2.3. Observation Record

The children lined up outside the animal's lounge and waited for the teachers to explain the characteristics of the different animals. Alice's group observed the rabbit's room first. After the teacher has said the precautions, the children are asked to line up and enter the activity room in an orderly manner, all the children stand up and line up, including Alice.

Once inside the bunnies' activity room, all the children first started trying to get closer to the bunnies. The rabbits were all huddled together in a pile, there were 2 such piles in total. For the first minute, the children watched from a distance. The teacher was at the front of the pile, picking up a piece of grass from the ground and stretching it out to one of the rabbits. Alice was the first to follow the teacher's example, crouching down on the ground and picking up a piece of grass and stretching it out to one of the rabbits, and one after another, the other children started to do the same thing. A small number of the children made a tapping motion with the grass on the rabbits and the teacher said to them "please touch them gently, don't hurt them." At this point the children stopped their hand movements and Alice asked one of the teachers "Can I touch them?" and the teacher replied in the affirmative,

telling them again to be gentle with the rabbits. Alice reached out to touch one of the rabbits with a gentle movement and exclaimed that their fur was very soft, some of the children agreed with her and were encouraged to touch the other rabbits and said, 'see if all the rabbits have such soft fur'. Alice petted almost all the rabbits with the other children, and some of the children, including Alice, laid their entire bodies on the ground and tried to rest their heads on the haystacks next to the rabbits. Until the teacher says, please stand up, the tour of the rabbit activity room is over.

Next the children went into the lamb room. Alice said, "lambs are much bigger than rabbits" to which the teacher replied to Alice "you are absolutely right, so please be safe and be more careful when touching them". This time the children stayed for a shorter period compared to their time in the rabbit's activity room, and some of the children began to gently stroke the lambs' heads soon after entering the fence. "Its fur is not as soft as a rabbit's" said one of the children, "Yes, please feel them" said one of the teachers. Alice was the first child to try to stroke the lambs' body parts. The children standing around her observed her behavior and gradually moved their hands from stroking the heads to the lambs' bodies, and the children started to try to stroke different parts of the lambs' bodies. One of the children spoke of wrapping their arms around the sides of the Lamb's body in a hugging gesture. One of the teachers said, "Imagine what their hair could be used for." One of the children said that it could be used to make clothes, the teacher confirmed their answer and asked the others what other answers they had, the children stared at the teacher, but no child spoke. The teacher waited for a few moments and then began to explain how to shave sheep and what their wool was used for. After the introduction, the teacher asked each child to turn their hands into the shape of a bowl and poured a handful of feed into each child's hand and said, "Try to feed them, please be gentle with your movements". The children stood in front of different lambs and waited for the lambs to come and lick the food away from their hands. Observation ends here.

3. Social-Emotional Development in the Observed Interaction

According to the observation, children can improve their social emotional development in this activity. The term "social-emotional development" (SED) refers to the range of social and emotional development aspects that affect children [3]. SED comprises the capacity to create, preserve, and grow healthy connections with peers and adults as well as the comprehension, regulation, and expression of emotions in a way appropriate for one's age and development [4]. Children who have a deep bond with animals also tend to be more attractive, more empathic, more sensitive toward other people, according to an increasing body of research. Children who are encouraged in their passion for animals also tend to transfer this love and care to other living things [5]. In this essay, Bandura's social learning theory is used to explain the observed behaviour of the children.

4. Analysis through Bandura’s Social Learning Theory

The Social Learning Theory of Albert Bandura places a strong emphasis on the value of observing, modeling, and imitating other people's actions, attitudes, and emotional responses. According to Bandura, learning consists of four primary elements which are attention, retention, motor reproduction and motivation and happens via observation in a social setting [6]. The children's visit to the indoor animal room illustrates several important ideas from Bandura's theory.

5. Planning for Enhanced Learning

5.1. Gathering Information from Observation

We can improve the children's social and emotional learning experiences and development by using a structured planning cycle that incorporates Bandura's Social Learning Theory. The children who as samples were 3-5 years old, research has shown that children under the age of six have difficulty separating words and what they mean, and although they cannot fully describe what they know, they have at least developed a basic awareness [7]. Therefore, the children as a sample were able to understand what the teacher was asking and instructing them to do during the activity but were not able to understand the meaning behind the activity. During the observation process, the observer uses the focal sample method of observation. Group and focal sampling provide similar spatial data, but focal samples are better suited for determining the effect of one person on another at any given moment [8]. People observe and copy other people's behavior after witnessing it, particularly if their observational experiences are favorable or entail incentives associated with the observed conduct. Imitation is the actual replication of observed behaviours [9]. In most behaviours of the group, Alice as the first child to respond, is reasonably chosen by the observer as the primary subject of observation. The information of observation was documented in the form of texts.

5.2. Analysing Learning Needs

Based on the recording document at part1, the observer gathered the information about the children improve and learn social and emotion through observing, petting and feeding the lambs and rabbits. According to the guide of O’Rorke, observational learning involves attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation [10]. In this activity, Alice paid close attention to the teacher's directions on how to engage with the lambs and bunnies. Secondly, the observer remembered and recorded all the behaviour and communications of all the children especially Alice. When Alice and the other children fed the bunnies grass and gave them gentle pats, as the instructor had demonstrated, they had clearly retained the material. Effective retention is demonstrated by the children's ability to remember and apply the instructions even after the instructor has given them a brief example. The condition of reproduction is all the children able to replicate what Alice doing, Alice is the model in this observation. The children successfully reproduced the behaviors demonstrated by the teacher, and Alice imitated the way the teacher fed the rabbits and then continued this approach while engaging with the lambs. The children's ability to put what they have seen into practice is demonstrated by their replication of the actions. The final necessary ingredient for modeling to occur is motivation [10]. The children’s enthusiasm and involvement in the activities demonstrated how motivated they were. Positive feedback from the teacher, such as compliments and affirmations, was very important in getting the children motivated. More incentive was given by the social element of witnessing peers

effectively engage with the animals. For example, Alice's early acts demonstrated the impact of peer modeling by inspiring other children to do the same.

The children primarily learned through observation which is a key component of Bandura's theory. Visual presentations have long been recognised as an important teaching method for children's motor skills and social-emotional development [11]. Alice's activities, which range from following directions to copying the teacher's movements, are indicative of the process of observational learning. When Alice initiated a behavior, such as feeding the rabbits, other children followed, demonstrating that Alice is a model among them. A study has shown that peer influence effects are stronger over shorter periods of time [12]. However, after observing the activity, the observer felt that there were purely some problems and challenges. Some of the children did not manage to pet the animal gently at first, as evidenced by them patting the grass on the rabbit. This challenge was addressed by direct teacher intervention and correction, but it was not possible to ensure that every child would be able to follow this instruction equally well the next time. The duration of the lamb room was shorter than that of the rabbit room as the children's engagement times varied. This difference may indicate different levels of interest or comfort with different animals, suggesting that different engagement strategies are needed.

5.3. Planning Follow-Up Experiences

This planning can be linked to EYLF outcome 5.1, which states that "Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes" [13]. To achieve this outcome, the children need a plan of Enhancing social, cognitive, and motor skills through structured animal interaction activities. So, I want to add two additional activities have been added to the existing ones. The first one is Role-Playing Activities. The children take turns to play the teacher for a day. The children go home in advance to learn about rabbits and how to feed them, and then demonstrate to the other children on 'teacher day' so that they can copy them. In contrast to traditional methods of teaching science, role-playing is an approach that often requires children to watch and listen in the classroom because role-playing is more than just learning facts; it can create an environment for effective learning through communication, collaboration, improvisation and debate [14]. While no behaviour is fully cognitive, psychomotor or affective, the expression of feelings and emotions is undoubtedly at the heart of affective learning in science [14]. This activity promotes cooperation and communication among peers, links to Bandura's social learning theory and can achieve the outcome 5.1 of EYLF. Promotes cooperation and communication among peers.

In this activity, it is crucial to consider the responses and engagement levels of the children, their varying comfort and interest levels, and making sure all the children are involved and motivated to participate so that the activity may be modified as needed. By encouraging kind and considerate behavior, the activity's organizers must always have safety as their top priority, particularly while engaging with the animals.

6. Conclusion

This essay concludes by highlighting the important role that organized observational learning plays in promoting children's social and emotional growth. By incorporating Bandura's SLT into practical activities, educators may successfully enrich children's learning experiences, helping them develop important skills for healthy social relationships and emotional expression.

Compared with previous studies that emphasise observational learning in general educational contexts, this essay applies SLT to animal-based interaction in early childhood and shows the value of teacher guidance and peer modelling in this setting. However, the discussion is based on a single observation and therefore cannot fully reflect children's long-term development or individual differences. Future research could include more participants and longer observation periods to provide a broader understanding of how animal interaction may support young children's social-emotional development.

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