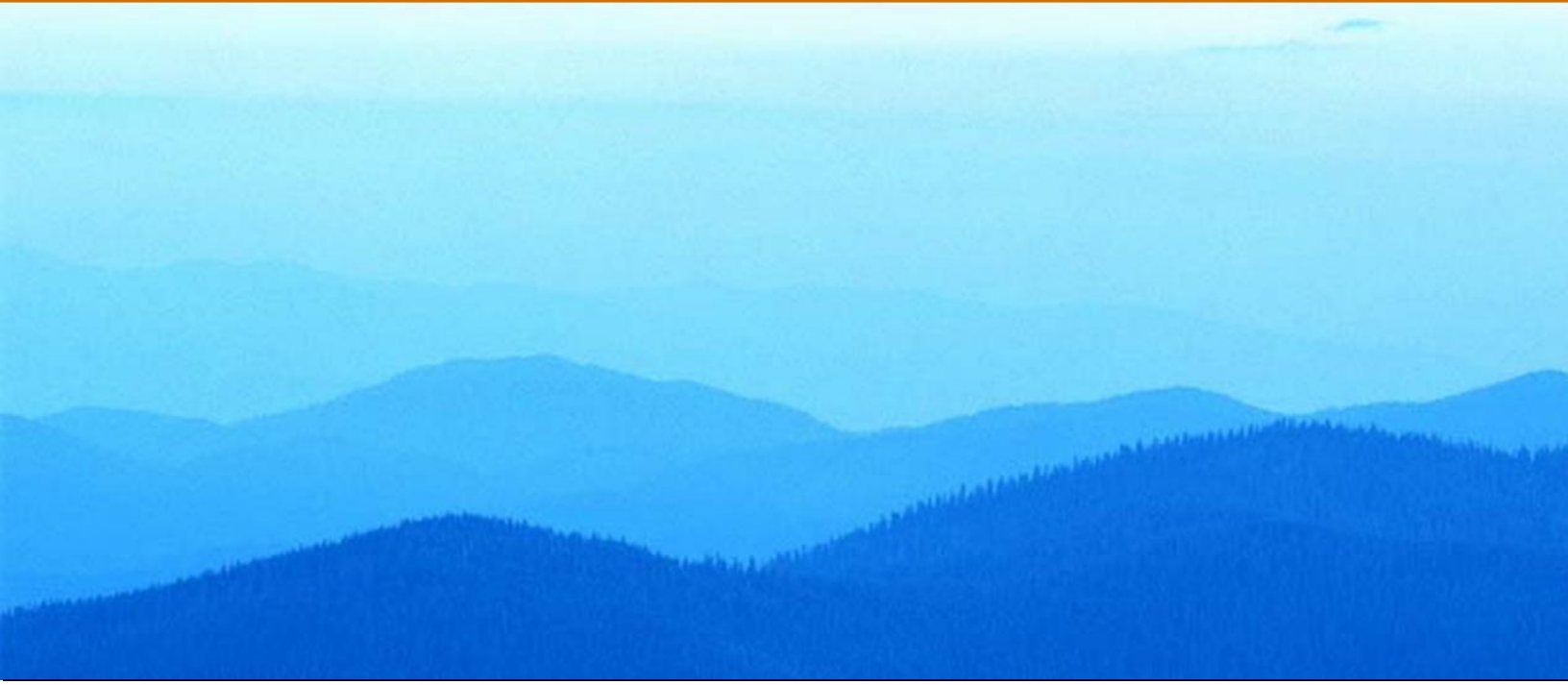

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Editorial Board

The *Language Experience Forum* Journal is a refereed journal of the Language Experience Special Interest Group of the International Literacy 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.

Submit articles to the editor: faziom@nsula.edu

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Introduction

As future educators, we are aware that students from all around the world could be entering our classrooms. Although it is impossible to be completely prepared for all students because of their diverse backgrounds, we know there are strategies and methods that can be implemented to support all students.

When students with different languages and different life experiences come together in a classroom, it can sometimes be difficult for relationships to form. Typically, students are drawn to others who have had similar experiences. One teaching strategy that creates a platform for all students to learn together is the Language Experience Approach (LEA). The complementary strategies of shared experiences and LEA, along with culturally and linguistically appropriate instruction, encourages students to share their lived experiences through collaborative writing opportunities.

The Basics of the Language Experience Approach

The purpose of the Language Experience Approach (LEA) is to use students' experiences and language to create texts for them to practice their literacy skills. LEA takes place when the whole class is participating, and the teacher writes what is said

during a student-led group discussion. The experience starts by having students find something that they have each experienced, whether together as a class or individually. Then, they discuss the experience and its impact. As students converse, the teacher records the conversation on paper, helping the students make connections between what they have said and what is written. Students can see the teacher model the writing process as their story is written in front of them. The teacher then reads the story to the students, and the students give corrections that they feel are needed. Students also have the opportunity to hear their story being read by someone that is expressive and strong in their ability. Students then read the story on their own multiple times to become familiar and fluent with the text. The teacher works with students in conferences to make sure they are familiar with each of the words in the story and helps them add anything that they feel is missing. The class then starts writing a new piece, continuing to go back and improve previous work, usually on a weekly basis. This approach to reading and writing can help build a strong connection between oral and written language and increases students' confidence as their reading and writing abilities improve. LEA is an effective way to individualize reading and writing instruction for students in the classroom and helps them find joy in both reading and writing since it is connected to their own lives. Examples of these experiences include watching the same movie, having had similarly lived experiences such as family trips to the grocery store, or going on a class field trip (Nessel & Dixon, 2008).

Differentiation

Teachers who use the Language Experience Approach are open to students approaching the same basic task in very different ways, thus individualizing and

differentiating the curriculum. The term *differentiation* can be defined as the methods that teachers use to accommodate each of their individual student's needs (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). For students, the point of differentiation is to provide them with options for making choices. When teachers differentiate, they modify instruction or activities based on content, process, product, or learning environments for their students. The ***content*** is what the students learn, the ***process*** is how the students make sense of the content, and the ***product*** is how students demonstrate what they have learned from the content and the process (Masten, 2017). Through differentiation, students have opportunities to learn in ways that are specifically tailored for their own skills or abilities.

In a room full of students, no two students will learn in the exact same way. Because all students are unique, they differ in their capabilities and learning styles. With differentiation, teachers can better accommodate each of these individual differences and provide learning experiences that will better help their students (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). The main goal of using differentiation is to help students grow as individuals and be successful. Students can do so because differentiation allows for flexibility while supporting student and teacher collaboration, ultimately taking into account each individual's foundational abilities (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000).

One of the main reasons differentiation is important is that it sets the tone for the learning environment. A differentiated environment allows for students' differences to be noticed, supported, and encouraged while teachers try to enhance students' learning opportunities based on students' diverse cultures, languages, abilities, and learning styles (Inclusive Schools Network, 2015). Differentiation is not providing students with more or

less work; it is providing effective and reasonable work for each student, maximizing opportunities for success.

Personalization

In addition to utilizing differentiation, teachers need to personalize instruction. Though the two may appear to be similar, they are quite different. Personalization accounts for students' personal preferences and interests, while ensuring that lessons are appropriately sequenced for each student's specific needs. Because of the variation in learning styles and interests of each individual student, the learning objects, content, method, and pace of instruction and activities may vary as well (Basye, 2018). While differentiation accommodates students' individual needs, personalization addresses students' individual interests. All classrooms include students with differences in language, abilities/disabilities, and learning styles, which is why both differentiation and personalization are necessary for effective instruction.

Personalized and Differentiated Instruction for Students Requiring Special Education

For students with special needs, personalized learning and differentiation do not take the place of an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Instead, differentiation and personalization enhance IEPs, 504 plans, and other intervention programs. While students in Special Education (SPED) may fall behind in educational progress (Morin, n.d.), personalized and differentiated learning can help them stay on grade level. In fact, when students' differences are acknowledged and embraced, the learning community is strengthened as students work and learn together through shared experiences.

One effective way to enhance students' reflections on shared experiences is to use the Language Experience Approach (LEA), utilizing both differentiation and personalization. This approach utilizes personalization by encouraging students to use their own personal, existing languages and experiences to build literacy knowledge and skills. The approach also uses differentiation, as students have options for building on previous knowledge and sharing new knowledge through multiple pathways.

Personalized and Differentiated Instruction for English Language Learners

Schools across the country are enrolling more English Language Learners (ELL) than ever before. Because English Language Learners are accustomed to their home or native language, personalization is necessary for these learners to gain reading and writing skills in the classroom. Mastering new literacy skills is made even more complex by these students' attempts to assimilate into a new environment while dealing with culture shock and struggling to understand their teachers' and classmates' language and behaviors. Through personalization and differentiation, English Language Learners can use their native language and culture as a bridge to learn new skills and maintain motivation as they complete tasks collaboratively through shared experience.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Teachers recognize that every classroom has a diverse group of learners, but ELL classes are likely to be more culturally diverse than others because ELL classrooms are not situated to teach only students who speak one specific foreign language. Instead, they are designed to meet the needs of all students whose home language is not English; thus, there may be many home languages represented in one ELL class and many cultures represented as well. Culture is a prominent factor in a student's ability to learn. A

teaching method that acknowledges, responds to, and celebrates fundamental cultures offers full, equitable access to education for students from all cultures (Ladson-Billings,1994). Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) focuses on valuing students' culture throughout the social, emotional, and academic domains of learning. According to the National Council of Teachers of English (n.d.) CRT may include curriculum and instruction that is student centered and embeds cultural context within the learning.

Linguistically Responsive Teaching

English Language Learners may demonstrate content mastery on or above grade level, but their limited English-speaking skills may prevent them from progressing academically. However, their language barrier should not inhibit them from working at a developmentally appropriate level (Usable Knowledge, 2018). Linguistically Responsive Teaching (LRT) focuses on the production of oral and written language and is crucial for all students' learning, development, and achievement, including English Language Learners. The National Council of Teachers of English (n.d.) purports that LRT can take many forms both inside and outside the school setting, including interactions with peers, literature, family, and the community.

Combining Methods to Meet the Needs of All Learners

One way that teachers can incorporate both culturally responsive practices and linguistically responsive practices in the curriculum is by using the LEA in combination with field trips. Because the pairing of LEA and field trips provides a shared learning experience that all can converse about at their own ability level, associated writing projects are differentiated and personalized. In this scenario, all students work at their own pace while making connections between old and new knowledge through

individualized learning experiences. With the inherent flexibility and individualization of LEA, students can be encouraged to make choices about their learning while using their cultural and linguistic perspectives to create LEA pieces.

Group Field Trips

A class field trip is an experience that could make for a series of highly motivating LEA lessons which are both differentiated and personalized to meet all students' needs. When the students leave school for the day, or even just a few hours, they are able to learn in the real world (Claiborne, Morrell, Bandy, & Bruff, n.d.). Leaving the classroom can be difficult because of both time and cost. However, an alternative to a traditional field trip is a virtual one. Current technology has made available virtual field trip experiences that teachers are utilizing more and more. Classes use programs such as video conferencing, interactive games, and assignments on virtual field trips instead of traditional field trips while still providing a similar shared experience. Some schools even do video conferences around the world to talk with partner classrooms (Scholastic Team, n.d.).

Field trips can be a fun experience for students whether in real life or through technology in the classroom, but they also engage students and help them learn authentically. They also have the potential to make students more culturally aware by experiencing museums, cultural landmarks, and historical sites. In addition, students can see real things from the time or place that they are learning about, building greater interest in what they are studying. Students are also able to use the experiences they have while on the field trip as subject matter when they do not have other writing ideas. This helps

them continue their interest in the topic and practice writing non-fiction (Greene, Kisida, & Bowen, 2018).

Planning the Field Trip

While differentiation and personalization are important tools in the classroom, they are also best practices for out-of-classroom learning, such as field trip experiences. Field trips can provide students with opportunities to learn more deeply about something they are interested in, learn about subjects in multiple ways, or choose topics for further study. For example, a field trip to a zoo could be the basis for exploration, research, and LEA exploration. A day of exploring at the zoo could provide many opportunities for investigating as children listen, speak, read, and write in context as they explore various animal habitats and read labels and signs.

Field trips should be designed so that students focus on topics of interest to explore and then narrow the topics for writing focus. The topic they ultimately choose could have multiple layers, meaning they could choose a broad area such as mammals, and then narrow to a topic such as lions. Next, they might describe lions' characteristics, such as what they look like and sound like, and they may add details such as what lions eat and how they behave as they gather information and data by taking pictures and/or videos, recording notes (either electronically or with pen and paper), interviewing zoo staff, and reading signs or pamphlets.

Implementing LEA after the Field Trip

Upon returning to the classroom, students may talk with each about what they experienced and consult books and other media to collect more information, all the while making connections between prior knowledge and new knowledge gained on the field trip.

To facilitate the writing process, the teacher can encourage students to gather additional information from various perspectives. For example, the student who chose to write about lions could talk to another student in class who has a house cat and compare their characteristics and behaviors. If a child in the class was born in a country where lions are indigenous, that child may share first-hand knowledge of seeing lions in their natural habitat and provide information about how lions are regarded in his or her native country. This sharing of varied experiences, as well as the shared experience on this particular field trip, can help students add to their prior knowledge and strengthen their ability to communicate both their prior knowledge and new knowledge.

Next, students should create some kind of product that showcases their learning, such as an essay or blog post. Photos taken on the field trip can be coupled with oral shares, poster presentations, or slideshow presentations. As long as the teacher and student mutually agree on a format that can show the student's learning, then the options are open-ended. The whole idea of the field trip is to have a shared experience with classmates that can be both personalized and differentiated for all students so that students are more engaged with the topic and with one another. The skills that they learn should transfer to other learning experiences, thus improving skills for future assignments and improving communication skills in and out of the classroom.

More Field Trip Ideas

Any destination that is within a reasonable distance and can potentially provide students with experiences that stimulate interest, conversations, research, and writing is a possible choice for a field trip. Some examples of nearby experiences might be a grocery store, a local farm, a tourist attraction, or a tour of an industrial kitchen. The unique

characteristics of an ELL class might cause students to be intrigued about other cultures and languages. Certainly, the students' languages and cultures can and should be shared, but another opportunity to expand students' cultural and linguistic awareness is a field trip to a language fair.

Language fairs are events where students of all ethnicities come together for competitions in the areas of linguistics, art, and cultural skills. Some of the primary languages of language fairs are Chinese, German, French, and Spanish. Language fair events may include vocabulary quizzes, arts and crafts, poetry, music, song, costumes, and dance. At these events, native English speakers have the opportunity to learn about other languages and cultural practices. ELLs have the opportunity to connect with other students that have their same linguistic background or people who speak a different language but share a common desire to learn English. This interaction can be very rewarding for ELLs, given the opportunity to use both their native language and English.

Summary

When teachers differentiate instruction and personalize content, process, product, and environment to meet all students' needs, children engage in learning experiences which are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate. By providing students with opportunities to participate in meaningful field trips and using these experiences as a catalyst for learning, common experiences are created and shared, thus providing opportunities for children to build language skills, share ideas, and develop awareness of others' backgrounds and unique life experiences. Every field trip that is expanded on as described here, whether virtual or on-location, is likely to be an experience that students will remember for years to come.

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From the Field:

Connecting Sports and the Language Experience Approach

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Introduction

Students who are encouraged to use their personal skills and life experiences as a foundation for writing are likely to develop greater confidence in their writing skills and stronger interest in the writing process. With that in mind, teachers should consider the skills honed by student athletes in the playing arena as important skills that are transferrable to the academic setting. In addition, as educators consider the amount of time and effort student athletes invest in sports, it becomes clear that the life experience of playing sports can be a motivator for honing writing skills as well. To integrate sports into the writing curriculum, this article focuses on three distinct areas: connecting sports to academic success, connecting sports to writing skills, and connecting sports to the Language Experience Approach.

Connecting Sports to Academic Success

According to the National Federation of State High Schools Association (2017), the number of high school sports participants has increased consistently for 28 years, nearing a staggering eight million in total. Teachers can take advantage of this by connecting instruction with real-life experiences when connecting sporting experiences to academic

tasks in the classroom. Participation in sports has the potential to positively impact students academically, physically, and socially-emotionally as students connect out-of-class experiences with classroom content and real-life situations.

Academic and Life Skill Impact

Many skills learned in sports can benefit academic outcomes and real-world skills. "Studies have demonstrated that children who participate in sporting activities achieve as much as 10% higher in academics compared to their counterparts who stayed clear of sports" (Pace Health, n.d., p. 1). Student athletes may have stronger academic skills than their non-athletic peers for many reasons. For instance, sports participation facilitates learning many valuable life skills such as time management, communication, civic responsibility, and goal-setting.

Student athletes must learn how to be accountable for and manage their time. Data show that student athletes spend a significant amount of time practicing their skills and traveling to sporting events—as much as 0-12 hours per week (Zarrett, Veliz, & Sabo, 2018). Thus, they must learn to use their time wisely to balance sporting events and study time.

In addition to building time management skills, student athletes also develop communication skills. To be successful, student athletes must communicate effectively with teachers, parents, and friends about when they have sporting events and when they have homework. Good communication skills are also required as athletes represent their teams in their local communities and beyond. One way athletic teams get involved in their communities is through community service activities. This kind of civic responsibility helps

to create well-rounded individuals and role models for younger children who look up to them, teaching the next generation to have goals and expectations for themselves.

Furthermore, student athletes learn to set goals for themselves as well as for their teams. To accomplish these goals, athletes must develop a positive mindset, attitude, and work-ethic. They also require stamina. Each athlete has to be an active team player that can cooperate with others, manage arising conflicts, and follow rules (Rosario, 2017). These positive character traits help athletes meet expectations not only in their sporting arena, but also in the academic environment and in real life.

Physical Impact

Sports offer a wide range of benefits to students of all ages. Most think of sports as being beneficial for a person's physical health. Participating in physical activity enhances students' coordination, muscle strength, and cardiovascular strength. Healthy students are also likely to have a healthy weight and better posture. Students who engage in sports tend to have better gross motor (large muscle) skills which help them persist with and endure class tasks longer. Sports also develop students' fine motor (small muscle) skills, enhancing their ability to write and type, so the physical benefits carry over into the classroom.

Social-Emotional Impact

In addition to physical benefits, sports also offer social-emotional benefits. First, people tend to be socially attracted to and interested in establishing initial friendships with others who appear to be healthy. Being accepted by peers is likely to help boost children's confidence, willingness to take social risks, and create diverse friend groups

(Pace Health, n.d.). This means if students are more active, they are more likely to be accepted in different social situations.

In the school setting, students are often required to engage in partner and group work. Student athletes not only have experience working toward group goals but often have taken a leadership role on the team toward that end. With background experience of either being a part of team or leading a team, student athletes are accustomed to working together cohesively, clearly communicating, asking questions, and solving problems. Due to their competitive experiences, they will be better equipped to overcome challenges under pressure (Pace Health, n.d.). These experiences will also advance students academically because they know how to relate to others, encourage others, and work toward common goals together with each team player being responsible for his share of the workload. Teachers can build on these skills across many different disciplines.

Students experience many social-emotional benefits by being involved in their schools and local communities as they work and play with their teams. Research indicates that children who have positive experiences belonging to a sports team are likely to gain benefits such as lower stress levels, improved moods, higher confidence rates, and increased focus. Furthermore, better concentration in the classroom, better understanding of rules, and more stable emotions are also likely to develop (Katalenas, 2018).

Teamwork also helps children build character and resilience as students learn that they may not experience success on the first try, but that success may require practice over weeks, months, or even years. By belonging to a team, the concept of practicing and the importance of commitment is cultivated (Streelman, 2016). With the support of caring

adults, student athletes learn life lessons such as even the best plans may not have the anticipated outcome, failure is hard but it is a part of life, success does not come easy, and hard work, plus time, are required to achieve success. Athletes build character and resilience as they come to believe in their ability to overcome obstacles by maintaining a positive outlook and pushing past adversity (Streelman, 2016).

Sports can also help improve students' self-esteem and experiences in the classroom. Athletes often develop positive self-images when they have success in their sport(s). Likewise, that same positive self-image is likely to be reflected in the classroom where the young athlete is engaged, is successful with the writing process, and has the opportunity to share his or her successes in athletics. According to the Women's Sports Foundation, 38.6% of student athletes gave themselves above average ratings in intelligence, compared to 31.9% of non-athletes (Zarrett, Veliz, & Sabo, 2018). Teachers typically have greater expectations for athletes' academic outcomes which, in turn, leads to athletes having higher expectations of themselves. Organized sports participation can help children have a more positive attitude toward their school work, which makes them better students along the way.

Connecting Sports to Writing

As student athletes improve their physical condition, repeatedly practice skills, and build on their passion for athletics, they can, in turn, increase the possibility of improving writing skills. Brain development, specific academic skills, and increased motivation are topics for educators to consider when planning literacy curriculum.

Brain Development

Athletes constantly work to become more fit, faster, and stronger. Interested in the relationship between this physical work and classroom achievement, researchers at Florida National University conducted a study to determine how sports participation can improve academic performance (2014). Study participants were sedentary people who suddenly improved their fitness levels. Brain scans were taken of the study participants before and after their physical fitness lifestyle changes. Results showed that after the study, participants increased their physical activity levels; they also increased volume in the hippocampus and frontal lobes of their brains—the regions of the brain which are responsible for cognitive functioning such as memory and learning (Florida National University, 2014). If teachers encourage their students to stay active, their students may perform better in the classroom.

Specific Academic Skills

Memorization, repetition, and learning are three skills developed in athletics. These skills are certainly transferrable to the classroom (University of Missouri, n.d.). Even though society is moving away from memorization, it is still important in many disciplines. Repetition and learning are correlated because the more practice a person has, the more likely he or she is to learn a skill. Repetition can certainly help students develop first writing skills and learn content. First, handwriting, which is a motor memory skill, develops through repetition. The more students practice handwriting, the more their fine motor skills develop, and the better their penmanship becomes. This repetitive practices also enhances their fluency, or their ability to script. Second, as students practice writing, they

become better at crafting well-constructed sentences, stories, and non-fiction pieces. The more authors write, the more they perfect their craft.

Increasing Motivation

A common characteristic that lifelong learners share is intrinsic motivation to develop skills. When an athlete puts in required work and is rewarded for effort, his or her motivation to keep practicing increases. Teachers can use the analogy of work and reward in sports and apply it to writing. According to the National Council of Youth Sports (n.d.), athletes' grade point averages increase with the number of teams on which they play. This means that multi-sport athletes may do well in all subjects including reading, writing, listening, speaking, and presenting.

Writing

Constructive criticism is a shared concept between sports and writing. In sports, athletes use constructive criticism to perform better in their next game or match. The same can be said for writing. Usually, writing involves editing, and, in many classes, student writers critique one another's work with the goal of improving each effort toward a better end product. The students can use the constructive criticism they receive from peer reviewers to improve their writing samples. When students communicate with one another about their writing, they can "hear" different perspectives, thus helping to minimize bias and mistakes in their writing. Another benefit of peer review in the writing classroom is the increased sense of a team effort. Teamwork is an essential part of athletics, but it can be beneficial in the classroom, too. Writing can be a multi-person process that aids in the development of ideas and topics while at the same time decreasing the likelihood of errors in text.

Connecting Sports to the Language Experience Approach

Sports experiences are effective shared experiences for implementing the Language Experience Approach (LEA) in the classroom. The LEA can be defined as the connection between personal experiences and reading and writing (Taylor, 1992). Students can use their own experiences with sports to make connections in all disciplines. Confident in their knowledge about sports, students can effectively translate their experiences into their writing. The more confident a student is, the more likely he or she will have a positive emotional state of mind, and this can increase academic success.

Encouraging students to pen their own stories is an engaging way to help them make connections across content areas. Using LEA allows students to express their own ideas and then share the ideas with their classmates. As is often the case with competitive activities, sports are frequently connected with powerful emotions, typically linked with winning, losing, teamwork, competition, or getting physically or emotionally hurt. Evoking powerful emotions can provoke passionate personal writing. In comparison, the use of basal readers or other reading approaches typically allows students a small amount of time to share their ideas and personal experiences with others (Nessel & Dixon, 2008). Because LEA encourages students to share personal events such as sporting experiences, students are helped to make connections among the playing field, classroom concepts, and writing.

Educators can utilize student experiences with sports in the LEA process to bring learners together as a writing community. Teaching strategies in this process include group peer editing and/or retelling students' experiences. When young children hear their

story being retold, it reassures them that their very own words are being heard (Nessel & Dixon, 2008).

Teachers recognize that different children have different intelligences. Howard Gardner's research identified diverse ways students are intelligent, but one intelligence in particular is frequently associated with very athletic children--the bodily kinesthetic intelligence (Brown & Meyers, 2008). This intelligence refers to a way of processing information that relies heavily on body movement or is preferred by people who enjoy body movement, control, or expression. So, teachers who are trying to help young athletes connect writing to sports may choose to also incorporate large body movements in the LEA process, allowing students a way to physically participate in the lesson and be more interactive with the language and/or writing (Brown & Meyers, 2008).

Conclusion

Student athletes learn many skills through sports participation, including setting goals, managing time, practicing to develop skill sets, and working well with a team. Each of these abilities translates well to the classroom setting and to being a successful student. Considering the amount of time student athletes devote to honing their athletic skills, it stands to reason that they are passionate about their sport(s). Teachers can use that passion for sports as groundwork for writing about sports, knowing that the student athlete/writer will be passionate about the topic, and therefore, will be more interested and engaged in the writing process. Furthermore, student athletes reap social-emotional benefits resulting from feeling pride in learning skills, learning from mistakes, and being a part of a winning team. As they share their emotions and stories with others in the classroom, they are also likely to develop a greater sense of pride in their writing. These

factors may lead to students' having a positive mindset toward learning so that they are more likely to reach their maximum potential.

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From the Field:

Neighborhood Explorers: Experiential Learning to Support Written and Oral Language

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Abstract

This article explores how families can develop a sense of belonging as young children explore their school community and share their experiences with their families through oral and written language. Experiential learning, place-based education, and the Language Experience Approach (LEA) are combined in this preschool project. Pictures of field trip events that occurred over the course of weeks and the resulting literacy-based child-made artifacts inspired by the field trip experiences were shared with community stakeholders to showcase the rich learning experiences the university-based Head Start attendees regularly experienced.

Developing this sense of place lets children know that they belong in the physical world around them and in the social and cultural world they share with others. When teachers implement geography projects and investigations with the goal of increasing children's connections with their physical environments, children enhance their cognitive skills as well as social and emotional ones.
(Brillante & Mankiw, 2015, p. 2)

Theoretical Framework

John Dewey (1859-1952), the "Father of American Education," believed that children's interests should be the driving force behind curriculum development and teaching practices (Dewey, 1938). The ideologies of John Dewey capitalize on multi-disciplinary strategies, hands-on experiences, relational interactions that build a community of learners, and authentic learning activities that "seek to extend learning beyond the walls of the school" (Graham, 2007, p. 377). Likewise, the primary goals of place-based education are to effectively build on child explorations and curiosities about the local environment, build relationships between the children in the classroom, strengthen children's relationships to their surrounding landscapes, and create relationships between humans and their natural communities (Graham, 2007). Williams (2017) convincingly argues that place-based education in modern schools aligns with John Dewey's theories. Schools and classrooms that place "an emphasis on the importance and relevance of building community, building strong relationships, developing higher level thinking skills for real-life application, and following student interests when planning for instruction" fit both the definition of place-based education and John Dewey's social learning theory (Williams, 2017, pp. 98-99).

Language Experience Approach

The Language Experience Approach is a teaching strategy that focuses on connecting personal lived experiences with reading and writing interactions (Dorr, 2006).

The Language Experience Approach has been very successful in preschool settings with emergent readers and writers (Copp, Cabelli, & Tortorelli, 2106). As preschool children explore the world around them, effective classroom teachers encourage children to describe their experiences, and during this give-and-take conversation, the teacher scaffolds more complex spoken structures such as complete sentences that tell *who it's about* and *what is happening* or encouragement of descriptive words that add details such as color and size. Shortly thereafter, the teacher engages in another discussion about the topic of interest and adds writing to the plan (Copp, Cabelli, & Tortorelli, 2016). Initially, preschool writing education using the Language Experience Approach focuses on writing children's spoken words exactly as they are spoken, even if grammar, syntax, and structure are incorrect by adult standards. The words are read back to the children just as they were spoken. In so doing, the children recognize that their words are valued and respected. In addition, the children learn that spoken words can be represented abstractly as written symbols, the letters of the alphabet (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Many of the children will come to understand the stability of words, that is, that specific strings of letters always represent a specific, predictable word or that once words are written, they do not change, no matter who reads them.

Reading, writing, listening, and speaking are all forms of language that are used for the purpose of communicating with others and understanding language shared during interactions. Strong communication skills develop best when they are meaningful to the producer and the receiver of language and the words are practiced in a meaningful context many times. By creating shared experiences for a group of children, the teacher also creates a meaningful context for language development. The teacher can build on

those shared experiences through recording children's words in writing in a whole group setting and/or for individuals, listening and responding to children's discussions, and using her knowledge of typical preschool language development to create the language arts curriculum (Allen, 1982). In other words, the teacher sets the stage by creating the meaningful shared experience and then lets the children's responses guide the instruction using developmentally sound, research-based practices.

Pre-reading instruction often includes the development of a connection between spoken words and written words, more complex oral language, phonemic awareness, and phonological awareness. These are focus skills in the early stages of emergent reading and writing because of the strong research-based link between these early pre-reading skills and later successful decoding ability in elementary grades (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). These are broad topics that are taught in tandem with one another and are made more approachable and personal through the Language Experience Approach.

The Classroom, the Students, and Overview of the Project

The Head Start center that had recently become the new learning environment for 32 preschoolers was located on a university campus that was, on a larger scale, also the learning environment for most of the preschoolers' parents. University students who met the income and need qualifications for Head Start were given the first placement slots for their preschool children at the university-based Head Start. Any openings not filled with the children of university students were then opened to parent/students at other facilities such as the local trade school or to parents who were geographically close to the university-based Head Start site. So, even if parents were not enrolled in university classes, they were likely to be "neighbors" to the university and recognize it as part of their

community. As most parents attended classes scattered among a variety of new and historic red brick buildings on the university campus, their 3-and 4-year-old children were attending a preschool that was located on the edge of that same campus in a metal building surrounded by playground equipment and a chain link fence. From the children's preschool building and playground, only one campus building that held classes could be seen. As such, many of the children did not even realize that they were sharing a college campus with their parents. The circuitous driving route to the Head Start center combined with its location at the tip of campus where it was somewhat obscured from the college campus buildings where adult classes were held all combined to make the preschool feel isolated from the college campus. The Neighborhood Explorers project was planned with the hope that the children would develop a geographic understanding of where their school was located in relation to their parents' school.

Trips in the Neighborhood

It was initially determined that the first walking trip should be to the iconic university fountain. The many reasons for this decision included close proximity to the preschool, safe distance from roadways, the likelihood that most of the children had seen the fountain from their vehicle as they were riding with their family into campus, the distinguishability of the landmark, and the appeal of a little water splashing on a hot day, which is the typical weather condition at the beginning of the school year in this region.

The first walking field trip to the fountain influenced some topics of conversation that spurred the next walking field trip. The children enjoyed the circular shape of the fountain and the texture experienced while running their hands around the circle made of bricks. In addition, many of the children had seen the fountain before when it was

overflowing with bubbles. They wanted to make bubbles in the fountain too! Both of these conversations sparked a trip to the round brick Post Office on campus where we mailed a child-dictated letter to the University President requesting permission to put bubble solution in the fountain. The teachers made prior arrangements for the trip to include a tour of the behind-the-scenes workings of a post office. The third walking field trip was based on the children's familiarity with campus. On the trip to the Post Office, they saw the Student Union, and many were familiar with that building as a place that had food. The teachers made arrangements for a tour of the kitchen of one of the restaurants along with plans for a snack consisting of a fresh baked cookie on the premises. The fourth walking field trip for this Neighborhood Explorers project was to the Music and Arts Department. The children could hear the music coming from the building as we passed on our way to the Post Office and were curious because it sounded like "a football game." The teachers made arrangements to visit the percussion class.

Back in the Classroom: Writing Projects

Inspired by the Fountain

The teachers deemed the field trip to the fountain a success. From the children's viewpoint, it was enjoyable because they splashed water, and they recognized that they had not walked far from their classroom before seeing something associated with "Mommy's school." From the teachers' perspective, it was a pleasant trip that was easily manageable because of being able to stay in green spaces during the whole trip, so that no roadways were encountered. Two group writing activities and one individual writing project were inspired from the trip to the fountain. First, the class dictated a simple Daily Newsletter wherein children were encouraged during group time to tell one thing that they

liked or wanted to tell about the trip to the fountain. As the children took turns, the teacher wrote the children's name, and their oral words were written next to their names. The newsletter was read back to the children on a few separate occasions, and they matched their names on the newsletter to their moveable name cards on the attendance board.

During the trip to the fountain, the children made it clear that they really wanted to make bubbles in the fountain. This brought up a discussion about respect for property and ways to ask for permission before altering other peoples' belongings. So, as a class, we wrote a letter on large chart paper to the University President requesting permission to put bubble solution in the fountain.

The third writing project inspired by the fountain trip was an individual activity set up during learning centers. Children were encouraged to draw pictures of one or more things they saw on the trip, and the teachers helped them label their drawings. As is typical of children in the Pre-Schematic Stage of drawing, many of the children were mainly concerned with the process of putting crayon marks on paper and named the objects in the drawing after it was created, not trying to make marks for representation of anything specific during the drawing process. However, some of the children were very intentional in drawing a large circle to represent the brick structure of the fountain and made recognizable representations of the water and people, also. Many of the children had made remarks about the tall tower that we saw on the trip that had one large, singular letter on it to represent the name of the university. That was also a popular representation in their pictures.

Inspired by the Post Office

The letter to the University President requesting permission to put bubble solution in the fountain was written, addressed, and delivered to the Post Office via our trip to that neighborhood destination. The behind-the-scenes tour sparked curiosity about weighing because our envelope had to be weighed to determine the amount of postage required. So, a balance scale experiment was set up to be used during learning centers. Again, the children wrote a Daily Newsletter about their trip and drew pictures of the event that teachers helped to label. As might be expected, the roundness of the building was a stimulus for more pictures of circles. In addition, the dramatic play center was transformed into a pretend post office with post office uniforms and supplemental materials such as envelopes, stickers, ink stamps, scales, paper, and writing utensils added. It was a popular learning center, and the children were very engaged with purposeful writing, but it was typically hurried writing because the children were more interested in the interactions than focusing on writing. So, a rural mailbox was added to the writing center, and with some teacher scaffolding, the writing of letters and addressing of envelopes became more intentional and focused on the writing process. Each child wrote letters to friends and loved ones, and while doing so, teachers could see the stage of writing that the child typically modeled, which ranged from random scribbles, to scribbles written from left to right, to letter like forms to recognizable letters written from left to right. Signing their name at the bottom of the letter was a wonderful and purposeful way to practice that skill.

Inspired by the Student Union

The children enjoyed seeing the kitchen and watching cookie batter being made in a huge industrial mixer prior to eating their snack at the restaurant in the Student Union. Back at school, we built on the children's interest by reading and following a recipe together and making our own cookies. To individualize this project, we made a basic butter cookie recipe and every child was given several options of additions to make to their two cookies that included raisins, pecans, yogurt chips, chocolate chips, sprinkles, and small candies. The children could choose two of the options, and their names were inscribed on the aluminum foil next to their cookie for ease in serving the right cookie to the right child. To encourage writing and understanding that spoken words can be represented with written letters and words, writing cookie recipes was added to the writing projects that also included the Daily Newsletter. Children individually dictated to teachers how to make cookies, and then each child drew his cookie creation. These recipes turned out to be rather comical with directives such as "cook for 2 minutes," or "put white powder in there" or "don't lick your fingers." For the parents' enjoyment, the teachers made a copy of their child's recipe and sent it home with an explanation of how and why it was created. One copy was put in the child's portfolio along with teacher anecdotal notes, and one copy of each recipe was compiled into a book and added to the children's library. Another option would have been to add it to the dramatic play center for children to use while they pretended to cook, but the dramatic play center was set up as a post office, so there were no cooking materials located in that center at that time.

Inspired by the Music and Arts Department

The children loved the drum and xylophone demonstrations most. They also enjoyed walking through the visual art exhibit that was in the building as we made our way to the percussion room. Back at school, we made drums from oatmeal containers and institutional sized vegetable cans donated by the school cafeteria. It was not lost on any of us that circles continued to reappear during the Neighborhood Explorers project—a round brick fountain, a round brick post office, round cookies, circles in visual art displays, and round drum tops. So, the teachers gathered circular objects and liquid tempera paint to use for printing and the children created circle art. Once dry, the children were encouraged to tell some places that one might see circles in the world, and their words were dictated and attached to the art work.

Introduction to Geography

During each trip we walked a similar route and noted landmarks, such as some architectural columns, concrete tile-topped picnic tables, the fountain, the large tower with the big letter at the top, the round post office, the one traffic light on campus, and a small grove of trees located on a hill slope. These were often mentioned in the Daily Newsletters as well as some of the children's drawings and were ways we could tell how much further we had to walk on our return trip from each destination. To build on the children's interests of landmarks and distances, the teachers created a bulletin board background that looked like intersecting streets to create the beginnings of a campus map. Then teachers helped the children make paper 12" tall representations of themselves using pre-cut body shapes, shirts shapes, and pants shapes. The teachers used photos that had been taken over the course of the first few weeks of school and

made an enlarged photocopy of each child's face so that the children could put their face on their self-representation. Next, the children's attention was drawn to the bulletin board map, and they helped determine some landmarks that needed to be on the map and where they should be placed in relation to the location of our school. These landmarks were named and labeled.

On the following days, individual children placed their paper self-representation on the map and decided what they would say about that place. The teacher wrote the child's words and read it back to them, tracing under the words with her finger as they were read to emphasize the left to right and top to bottom progression of print. The children were encouraged to find the name place in their words and match it to the name place label on the map rendition. The paper that the child's words were written on was cut into the shape of a cartoon talk balloon and placed near the child's self-representation.

The children were more excited about this bulletin board than other displays in the classroom, and when parents came to pick their child up from school, many were guided by their child past the sign-out table to the bulletin board where they were eager to show off their work. Parents were encouraged to read the child's talk balloon aloud to him so that the child could hear the same words were read upon each reading from a different person, thus developing an understanding that once words are written, they remain the same regardless who the reader is.

Waiting for the Mail

The University President responded and gave us permission to add bubble solution to the fountain. The first time, we simply added dishwashing liquid and had the disappointing result of very few bubbles. Internet research revealed a recipe with

promise, and that attempt gave much better, more exciting results. Back at school, we put the bubble solution in a tiny child's swimming pool and let each child stand inside the pool while a hula hoop was lifted from the bubble solution and over the child's head, thus encircling the child in a giant bubble. That was an exciting day! Later, each child drew a picture of himself inside of a bubble and finished the sentence starter, "If I went up in a bubble…" These were compiled into a class book and placed in the class library.

Making Connections with Others

Sharing with Stakeholders

The culmination of this project coincided with Head Start's National Birthday, so a gathering was planned to both celebrate the birthday and to showcase the children's work. Invitations were sent, displays of the children's work were created, and cake and punch were served. The University President and other university administrators came to the showcase, as did parents, grandparents, and Head Start administrators. The children played outside during this time, but a few at a time were sent inside with an adult to tell the visitors about the displayed work.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences were on the calendar soon after this project was completed. The teachers were amazed at how many parents made positive comments about the Neighborhood Explorers project. The comments were classified under four main categories: Shared spaces, social-emotional bonds, increased oral language at home, and positive "press." First, parents were excited that as they drove into campus and passed by campus landmarks, their children got so excited and told about their trips. This gave parents and children opportunities to swap stories about

things that happened to them near these landmarks. Having shared experiences and discussions in association with particular geographical locations or landmarks is part of what geographers refer to as *sense of place* (Brillante & Mankiw, 2015). Second, there was a new social and emotional bond as parents and children began to see their surroundings as "their school" and not just as "Mommy's school." The connection of the preschool child's family to both the university family and to the Head Start family helped each participating parent(s)-child grouping develop a greater sense of belonging. A sense of belonging is considered to be a social-emotional support that is healthy for overall psychological well-being (Brillante & Mankiw, 2015). Third, this was the first time many of the parents and children had repeatedly spent a large portion of the day apart while the children were busy doing exciting things. So, the children had a lot to say at home about their school experiences, and the parents had a good understanding of what the children were talking about because the parents recognized the places the children described. Consequently, the parents noticed more oral language at home than usual and were delighted about their development. Last, parents were also happy with their child's new school experience and told their friends about the program, thus increasing word-of-mouth advertisement for the program.

Conclusion

The initial purpose of this project was for children to realize that they shared a campus with their parent or parents, but so much more happened that the teachers had not anticipated. Based on their experiences during this project, the new teacher perspective is that creating opportunities for parents and children to share the same landscapes both physically and emotionally creates a sense of belonging for both parents

and children, has a positive impact on home-school relations, and is a beneficial catalyst for oral and written language at school and at home.

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