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Language Experience Forum Journal

The *Language Experience Forum* Journal is a refereed journal of the Language Experience Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association. The journal is aimed at teachers of literacy at all levels. It provides a forum for discussion of ideas and issues related to the teaching of literacy to all groups of students and across multiple disciplinary areas.

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From the Field

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Andy the Duck Goes Digital: A Language Experience

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Abstract

Using the Project Approach (Helm & Katz, 2011), a class of preschool children in a Head Start program learns about ducks while hatching a duck egg in a classroom incubator.   Through this project, the children discover new ideas, explore possibilities, experiment to determine cause and effect, and conduct research on the topic of "ducks."   The child-initiated book that resulted from the project is a prime example of the Language Experience Approach in action. Preschool children of differing literacy levels came together to complete a group-authored book that used digital photography, computer editing, and teacher support as tools for creating a product that had multi-level purposes.

...experiences with Head Start, Sesame Street, early childhood education, and the like . . . have reconfirmed what educators like Friedrich Froebel, Huey, and others have said. Development is a continuous interaction between a child and his environment, and the quality and quantity of experiences encountered affects development. Preschool programs are best when aimed at giving children a wide range of experiences, both individual and group, in which they have opportunities to share with others through work and play, to enjoy and appreciate the fund of circumstances in the world about them, to extend their creative powers, and to use language freely, frequently, and informally. (Stauffer, 1980, p. 38)

The Initial *Hatching* of the Idea: A Vignette

The end of the school year is fast approaching, and an overwhelmed preschool teacher realizes that she has two weeks left to put final touches on a child assessment portfolio for every child in her classroom, meet with the parent committee to finalize plans for the end-of-the-school-year family picnic, and create a class memory book. Oh! She also needs to teach her 4-year-olds! The teacher sits at the computer, trying to concentrate for a just a few more moments while the teaching assistant transitions children from nap time to outdoor play and snack. Ethan, a little boy

with big brown eyes who had awakened from nap early and had spent his quiet time reading books,

approaches the teacher excitedly. "We could write a book like this. We could! It tells about a boy

who incubated eggs just like we did. Can we write a story about our duck?!!" The teacher looked

at the well-loved copy of The Little Duck (Dunn, 1976) that Ethan was holding. The first response

that came to the tired teacher's brain was "No way! I cannot handle one more thing on my list."

The words that escaped her mouth, however, were: "Of course we can, Sweetheart!"

The Language Experience Approach

Once the teacher thought about the book to be written by the class, she knew that the book

would be a group endeavor using the Language Experience Approach (LEA) (Stauffer, 1980).

LEA is defined as a child-centered group process that uses the children's own words about a

personal event as the basis for created text that children find both familiar and comfortable. Such

familiarity and comfort lends a level of predictability and readability to the text that helps children

begin to read and write words that are already a part of their vocabulary (Padak & Rasinski, 1999).

LEA also builds a strong link between verbal communication and written communication (Van

Allen, 1970). To illustrate this relationship, Van Allen (1970) asserted:

> What I can think about I can talk about. What I can say, I can write, or someone can write
>
> for me. I can read what I can write by myself. I can learn to read what other people write for
>
> me to read, because most of the words we use are the same. (p. 1)

With this theory in mind, the teacher planned an experience to get class buy-in for the project.

Getting the Class on Board

With the class gathered in a large group meeting, Ethan and the teacher told the class about

his idea to write a story concerning their adventures with Andy the Duck. This was not a novel

concept to the children because they had written many books before. They had even written books

about events that they had experienced together as a class, such as a trip to the fire station. This

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proposed book was different for two major reasons. First, the entire idea was child-driven. It was

not the teacher's idea, nor did the teacher lead the children to think it was their idea. It was truly

hatched from the brain of a young child who was inspired by a book that had been placed in the

Reading Center. Second, this planned book required that the children recall and write about not a

single event, but rather an eight-week long process, which could prove challenging for a group of

children this age.

Teacher Buy-In

The class as a whole was excited about the idea, and the boy with big brown eyes was

obviously pleased about that. The teacher, too, became excited about the project when she realized

that the class-made book could fulfill several of her end-of-the-school-year obligations. First, as

children were engaged in the writing and editing process, the teacher could assess each child's

literacy skills, thus adding important information to each of the child assessment portfolios.

Second, the class-made book could act as the memory book that the parents had requested. Instead

of putting together an album from throughout the year as originally planned, the class-made duck

book could have a picture of every child along with the child's name, thus fulfilling the

requirements of the memory book. Last, as part of the original plan for the family picnic, the

families were to come inside and enjoy a big screen slide presentation of class activities from

throughout the school year. By scanning the finished class-made duck book, the book could be

transformed into a presentation and be the "opening act" of the slide show, followed by random

snapshots from throughout the school year.

Getting Started

As is typical practice when using the Language Experience Approach, the class was

introduced to the topic, and every individual was encouraged to share a personal experience

relating to the topic. With a marker and large chart tablet at the teacher's side, an Experience Chart

was created with the group. The children's exact words were written as the teacher used questions and comments to lead a group discussion about things that had happened as they had waited for Andy the Duck to hatch and had continued to observe him and interact with him as he grew. The children's words were read back to them for verification that the words written on the chart had, indeed, been written as the children wanted them to be written. This step in the Language Experience Approach helps the children see that the words that they speak can be symbolically represented using letters of the alphabet. In addition, the teacher models the conventions of print such as left to right and top to bottom orientation of print, spaces between words, and punctuation at the end of sentences.

Much of what the children said was fairly simple. Some examples include:

Andy is pretty.

Our duck has nails.

He can float.

Others shared thoughts that were more complex such as:

Andy used to be downy, but now he has feathers.

He got out his egg with his egg tooth.

He was in that egg for 28 days, then he hatched out.

He can kick his feet and swim backwards.

As the teacher reflected on this process, she came to several conclusions. First, the teacher decided that at this point in the school year, most of the children were comfortable speaking in front of the group. Second, she determined from the children's facial expressions and level of interaction that they were truly engaged in the group writing process and were not bored or in a hurry to move on to something else. She therefore determined that the simple sentences and the more complex sentences that the children shared during the group writing experience were genuinely indicative of

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individual oral language abilities and individual content knowledge about the duck. The

conclusions drawn from her reflections helped guide her teaching decisions.

Decision 1. Should the children be intentionally grouped? Small groups could be based on

productive language ability or content knowledge level. There were many other activities taking

place in the classroom simultaneously, though, that required individual children's attention; thus,

the teacher decided to initially group the children by convenience. When one group was finished,

individuals who were not busy doing "must do" activities were called together to work on the next

page. She also decided that if this did not seem to work well, the decision would be re-visited.

Decision 2. How should the book be organized? The teacher decided that the pictures that

had been taken over the course of the duck's incubation and life would be placed in sequential order

by the teaching staff. Then, it would be ascertained if there were any missing elements. Were

there steps in the duck hatching and growing process that were missing? If so, those steps could

possibly be re-enacted and then pictures could be taken to add to the book. Were there any

children who did not prominently appear in any of the chosen pictures? If so, other pictures could

be substituted for the chosen pictures so that everyone would be included.

Decision 3. How should the book be written?   Because the pictures for the book were

digital and easily viewed on the computer screen, convenience warranted that the group writing

project could take place at the computer. The teacher had never attempted this before, but she felt

that it could be productive for several reasons. First, typical class books stayed in the classroom,

and each page of the book had a child's picture and name written on it. In addition, the verbatim

words the child spoke were hand-written by an adult and used to add to the story. For much the

same reasons as discussed in the creation of the Experience Chart, the child's words were not

edited. Since the duck book would be given to each child and would most likely wind up as part of

the bedtime story line-up, not to mention the possibility of it becoming part of the historical record,

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it seemed prudent for it to be grammatically correct and act as a model for correct language usage. Therefore, group editing and decision-making would be a part of the writing process. Second, time was of the essence, and the group editing process could be accomplished quickly and neatly through desktop publishing.

Planning and Doing in Tandem

Planning and organizing are vital components of teaching. However, when the teacher is guiding activities that are child-led, one of the disadvantages is lack of planning time as the teacher listens to the children's ideas and tries to quickly pave a path that will lead to the learning of skills, facts, dispositions, and ways to further knowledge based on those ideas. The duck book project was no exception. Once the children agreed that writing *Andy the Duck* was a great idea and showed enthusiasm about participating, the teacher intended to have the pictures selected and sequenced and ready to write about by the next day. Those were good intentions, but events did not unfold that way. Instead, she quickly realized that there was not a good picture of every child and that there were classroom activities in reference to *Andy the Duck* that were missing. For instance, there were no pictures of the incubator or the intact egg. During morning circle, it was explained to the children that more pictures were needed so that every classmate would appear in the book. The group was very understanding and supportive of this, expressing their willingness to wait to start the book until after everyone had a picture to include. Helping children develop social dispositions that take others' perspectives and needs into consideration is an imperative part of developing an overall positive classroom community. Although these types of skills are sometimes an unspoken part of the early childhood curriculum, they are important and group projects are an excellent springboard for developing them.

Even though many things that had happened in Andy's life could not be reproduced, new pictures were taken of the children with the cracked egg and some of the classroom charts that had

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been created, thus allowing for a good quality picture of every child to include in the book. While

the teacher was taking pictures and most of the children were engaged in learning centers, the

teaching assistant took each individual child to the Experience Chart and read what had been said

the previous day. She also pointed out some words that appeared frequently on the chart such as

Andy, egg, and ***duck.*** Though an improvised activity, this proved to be beneficial in several ways.

It showed the children that their words written on the chart were unchanging, and that once those

words were written, the words were consistent regardless of who read them. It also gave them an

opportunity to see specific likenesses and differences between words and to recognize words that

were frequently repeated in the text.

Benefits of Digital Photography in LEA

The use of pictures was effective in helping children recall details about the classroom

events involving Andy the Duck. The events took place over a period of eight weeks and were not

easy for the children to recall, but the pictures jogged their memories. More specifically, digital

photography allowed for many conveniences and learning supports:

- At little cost, many people and settings could be photographed

- Many photos could be sorted and best photos selected for the needed purpose

- Photos could be easily enhanced and edited to better focus on the main subject of the
  picture

- Pictures could be arranged in sequential order and reviewed repeatedly by the children

- Pictures were a tangible artifact of a specific point in time

- Pictures brought children "back in time" to recall past events more readily

- Large pictures on a computer screen allowed for ease in viewing by small groups of
  children simultaneously, which enhanced group discussions centered on the pictures

    From past classroom experiences, the teacher knew that the children would want to see all

of the pictures that were going into the book. She also knew that if they did not see them prior to the small group editing that would take place during learning centers, there would be classroom management issues and off-task behavior as children tried to sneak a peek. As a pre-emptive measure to help alleviate these issues, the teacher used the early morning time prior to breakfast to invite children to the computer to view the whole book without any text. She also invited individuals to say something about the first picture. She then took the many words that children had used to tell about the picture to create a text that would introduce the story. So, the first page was certainly child-influenced, but it was teacher-written. During Morning Circle, the teacher showed the pictures intended for the book again. The pictures were rather difficult for a large group to see, but there was no way to project the screen image to a larger venue. However, having seen the pictures once already eased many tensions. Then, the teacher read aloud the text of the first page as an example of what the children could look forward to doing later in the day or week.

The Editing Process and Assessing Children's Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions

As planned, the teacher was joined at the computer by groups of two to four children, depending on the children's availability during learning centers. This seemed to work out well insofar as multi-level abilities joining together to help one another and offer suggestions. The children were excited to see their pictures on the computer and were also interested in having an opportunity to say something in a book that would eventually be printed and sent home with all of their classmates. The children provided verbal information to the teacher as she typed; then, the teacher read the information back to the children using her finger to track each word, hence emphasizing the directionality of reading and distinguishing individual words. Then, with definite intentionality, the teacher asked questions and made comments, some designed to assess literacy skills, others designed to extend vocabulary, correct grammar, or add specificity.

To assess literacy skills, a simple literacy checklist was created with each child's name and the date of the activity; space was included for anecdotal notes. The literacy skills that were assessed included identifying some letters, identifying the beginning of a word, recognizing some common words in print, and identifying some punctuation marks and their usage. Completing the checklist was made more efficient by listing letters of the alphabet so that the ones that were identified by a child could simply be circled. Anecdotal notes helped the teacher recall details, as well as literacy skills, that were made apparent during the editing process but were not necessarily being assessed. For example, one child called a period a *stop sign,* and another child took great pleasure in showing that he could read the names of every child in the class as listed on the author page.

With minimal prompting from the teacher, most of the children were able to recall specific vocabulary words to be added to the text such as *oviparous, egg tooth, down, feathers, beak,* and *responsible*. One of the benefits of group editing turned out to be the prompting from other children. If one child could not recall a word, someone else in the group either gave another hint or gave a word suggestion. This also turned out to be true in correcting grammar. Generally, the children were polite to one another and sometimes used the words that the teacher had modeled to help a child correct his or her words. Other times, especially when the text was read back to the children, individuals corrected their own grammatical mistakes. Still, other times, the teacher needed to tell the children the correct word to use. The following is a comparison of a fairly complex sentence that remained unchanged from what the child initially said as compared to a series of child-led and teacher-led editorial changes made to a simple sentence. This is the unchanged sentence:

> *We wrapped him in a sheet to hold him because he flapped his tiny wings and tried to get*
> *away.*

This is an example of text that went through more changes than any other as we all worked together:

> *Andy got enough oil to swim.*
>
> *When Andy was two weeks old, he got enough oil to swim without his mama.*
>
> *When Andy was two weeks old, he got enough oil to swim on his own.*
>
> *When Andy was two weeks old, we hoped he got enough oil to swim on his own.*
>
> *When Andy was two weeks old, we hoped he had begun to produce enough oil on his own.*
>
> *When Andy was two weeks old, we hoped he had begun to produce enough oil on his own that he would be able to swim.*

The children were excited about the process of verbally changing the words and then watching the written words on the computer screen change accordingly. It was somewhat magical, and there were lots of giggles. Some small groups developed a *do it again* mentality and wanted to change a lot of words just to see the changes occur and hear the words re-read with the changes in place. Unfortunately, time did allow for as much of this kind of play with words as the teacher would have liked.

One specification that had to be acknowledged with each group was to make sure that the people pictured on the page had their name written in the text. Different groups had different ways of handling this. Some groups added a list of all of the children who were pictured as the last sentence on the page and, with some encouragement, told what the group was doing. Others named all of the children pictured and told what they were doing individually. It is also interesting to note that several small groups used various classroom charts and posters as references to help spell the names of their friends for the class-made book text. The children's self-initiated use of environmental print was indicative of further literacy skill development in that it showed print awareness in a meaningful, contextually appropriate way (Prior, 2009).

Publishing and Sharing

Andy the Duck was completed in the nick of time. Copies of the book were printed and distributed to children as part of the end-of-year family program. The families appreciated both the take home book and the PowerPoint® presentation of the book along with photos that had been taken throughout the school year. The teacher appreciated the opportunity to use a child-led project to accomplish many goals and to learn from the experience for future teaching episodes.

What the Teachers Learned

Digital Language Experience Approach. Though we did not know it at the time we created the class-made book, we were employing techniques and methods described as the Digital Language Experience Approach (D-LEA) (Labbo, Eakle, & Montero, 2002). Labbo et al. defined D-LEA as "the use of computers and digital photography to enhance Language Experience Approach (LEA) activities" (http://www.readingonline.org/electronic/labbo2/)."   In a case study using D-LEA in a kindergarten classroom, these researchers found many of the same benefits that we did in using digital photography and desktop publishing with young children.

Grouping strategies. Additionally, the classroom teacher learned about grouping strategies as her class engaged in writing the book. After the first day, it became clear that groups of two or three children were preferable. Even groups of four children got along well socially and created readable products. However, since the teacher was assessing literacy skills during the course of the group editing process, she found that it was difficult to keep up with and document skills and comments when there were more than three children working at a time. Furthermore, children seemed to have patience and pay attention during this process when there were two or three children, but the teacher recognized that the group's attention waned when there were more than three children participating.

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Opportunities for speaking. Another issue that surfaced in regard to grouping was individuals' likelihood to speak freely during the small group discussions and editing. On one hand, there needed to be a consideration of fairness in opportunities for speaking. The teacher recognized that some children were more outspoken, had better social skills, and were better at getting their ideas heard. These young leaders were not overbearing to the point of excluding more timid children, but the outspoken children often took the lead. Because the teacher recognized this and there were enough pages in the book for some children to have more than one opportunity to tell about a picture, some groups were intentionally developed to allow more timid children a greater opportunity to take a leadership role. Conversely, the teacher noted that some children who were less talkative during whole group discussions were much more animated during the small group discussions and editing process. This seemed to be an effect caused by both a small group situation and the excitement of using digital pictures.

Class dynamics. A related concept that the teacher became aware of was the evolving processes of class dynamics. This experience of writing *Andy the Duck* occurred at the end of the school year after the children had interacted for nine months. Most of the children had also been together as three-year-olds in a different preschool classroom at the same school. The prior experiences the children brought with them to this learning episode prepared them for listening attentively to others, taking turns in conversational speech, and working cooperatively with others. Had this same learning opportunity been presented at the beginning of the school year, it is likely that it would not have gone as smoothly simply because the children would not have been as sophisticated in enacting group skills as they were by the end of the school year. With that in mind though, it seems probable that group endeavors similar to this Language Experience Approach activity would help to build group social skills throughout the school year.

Summary

Writing *Andy the Duck* provided an opportunity to expand on previous LEA activities by incorporating digital photography and desktop publishing. This movement into higher level technology in the preschool classroom gave children a functional, yet fun, opportunity to use the classroom computer for creating a product, rather than simply playing a learning game as was the usual case. The excitement created by using pictures of the children engaging in a high interest class project coupled with the novelty of on-the-spot editing brought about intense small group engagement and on-task attention required for seeing a task through to completion. The final product was a source of pride for the children, their parents, and the teachers.

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FROM THE FIELD

The Value of Center-Based Instruction in Enhancing Literacy across the Curriculum

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Current Trends

I am concerned with some of the current trends in early childhood education. Specifically, early childhood curriculum has been compacted to the extent that we now have unreasonable expectations of young children so that they may be "prepared" for the next grade level. As Curtis and Carter state, "we have seen an ever-increasing 'push-down curriculum with an emphasis on 'academic readiness.' Kindergarten feels too much like first grade, and thus, preschool expectations resemble the view of kindergarten that was held a couple decades ago" (Curtis & Carter, 2011, p. 14). In too many classrooms, preschool children are enduring long spans of teacher-centered instruction and completing worksheets at the expense of play and free exploration. These trends are disturbing because they do not align with what research says about how young children develop. For example, Piaget believed that children naturally develop in a predictable sequence of stages, with each stage building on gains made in the previous one. (Wittmer, Petersen, & Puckett, 2012). Based on Piaget's theory, "this 'get them ready' emphasis leads to a preschool curriculum that is too abstract for young children's concrete thinking and often includes meaningless memorization and parroting" (Curtis & Carter, 2011, p. 14).

Meaningful Exploration

In order for children to understand concepts, they must experience and explore these concepts in meaningful ways. Curtis and Carter suggest, "Children grow when curriculum activities are meaningful and geared to their interests and developmental and cultural needs" (2011, p. 14). When children are interested and invested in an activity, meaningful learning occurs. During these learning activities, children "reach new understandings as a result of attentive adults who scaffold their learning" (p. 14). Curtis and Carter determined "at the heart of children's learning is active play in an engaging environment—uninterrupted time to curiously explore, to become physically competent, and to be intellectually engaged" (p. 14). During this time to explore and learn, "adults enhance children's learning with support to extend these experiences and deepen their understandings" (p. 14). By providing this scaffolding, teachers encourage children to become naturally inquisitive and further explore new experiences. As a guideline for designing early childhood curriculum, Curtis and Carter revisited the 3R's and have proposed these revisions:

Remember to slow down. Take time to really notice and delight in children and the magic of their development.

Reawaken yourself and the children to a sense of wonder, curiosity, a passion for discovery, and new learning.

Recognize that childhood is a time for intense intellectual pursuits as well as social and emotional learning. Build curriculum on children's interests and on the questions and skills they are pursuing.

Revisit the idea of academic lessons. Rather than worksheets, offer children hands-on opportunities to gain understanding of math, science, reading, writing, and experimentation. (p. 15)

Following these guidelines, early childhood teachers are mindful of developmentally appropriate practices for young children.

Center-Based Pedagogy

Simply put, center-based instruction allows children to explore and experiment as they strengthen social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills. When children learn and grow in classrooms that contain a variety of centers (e.g., math/manipulative, science, literacy, dramatic play, cooking, sand and water, art, and blocks), they can explore concepts within a variety of contexts. In fact, centers should operate within the context of an emergent curriculum to ensure that they stimulate children's natural curiosity. According to Click and Karkos, "Emergent curriculum supplies cognitive activities that children initiate through questioning and explorations. These activities also encourage children to experiment and 'think outside the box'" (2010, p. 136).

Math/manipulative and science center. The Math/Manipulative and Science center should provide children with a variety of materials and objects needed to experiment with new concepts and "to test their own knowledge or skills" (Click & Karkos, 2010, p. 156). While playing in this center, children "should be able to increase their vocabulary of mathematical and scientific words" (p. 156). The activities and materials in this center should help children "learn to count, sort, and classify objects. Children can judge and understand size, shape, and texture of objects" (p. 156). These classifying and sorting concepts build a foundation for early mathematics skills. In this space, children also "learn about their physical environment, about matter and energy, and about living things. Activities in this area should provide many opportunities for children to use all their senses to consolidate their learning" (p. 156). Activities that encourage an early foundation of understanding the scientific process are very important.

According to Curtis and Carter (2011), activities for a math/manipulative and science center might involve young children in:

1) pouring activities at a sensory table using different sized cups to discover which cup will hold the most.

2) making diagrams or drawing pictures to represent numbers (e.g., how many children like pizza and how many do not like pizza).

3) creating patterns with blocks, beads, or other suitable materials.

4) practicing ordering materials from shortest to longest, smallest to largest, and so forth.

5) playing with concrete materials to learn geometric shapes (e.g. blocks, puzzles, cookie cutters).

6) exploring and describing attributes of common objects (e.g., size, shape, color, weight, and texture).

7) explore ways materials can be changed by combining, freezing, melting, dissolving, or applying physical pressure through pushing, pulling, pounding, or stretching. (pp. 198-203)

In each of these activities, the children manipulate concrete objects to build mathematical skills and enhance their understanding of mathematics in the real world.

Literacy center. Literacy centers "provide opportunities for children to acquire skills they will need to read and write" (Click & Karkos, 2010, p. 157). Literacy centers are essential in helping children with a wide range of abilities develop literacy skills. This area focuses primarily on developing "an appreciation of books, the development of language skills, and the improvement of fine motor skills" (p. 157). Literacy center activities include sequencing and retelling stories (p. 157) along with "clapping syllables in names, clapping syllables in words, and practicing letter-sound correspondence" (Curtis & Carter, 2011, p. 196). As children play in

the literacy center, they naturally develop language skills and "add new words to their vocabularies through their play activities" (Click & Karkos, 2010, p. 136). By interacting with their teachers and peers, children have "many opportunities to practice language by explaining what they have learned, by asking questions, or by solving problems. Children naturally integrate drawing and writing in their play as they create grocery lists, signs, and letters. Gradually, the development of language skills may include the ability to recognize some written words" (p. 136). All of these skills are best learned in context.

    Dramatic play center. Dramatic play allows children to mimic tasks they experience at home as well as take on new roles in imaginative play (Click & Karkos, 2010, p. 153). Indeed, dramatic play allows children to build social and language skills as they talk on play telephones and alter their language as they take on different roles. Children increase their social and emotional skills as they pretend to visit each other for meals and engage in rituals such as "cooking, putting babies to sleep …, and disciplining children" (p. 153). Dramatic play also helps children strengthen fine motor and small-muscle capabilities by cooking meals and performing chores. Further, children develop creative thinking skills as they dress for specific roles by selecting from a variety of clothing, jewelry, hats, shoes, and other props.
While children typically enjoy dramatic play centers, teachers must be careful to ensure a "gender-equitable classroom" by allowing children "opportunities to play with both same-sex and opposite-sex classmates" (Copple, 2003, p. 111). To be gender-equitable, the dramatic play area should "include props such as men's hats and ties, women's hats, [and] hats from a variety of occupations" (p.112), and teachers should "encourage children to participate in a range of activities that are typically gender typed for the opposite-sex child" (p. 112). By removing gender bias from dramatic play, the center fosters a unique blend of creativity, language, and social development for young children.

Cooking center. Cooking centers can stand on their own or be incorporated with the math/manipulative and science center. Under a teacher's supervision, "young children can enjoy the real tasks involved in preparing their own snacks or meals" (Click & Karkos, 2010, p. 158). Cooking provides an authentic experience for young children to "see how matter changes under different circumstances" (p. 158). Cooking also encourages the development of social skills "as children wait their turn or share tasks with others" (p. 158) and language skills as children read and follow recipes and use words to describe procedures and physical changes.

Sand and water center. Sand and water centers provide yet another outlet for free exploration and creativity among young children, and they facilitate child development in all domains (Crowther, 2008). Crowther asserts that children's social skills improve as they collaborate with others and model respect for what their peers create, and emotional skills develop as children show pride in the accomplishments they make in independent exploration (free from adult intervention) and build self-esteem. Exploring sand and water are soothing and therapeutic, and children are able to persist in this center longer than any other (2008). In this center, young children can also develop knowledge and skills in mathematics, science, and creative thinking; they develop physical and coordination skills while lifting, pouring, scooping, filling, sifting, and measuring. As with many other centers, sand and centers encourage children's language development as children describe structures, talk about their actions, and negotiate play, along with learning new vocabulary words such as "swish" and "splash" (Crowther, 2008).

Art center. The art center is another area in the classroom that enhances children's creativity as they use open-ended materials to create, and it enhances language development as they describe their important work. The art center also promotes fine motor growth as children draw, trace, glue, paint, and cut; it promotes gross motor development when children experiment

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with clay, use finger-paint, and paint on easels (Click & Karkos, 2010, p. 155). Art centers can facilitate children's emotional development by "allowing them to feel successful at an activity of their own choice" (Click & Karkos, 2010, p. 155). Art centers can also help children "strengthen their social skills" by working collaboratively with other children" (Click & Karkos, 2010, p. 155).

Block center. The block center is a popular gross motor center in many early childhood classrooms. When children play in the block center, they strengthen social skills by learning to work cooperatively, share materials, and accomplish common goals (Click & Karkos, 2010, p. 154). Block centers also encourage "mathematical concepts, as well as increase [children's] understanding of balance, spatial relations, size, and shape" (Click & Karkos, 2010, p. 154). As children experiment with towers of various shapes and sizes, they naturally learn physics principles. Finally, block play helps students develop language skills by encouraging children to use spatial terms (Crowther, 2008) and narrate their play.

Role of the Teacher in Center-Based Instruction

Many question the role of the teacher in center-based instruction. The teacher must research and prepare authentic activities for a variety of subjects for these centers. These experiences must be age appropriate and allow students to be able to freely explore, while guiding them toward important concepts. In center-based instruction, "the teacher creates a favorable context for opportunities of playing and learning, for listening to children, and for becoming a witness to children's experiences, through competent documentation" (Gandini & Edwards, 2001, p. 98). As the teacher documents the children's work through anecdotal notes, photographs with narrative, and checklists, she documents the children's knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to each area of the curriculum, thus meeting demands for accountability.

As Gandini and Edwards explain,

> The role of the witness to the experiences, along with the role of the director and the role of observer of the children, carries the teacher far from the traditional role of showing children what to do and how to do it. In this multi-faceted role, the teacher becomes truly involved in what the children are doing. She becomes a partner in play and gives value to the children and their actions, always extending and supporting their expressions. (p. 98).

The role of the teacher as facilitator of experience and partner in play allows the teacher to provide scaffolding for the students to encourage further exploration and learning through center-based instruction, meeting each child's individual needs and interests.

Conclusion

I believe that center-based instruction allows young children to explore concepts in authentic learning situations. As children engage in meaningful, concrete, relevant, center-based experiences, they gain "self-confidence, independence, and social and emotional intelligence" (Click & Karkos, 2010, p. 137). They learn skills required in the mathematics and literacy curriculum naturally in context. This is far more powerful than the pencil-and-paper worksheet driven instruction that is occurring in many preschool classrooms today.

<div align="center">References</div>

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LESIG: Language Experience Approach to Literacy Across Content Areas
Saturday, May 10, 2015, 1:00-2:00 pm
60th Annual Convention, St. Louis, MS

This session explores the use of the Language Experience Approach (LEA) in a variety of settings and across age groups with a particular emphasis on using this literacy strategy with ELLs, struggling readers, and across content areas. LEA provides support for readers because they are actively engaged in creating meaningful communications. This strategy is especially beneficial for reading across content areas and for struggling readers because it draws on students' experiences, thus providing meaningful and relevant texts which students can use to hone language skills. We hope to see you at our session.

Session Chair
Leslie Haas

Keynote:

Dr. Tim Rasinski will lead this program demonstrating and sharing how the Language Experience Approach "primes the pump" to motivate children to read and write so they will engage themselves in the task and bootstrap their way to full literacy. The second half of the program will consist of several roundtables in which new research on and approaches to the Language Experience Approach will be shared as it relates to supporting English Language Learners, leveraging technology opportunities, supporting grammar instruction, and incorporating real world connections.

Tim Rasinski
Kent State University
Kent, OH

Round Table Presentations:

Stephen Adamson
Dallas Independent School District
Dallas, TX

Dorothy Idris
School District of Philadelphia
Philadelphia, PA

Jane Moore
University of Texas at Arlington
Arlington, TX

Mary Strong
Widener University
Chester, PA

David Salyer
Loras College
Dubquue, IA

Sheri Vasinda
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK

Dr. Michelle Fazio-Brunson
Northwestern State University
Natchitoches, LA

Monica Ramirez
Dallas ISD
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