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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.

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Student Research:

Observing with a Purpose: Place-Based Learning, Journaling, and Discussion

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Introduction

“Tell me, and I’ll forget. Show me, and I may remember. But involve me, and I’ll understand” - Translated Chinese proverb (Elstein, 2019).

These wise words embody the essence of the Language Experience approach—a strategy used to develop students’ literacy skills by writing about shared experiences. Through experiences and collaboration, students can put their ideas down on paper, thus participating in the writing process. By creating or using a common experience that all students will write about together, each student has a common starting place for a writing project. Students need hands-on experiences where their minds are engaged in order to

make sense of the world around them (Institute of Inquiry, 2015). By giving students these opportunities for shared learning, we, as teachers, are supporting lifelong learners who will always be able to make connections in class and outside of class.

Our lens for the Language Experience Approach focuses on observing with a purpose. This idea allows students to construct their own meaning based on what they, themselves, have absorbed (Smith, 2019). This idea holds exceptional value because all students will have the same experience yet different perspectives relating to their backgrounds and interests, thus extending their understanding outside the classroom. Students will utilize their own vocabularies and knowledge to make a dialogue that makes sense to them, rather than relying on memorizing the teacher's perspective. In 2001, Richard Schmidt hypothesized that nothing can be learned until it is noticed; once it is noticed, students can create deeper understanding through continued observations and making connections to what they already know. Observing with a purpose helps students create meaning because it directs them to pay attention to their surroundings. We will explore this lens of observing with a purpose through place-based learning, journaling, and discussion.

Place-based Learning is experiencing the world around us in an authentic and meaningful way that connects educational ideas to real models and examples. Rather than limiting students' in-class learning to abstract concepts, students get to engage with their community and local surroundings to gain a deeper and more personal understanding (Institute for Inquiry, 2015). Place-based learning involves students in their local environment, so they can see real-world examples of the concepts they are learning in the classroom. All too often the way writing is being taught in schools makes students

think that it is only a K-12 activity and not a life-long skill that will be used constantly throughout their lives (Gallagher, 2011). We need our students to see and value good writing. What better way to nurture this mindset than to expose them to writing and ideas in the real world?

Students can apply both content knowledge and literacy skills if they journal throughout this development—from their first observations to creating a final report. Journaling helps students focus their ideas from observations to make sense of the world around them. It gives students continued practice with writing throughout the entire learning process. “In all forms of LEA, the central principle is to use the student’s own vocabulary, language patterns, and background of experiences to create reading texts, making reading an especially meaningful and enjoyable process” (Nessel, 2008, p. 1). With this idea in mind, students are engaging in thought-provoking questions probed by the teacher, and they explore those ideas through writing or doodling in a way that makes sense to them in their own journal. Students are also able to look back at previous discoveries to see how their learning has evolved. Ultimately, a journal serves as documentation for the trajectory of learning over time, as well as encourages habits that foster a continued growth mindset.

Discussion involves students in a rich learning community, where they can benefit from sharing their ideas and learning from others. In the book *Inquire Within: Implementing Inquiry-Based Science Standards in Grades 3-8*, Douglas Llewellyn (2007) comments on the necessity of discussion. He says, "Making meaning from the experience requires reflection, conversation, comparison of findings with others, interpretation of data and observations, and the application of new conceptions to other contexts" (p. 5). If

shared experiences are used for learning in the classroom, then discussion completes the learning process by giving students an opportunity to reflect on, compare, contrast, interpret, and apply their findings and ideas throughout their continuum of learning.

Observations, journals, and discussions are designed to be tools that build students' understanding. There are no wrong answers as students explore phenomena; the goal is to get students to think and gain confidence in their abilities to learn. Teachers should focus on the processes students have taken to come to their own conclusions, as learning is a dynamic process that takes time and new experiences before it fully develops. Through hands-on activities and explorations, students will be able to continuously make meaning. After all, the best way for someone to *learn* is to *do*.

Place-Based Learning

As discussed in the introduction, for students to learn, they must do. What better way to learn than by exploring a local environment and discussing the findings? By spending time thinking about classroom concepts outside of the classroom, students can feel open to talk about exactly what they know and what they are still curious about. A major part of place-based learning deals with the idea of notice and wonder, which is typically a mathematical idea that says that students should be able to tell a story in their own words, make estimates, and continue to work toward an understanding of *how* to solve a problem (NCTM, n.d.). This approach to learning shows students that the process of discovering answers is much more valuable than getting a *correct* answer. Students will no longer feel pressure to think a certain way; rather, they can feel confident about exploring what is around them. The strategy of notice and wonder is valuable to students

in all subjects because they can focus on everyday places and the learning that takes place there.

Unified Exploration

Through place-based learning, *all* students are actively engaged in learning because everyone's observations matter. This makes differentiation within place-based learning a natural process because every student has a perspective and an ability to notice—there are no wrong ways to observe the shared location. Students are able to work together to socially construct understanding; students can learn from each other's observations to make a well-rounded sense of meaning (Vygotsky, 1978). Ideas in isolation are just ideas, but ideas that come together are connections—building blocks of meaning making. A study on classroom diversity by Tonda Liggett (2010), revealed that today's classrooms are filled with more diverse students than ever before. To honor these differences, students should be brought together to experience new perspectives in a shared location. Students with special needs are seeing real world applications, and they are paying attention to their own thoughts. English-language learners are building valuable vocabulary, and they can utilize the shared experience to further their understanding. In general, students retain information as they see where the information can be applied. For example, if students are learning about the importance of caring for the environment, they can go out to their school playground and find examples and non-examples of showing consideration for the environment. Some students may find examples of people taking care of the environment by seeing things like trash cans or recycling bins. Other students may find non-examples of environmental care such as pieces of litter that blew in with the wind. Others may think about what they can do to help

keep the Earth clean. When students discuss together, they can continuously keep their ideas flowing—because they are not pressured to think through a single-lens perspective.

Soaking up Learning

While the teacher can set up guidelines for the place-based observations, it is not a requirement. The purpose is to get every student thinking and connecting to their local environments—which can be anything from the school’s library to a nearby stream to a local park. The focus should not be on assessing what students say in a summative form; rather, the teacher should listen to their rich conversations in a formative manner. Often, what students are noticing and wondering about helps the teacher know what students are understanding more than completing a traditional pretest and posttest. The depth of questions shows the teacher how students are grappling with the information, but it also shows that they *want* to learn. By taking time to explore new places, students give the teacher ideas for how to appeal to their interests in the classroom to make classroom learning connected to their place-based learning experiences. Having these connections, assessment becomes a more natural process because students will have constant practice defending what they are thinking and why.

Pondering with a Purpose

Lastly, place-based learning asks students to make connections with what they have learned before and what they will learn in the future. Taking time to understand these connections, students will continuously learn inside and outside the classroom. In order for students to truly take away what they need to from class, they need to own their information (Gonzalez, 2018). The way information is organized helps students recognize and *own* their meaning-making process. To organize, teachers should provide tools such

as graphic organizers to represent what information was found, journals to promote freewriting, and even anticipatory guides to activate student engagement and prior knowledge. These tools help students self-regulate and map their learning over time. This information may seem basic, and not necessarily relevant to observing with a purpose, but we cannot expect students to learn if we are not supporting them in a successful learning environment. Since the goal is focused on making good observations with connections, we must consider what makes good observations.

Journaling

The use of journaling—which the Institute of Inquiry (2015) refers to as *science writing*—has a wide variety of benefits in all classrooms; students can write freely about classroom concepts in a way that makes sense to them in any subject. Student journaling can be adapted for use with any grade level, content area, or exceptionality, as it is an active process for students. Imagine the difference in comprehension between a student who creates a concept map using his or her own words and a student that only obtains information from a slideshow. The student who utilizes his or her own vocabulary has richer opportunities to grapple with meaning-making and reinforce key understandings. The journal is an invaluable tool for all students because it serves as a “repository for emerging ideas (a silent partner in an investigation)” (Institute of Inquiry, 2015, p. 5). Using a journal as a place to store one’s thoughts shows the importance of getting ideas out on paper while investigating. Even if some of the ideas are imperfect or incorrect, the process of sifting through them is essential for students as they construct their own meaning. Not only can students make observations in their journal, they can ask questions, use it as a reminder during discussions or later units, record and develop their

ideas, and revise old notes to accommodate new understandings. All of this culminates as excellent visual evidence of their knowledge progression (Llewellyn, 2007). Once they have reached the last pages of their journal, students will be more comfortable documenting, reflecting, and hypothesizing about their experiences, further strengthening the foundational skills and knowledge that will support them as lifelong learners.

Journaling in Action

The process of journaling will look different for each student. It is important that they understand that the journal is, first and foremost, a tool for *them*. If teachers place too strong an emphasis on grading, students may write what they think the teacher wants to see—completely defeating the purpose of the activity. When students journal, they make their thoughts visible on the page, allowing those reading the journal to see a snapshot of the students' progress through the meaning-making process. Because every student will work through this process differently, the content is not always appropriate to grade. This is why teachers should explicitly state their expectations for each activity implemented throughout the journal. When teachers are transparent about which pages or activities will be shared with others or used for assessment, students gain security and feel free to take notes with whatever methods work best—whether it be sketching or simply using words that make the most sense to them. Conversely, on the days that students know their work will be reviewed, the journal becomes a mode of non-synchronous communication between instructor and learner (James, 2005). This gives educators an opportunity to truly understand what each individual student needs. At the same time, journals give students a platform to ask questions, self-evaluate, and record specific observations made or skills learned.

In-class journaling is an activity that is inherently differentiated to each individual. It allows students to use their own words and makes observations and subsequent discussions more relevant. By giving students the opportunity to journal independently, they can come to future classroom activities prepared. During group discussions, the class is able to collectively build the ability and confidence to “recognize specific words from the [journal] and develop the decoding skills of context, phonics, and structural analysis, using the [journal] as a resource...” (Dixon & Nessel, 2008, p. 8). For young students, this can be one of the best ways to transition into reading other published informational texts. The progression from reading one’s own words to collaborating with others—from fellow students to the larger learning community—builds stronger communication skills and academic language proficiency as well as confidence to contribute to the general classroom conversation.

The Significance of Inquiry-Based Journaling

Teachers who want their students to be more familiar with the process of scientific inquiry are perfect candidates for utilizing journaling in their classrooms. At the most basic level, journals are a space for students to jot down questions, thoughts, predictions, or reflections—all which could potentially be referenced in later discussions. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2013), any instructor that uses journaling effectively, “places students’ questions, ideas, and observations at the center of the learning experience” (p. 2). This corresponds with a previously presented idea that students will use their own words to develop necessary academic skills. The Ministry of Education goes on to say that this approach is built upon “the idea that both educators and students share

responsibility for learning” (p. 2). Educators and students co-construct understanding throughout the process.

Observation journals are effective tools for students to fully engage in the writing process, making for a more meaningful experience. A publication by Alisa James in 2005 emphasizes the idea that journaling is a beneficial strategy for both educators and students:

The information gleaned from journals can help teachers meet the needs of all students, particularly needs they were unaware of until they read the entries... Students are better served by knowing that their voices are listened to and valued [and] they are more involved with the teaching-learning process. (p. 4)

In summation, journals are insightful assessment sources for teachers and valuable resources for supporting students’ growth, as they become organized, reflective, self-regulated learners.

Through the combination of interactive exercises like inquiry-based journaling and discussion, students will become accustomed to asking questions, making predictions, and referring to evidence which supports their claims. All of this culminates into authentic and meaningful language development that is led by students’ prior content knowledge and vocabulary. As stated by Dixon & Nessel (2008), “An important advantage to this approach is that, from the start, students learn to recognize words in print that are orally very familiar to them... Because students compose the account, comprehension is inherent” (p. 2). This means that, even if students do not immediately understand what they are observing, they will still be able to focus entirely on the experience, *not* the

vocabulary of provided texts. Instead, all students can challenge themselves and learn content knowledge and language skills at their own pace in a way that makes sense to them.

Discussion

To discuss, as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is “(a) to talk about, (b) to investigate by reasoning or argument, (c) to present in detail for examination or consideration” (Merriam-Webster, 2019, para. 1). Conversation, investigation, argumentation, and presentation of information through discussion is, as Samantha Corcoran (n.d.) explains in *Discussion in the Classroom: Why to Do It, How to Do It, and How to Assess It*, a means of deep learning because students are actively engaged. Corcoran (n.d) emphasizes that true engagement creates deeper enjoyment and greater retention of information. When children actively engage with content, ask questions, reason through a problem, and talk about what they know or are learning, they make connections, which, in turn, increases their enjoyment and understanding. Without making connections, observations have no objective; without active involvement in the learning process, students will not delve deeper into learning.

Learning through Communication

At the beginning of the writing and observation process, students need to make sense of information and connect it to what they know. Discussion allows for children to share their ideas, questions, and thoughts with each other and broaden their understanding through new perspectives. It also allows for teachers to better understand where students are in their understanding and thinking. Dixon and Nessel (2008) shared in *Using the Language Experience Approach With English Language Learners* that

discussion allows for students to better understand content, as they have opportunities to practice listening to others, organizing and communicating their ideas, and verbally exploring the topic. These language and presentation skills are integral to the actual writing of a text, but a deeper understanding of the content is also necessary for strong writing. Discussion allows for a combination of practice and learning in these three areas, which then provides students with a strong foundation for their writing pieces.

Engaging to Connect

Often in beginning discussions, children use words and ideas that make sense to them to describe what they know or have experienced. Writing these words and key ideas down or using a word wall can be beneficial techniques for capturing ideas in discussions. When these ideas are captured or remembered by students, they can then make connections in current and future discussions and observations. As the writing experience continues, new vocabulary, content, and ideas are introduced and students will continue to make connections between what they knew, know, and are learning. Again, Dixon and Nessel (2008) describe the importance of making connections when they say, "In all forms of LEA, the central principle is to use the student's own vocabulary, language patterns, and background of experiences to create reading texts, making reading an especially meaningful and enjoyable process" (p. 1). Discussion is a natural means of accomplishing this and it helps to clarify what is known, as well as what students want and need to know.

Discussions should take place throughout the whole process of observing, journaling, and writing because students will need to continue to make sense of their ideas and make connections in a safe and dynamic environment. Toward the end of the

experience, as students begin to write individually and collaboratively, the importance of communication will become even more vital to the writing process. As the class works to make sense of their experiences and the writing process, they bring their personal experiences, ideas, and writing to the discussion to create a cohesive understanding. This communication with others will help students widen their perspectives in a meaningful manner.

Assessing Realistically

Discussions throughout the writing and experience process serve two purposes. First, Samantha Corcoran (n.d) explains that discussion helps students learn more deeply through the process of engaging with the content and making connections with their peers. Secondly, she explains, discussions allow teachers to formatively assess their students' understanding and ability. Discussion provides rich qualitative data on what students are thinking and where they are in the sense making and writing process. Discussions can also serve as summative assessment if the teacher so chooses, and this can be a unique and in-depth technique for differentiating assessments. Awareness of what students think and understand is essential for good teaching. Unfortunately, traditional assessments often lack the depth that discussion can provide, hindering the teacher's ability to assess students' abilities. Rather than asking for simple surface answers that can be answered with rote memory, discussion engages students and makes visible their learning.

Learning Uniquely

According to Parish (2019), some of the best practices and techniques for discussion are also some of the most challenging. He explains that in general, discussions

can be differentiated by including the use of visuals, taking turns, using small groups, and creating realistic expectations of conversations. However, Robb (2008) explains that discussion is often used as a strategy for differentiation. It helps students build understanding and clarify their thoughts. It pushes them to move beyond mere memorization of facts and use what they know to face challenges and create solutions. All of these activities “deepen their understanding and recall” (Robb, 2008, para. 23). No matter the students’ current level of understanding or ability, discussion is a medium that is easy to manipulate so that it challenges and accommodates each student.

Conclusion

In conclusion, observing with a purpose is designed to help students learn through making connections. Some ways to implement this connection-rich approach include utilizing place-based learning, journaling, and discussion. These are authentic, hands-on activities that allow students to build language skills and self-regulate their learning while concurrently applying knowledge to various subjects. Using a hands-on approach to learning helps students use multiple learning styles to make connections with prior knowledge, as they learn both inside and outside the classroom. When students are actively engaged in the meaning-making process through real-life experiences, they maximize opportunities to grow as lifelong learners.

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Student Research:

Creating Language Experiences Through Traditions

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Introduction

Around the world, traditions are experiences that are unique to everyone. Some people may celebrate holidays with their families and friends, honor their loved ones in various ways, and acknowledge birthdays or lifetime achievements. Others may eat particular foods at festivities, gather for family reunions, or spend quality time with those who matter most on designated days. Despite the reason for gathering, or how traditions are celebrated, every individual can experience traditions.

Although traditions can occur in our daily lives, they can also be implemented and celebrated in classrooms. Educators can implement traditions in a variety of ways, such as designating “free days” to students on Fridays or creating classroom holidays. Often, implementing these variations of traditions are beneficial for students because traditions

are known to “establish a good bonding experience” (Fraser-Thill, 2019, para.1). Having a bonding experience with students is an effective way for educators to establish positive relationships with their students, for students to establish positive relationships with each other, and for creating an environment where students feel safe and welcome.

While educators work to establish traditions in their classrooms, they can utilize the Language Experience Approach (LEA), which is “a method to reading instruction based on activities and stories developed from personal experiences” (LEA, n.d., p. 3). Traditions are a shared experience that all students can connect with, either in the classroom or outside the classroom. Educators can use the Language Experience Approach to develop students’ writing abilities and reading skills while they participate in personal activities that are likely to include some fun.

Prior to planning Language Experience Approach activities which focus on traditions, educators must build common understanding. First, educators must understand what the Language Experience Approach is and the characteristics which define strategy. They must understand how to implement the approach by sharing creating or sharing common traditions. Initially, educators will recognize how students can benefit from using traditions as a shared experience to gradually strengthen their reading and writing abilities, and further see how traditions can help students feel a sense of belonging in the classroom.

Second, educators shift their focus to traditions. As educators plan traditions as common experiences for the Language Experience Approach, they recognize how traditions impact relationships and help children build self-esteem. Distinguishing traditions based on cultural and religious views in order to avoid “cultural assumptions and

stereotypes” is critical, and then they must determine appropriate traditions to establish in a multicultural classroom (Teaching Tolerance, 2019, para. 6).

Finally, this article shares an assortment of experiences that can be created when utilizing traditions as a common theme. Many experiences may positively impact students and their learning processes, while other experiences may provide educators an alternative point of view and suggest appropriate supports to provide for students. Either way, implementing a shared experience through traditions can spark a connection with all students and help inform educators which supports are needed for subsequent lessons.

Implementing the Language Experience Approach

The Language Experience Approach has been utilized by classroom teachers for over 40 years to help students develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (The Literacy Bug, n.d., para. 5). LEA requires students to reflect on an experience that they have all shared in some way, and students expand on this experience through writing. It can be utilized in any classroom, and it helps students connect what they learn in class with the world outside the classroom.

Many teachers also incorporate the Language Experience Approach in their instruction because it is an effective strategy that helps create “an emotional bond between the students” (LEA, n.d., p. 1). Strengthening interpersonal relationships in the classroom is a powerful way to help students feel comfortable and safe in the learning environment. Studies show that when students feel comfortable and safe, “self-esteem increases and students are motivated to engage in the learning process” (The SHARE Team, 2012, para. 2).

Other educators use the Language Experience Approach because it is flexible and adaptable. Using this approach, educators can “tailor the instruction to fit the needs and specific interests of individual students” (Nessel & Dixon, 2008, p. 2). Not only does the versatility of LEA attract teachers, but the inclusiveness of the approach makes it beneficial for all learners, including English language learners. Unlike other strategies which focus on one skill at a time, LEA provides students with “rich tasks that provide opportunities for students to see, hear, and manipulate language in purposeful ways” (The Literacy Bug, n.d., para. 1). Ultimately, teachers incorporate the Language Experience Approach in their literacy lessons because it is valuable for students who struggle with reading and writing. LEA targets these two subjects and integrates them into meaningful and personal activities that students can enjoy (LEA, n.d.).

The Significance of Traditions

Traditions are embedded in our everyday lives and are deeply rooted in our culture. Many individuals celebrate traditions in their families but are not aware of what a tradition actually is. According to Merriam-Webster's online dictionary (2019) a tradition is “an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior, such as a religious practice or a social custom” (para 1). Traditions are comprised of a culture's beliefs, customs, and any other information passed down through conversation (2019).

Traditions are important and should be valued for many different reasons. Traditions help create bonds between people, shape our identities, and enable us to understand ourselves and each other (Childhelp, n.d). Traditions also provide insight into how people behave and respond to social interactions (Rockwell, 2020). Traditions likewise help shape a person into an active member of society and shape our identities to

help us belong to specific groups (Childhelp, n.d). Expanding our awareness and increasing our understanding of others' traditions and our own can us appreciate our similarities and differences.

Using Traditions as Language Experience Approach Activities

Writing about traditions can be an engaging task for students because it allows students to write about traditions they have experienced and think about traditions they have not experienced yet. Using traditions as writing prompts also gives students opportunities to share their traditions and learn about cultures to which they otherwise might not be exposed. Learning about a variety of traditions can deepen students' respect for the history of traditions as well as diversity itself (Studenttreasures, 2018).

Traditions are celebrated in a variety of ways. Speaking about traditions connects people with similar traditions regardless of age (Studenttreasures, 2018). Teachers using the LEA and traditions as a common theme must remember that all students may not be familiar with traditions. Giving examples of what traditions are and providing in-class opportunities to experience traditions may boost students' understanding. Traditions need not be holiday related. In fact, traditions can include eating a meal as a family every Friday night or going on a family vacation once a year. Allowing students to have time to brainstorm ideas or challenging students to write about a tradition that is unique to their lives can give students opportunities to further understand and then share their stories. Students can share the traditions they think are unique, so other students can learn from and understand those traditions.

Younger students may not have a clear understanding of the experiences connected with traditions, and they will need to understand these experiences before they

can compare their experiences with others' experiences. Some ideas to help students brainstorm what to write about include specific holiday traditions, family vacation destinations, or games their families play together (Studenttreasures, 2018). Students' ideas should be recognized and reinforced whether their traditions are extravagant or simple (Studenttreasures, 2018). Another option would be to have students interview each other about their traditions and then write about their partner's traditions, thus enabling them to connect with one another and appreciate the differences and similarities in their lives.

Creating Classroom Traditions

Educators can use classroom traditions to create a sense of community, positively impacting the way the students engage and participate (Futterman, 2015; Woodfin, 1998). Classroom traditions can be as simple as giving high fives on the way through the door in the morning or as complex as throwing a holiday party or 100th Day of School party. Classroom traditions can utilize the Language Experience Approach in a variety of ways so all students can discuss and write about their shared experiences.

As an instructor, teachers must know their students' traditions, cultures, and academic abilities in order to prevent racial or ethnic stereotyping (Futterman, 2015). When implementing class traditions, educators must teach students to embrace diversity and respect all students' cultures. In more diverse classrooms, educators should "select holidays and religious celebrations based on your classroom representation so that it is an inclusive and respectful experience for students" (Gray, 2019). Traditions can have a positive impact on the classroom environment because "knowing and learning about classmates' and teachers' cultural backgrounds, religions, families, and traditions at the

beginning of the school year reduces fear and increases empathy” (Gray, 2019). Class tradition celebrations also allow students’ families and the community to be involved in the classroom, as they are invited to share their individual stories. One teacher shared that she often would invite local indigenous leaders into the classroom to share their traditions and oral creation stories (Gray, 2019). When these leaders would come into the classroom the teacher shared that students were interested and engaged and they developed a deeper understanding of indigenous traditions by hearing from local leaders (Gray, 2019). Class tradition shares can be educational, as well. Students can view shows from the History Channel which depict religions and cultures across the globe and then engage in group conversations and writing activities (Gray, 2019).

Students should play a primary role in planning and carrying out classroom tradition activities. According to Polly Greenberg (2019), students should be involved in discussions and planning classroom traditions because it motivates students to work hard and learn more from these experiences. When students are involved in the process of creating and celebrating traditions, learning is more meaningful for them. Classroom rituals contribute to students’ sense of well-being, social development, and educational competence (Greenberg, 2019).

Conclusion

The Language Experience Approach helps students develop reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Using this strategy integrated with the concept of traditions, students can share individual experiences from their own lives or experiences shared with others in the classroom as common ground for writing activities. Because LEA is individualized, it can be used in any classroom at any level to accommodate all children’s

needs, including those of English language learners, all while building interpersonal relationships in the classroom. Embedding LEA activities in real-world experiences helps children improve their literacy skills in meaningful ways, making learning more relevant for all.

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From the Field:

Enhancing the Cradle to College Pipeline through Family Literacy Service Learning Projects

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Introduction

While Louisiana has made strides in improving the criminal justice system in recent years, we continue to be the world's prison capitol (Weishar, 2017). In other words, we have more people incarcerated per 100 people than anywhere else in the world. While mass incarceration in our state is the result of a *Cradle to Prison Pipeline*, research tells us that the pipeline can be interrupted through early intervention, and specifically, through family literacy intervention (Eaton & DeLauri, 2010). Thus, the Early Childhood Education program at Northwestern State University partners with the Natchitoches District Defender's office to reinforce a *Cradle to College Pipeline* in our state. Through service

learning projects in every Early Childhood Education course at NSU, we collect books and school supplies and compile them into family literacy bags which we donate to children from poverty-stricken circumstances. This article shares our story.

Martha's Story

In early 2019 while student teaching at L.P. Vaughn Elementary, I witnessed firsthand the needs of many students. I saw families struggling to choose between food, clothes, medicine, and school supplies. Though I personally have never known the hardship of choosing food over school supplies, I felt I had to help in any way possible. I immediately thought about the Cradle to College Service Learning Project that Dr. Brunson introduced in my education classes. I began thinking of ways to broaden the impact of the service learning project. During this time, I was a member of Phi Mu Fraternity, so I contacted the Phi Mu Executive Board and arranged to present my idea at the next chapter meeting. At that meeting I shared facts highlighting the serious need for school supplies and the impact the project could have on children in our city. The response from my sisters was explosive. They saw the need and importance of helping the children in the local community. With each following semester, the response only grew.

As a result of my work with this service learning project, I have grown as an educator and now see the great need for school supplies and how lack of them affects students. Children should not be penalized for matters outside their control, and the success of this project has given me a new sense of hope for the future. Lastly, I have been reminded that a little love goes a long way. The students who receive the literacy bags from the service learning project need extra support and guidance, and the tools

they receive provide both and help them succeed in school.

Figure 1

Martha Hopewell with Supplies Collected from Phi Mu



Patricia's Story

It was like Christmas when the students were given the literacy bags from Dr. Brunson and her Early Childhood Education majors. Before we presented the children with their bag, and they didn't know they were going to get one, I showed them a bag and all the things that were inside – paper, crayons, books, glue, construction paper, and other wonderful supplies. We talked about what I could do with mine, how I would take care of the items, and then how I would share them with my family. Then we handed out the bags for each child to explore, and it was like Christmas.

The students truly appreciated having something of their own. Often, they ask to take classroom supplies such as crayons or glue home, telling me they do not have any at home, or that a sibling took or broke what they had. Sometimes I take things for granted, but seeing the students when they receive these gifts to help them practice their new knowledge and skills helps me keep things in perspective. Throughout the year, students

may bring a book from home to share with the class. Two children brought the book that was in the literacy bag. I never found out if it was they only book they had or their favorite book, but it was definitely a book that gave them pride to be able to share.

Figure 2

Patricia Alexander, Principal Micah Nicholson, and Alicia Foy Taylor (right) with Family Literacy Bags for Donation



Brittany's Story

The greatest benefits of the family literacy bags are the opportunities families have to share learning experiences together at home. Families can use the resources to practice skills with their children to help children meet academic goals relating to math, reading, and writing without the burden of having to provide these materials on limited incomes. The families in my program love receiving their bags. Many stories have been shared with me, but one story is very special. One particular mom of a child with special needs contacted me after receiving their bag to share their excitement. His mom read a counting story with him. She was not aware he was able to count to 10, but as they read the story, he counted along with her. After the story, she continued to count with him, and

he continued counting on to 20. She was so excited to share with me that he had learned this skill, and without the literacy bag, this mom would not have had this learning experience with her child. The little boy came back to school the next day and shared his counting accomplishment with the whole class. Children love to have the interactions with their parents to help them learn and they like to share their accomplishments. The literacy bags assist with building vocabulary, language, and communication skills, all while facilitating social-emotional development at home.

Figure 3

Brittany's Students with their Family Literacy Bags



Implications for Teachers

The anecdotal stories shared in this article are just a few examples of the positive feedback we have received on our service learning project, which is rooted in research on best practices. Jerlean Daniels, former NAEYC President and 2018 cochair of the NAEYC Black Caucus, encourages early childhood educators to recognize the opportunity gaps created by policies and practices that too often trap people of color into a downward

spiral. Those policies and practices frequently create situations where low-income children of color attend under-funded schools and live in under-resourced neighborhoods, both of which pave the way for the cradle to prison pipeline (Daniels, 2018). One way that teachers can advocate for the children and families that they serve is to be aware of state and local government and school decision-making procedures, recognizing when and how to attend forums for the public to voice their opinions. Another more easily reached way to advocate for the low-income children and families of color that one serves is to follow Daniels recommendation to “Think nationally, act locally” (Daniels, 2018). The family literacy projects highlighted here are wonderful examples of acting locally.

Providing young children with literature and school supplies to enjoy at home has many benefits. First, it gives children continual access to grade-level appropriate books, an important component of closing the *word gap*. The *word gap* is an expression used to describe the far fewer number of words heard and the far fewer variety of words heard by low-income kids as compared to their counterparts from white-collar families (Wong, 2016). Even if parents converse with their children regularly and give appropriate explanations for children’s questions, daily dialogues do not typically use very sophisticated language. On the other hand, even low-level children’s books are likely to introduce a plethora of words not used in everyday language. Second, the literacy packets children receive as part of this program add to their family’s personal libraries, thus helping to eliminate *book deserts*. *Book desert* is a newly coined term that refers to neighborhoods where children have severely limited access to books (Wong, 2016). Third, the literature and school supplies are often accompanied by parent education sheets that help parents to understand the importance of reading to their children, along

with ideas for creative ways to extend ideas based on the books. As reported by Wong, (2016), Susan Neuman, an early childhood education researcher and former Assistant Education Secretary, determined that economically disadvantaged children who enter kindergarten with relatively little experiences with storybooks being read to them by adults as part of their regular routines scored 60% lower on kindergarten readiness tests than same-age children from financially stable homes (Wong, 2016). These three components, 1) access to age-appropriate books, 2) hearing and listening to wide variety of words, and 3) routinely engaging with books read by parents can have great magnitude on children's vocabularies and comprehension skills. "Ultimately, giving kids access to books may be one of the most overlooked solutions to helping ensure kids attend school with the tools they need to succeed" (Wong, 2016, para. 13). Those interested in investigating this topic further, may wish to consider these search terms: *Cradle to Prison Pipeline, Equity, Anti-Bias, Cultural Competence, Diversity, Race and Ethnicity, Opportunity Gap, Word Gap, Book Deserts, and Economic Status.*

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Language Experience: Literacy Across the Disciplines

<http://languageexperienceapproach.weebly.com>

This special interest group was designed to explore how reading, writing, discussion, and authentic experiences can be combined in the curriculum to enhance learning at all age levels, in every discipline.

Language Experience Approach Explained

by Mary W. Strong, Ed.D. Professor Emerita Widener University

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) is based on the following ideas: that the learner is an active user of language, learning is promoted through personal involvement, and communication of meaning is the purpose of language learning. Another important aspect is that the learner's products are valued and are valid materials to be utilized for literacy learning (Landis, Umolu & Mancha, 2010).

The steps followed in the LEA procedure are as follows:

1. The student composes a story (based upon their own experience or upon a book as a stimulus) and dictates her story to the teacher.
2. The teacher reads the student's story to check if the written dictation was correct.
3. The student's draft is completed and the student reads his/her story to the teacher.
4. Any words that the student has difficulty identifying can become part of a word bank for the student.
5. The story could then be printed and reread again by the student or by the other students in the class.

A great asset of LEA is that the student's reading vocabulary, which is derived from his oral vocabulary, allows for acquisition of sight words, as well as natural semantic and grammatical structures (Ward, 2005). The Language Experience Approach is a total language arts approach that relies heavily upon dictated stories, word banks, and creative writing. Therefore, LEA is also a very comprehensive methodology that can be used to teach literacy.

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