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The cover painting was created by Grade 2 student Kaden Shaw, in Raymond Elementary School, Raymond, Alberta. His work is the product of integrated studies led by his student teacher, Hillari Blaylock, a first-year education student at the University of Lethbridge. Grade 2 students discovered the properties of buoyancy and boats in their science lessons and explored the use of various media in art. Before beginning to paint, they examined the work of art masters, with careful attention to the colours used to represent sunsets and oceans. Then, using the brush stroke techniques demonstrated by Ms Blaylock, the children dipped their brushes in tempera paints and created vivid backgrounds for their boats. They cut their boat shapes from scrapbook paper of various textures and positioned them in ways that made clear to viewers that the boats were buoyant and ready to sail into the sunset. Grade 2 masterpieces such as this one are fine examples of visual representation of cross-curricular learning.

From the Editor's Desk

More years ago than I sometimes like to admit, my teachers' college instructors impressed upon me the benefits of integrated, cross-curricular learning opportunities for young children. Integrated learning, they explained, is the way children learn naturally. Now, it is my turn to extol the virtues of such learning and to advise preservice and inservice teachers to adopt an approach to curriculum that purposefully draws together knowledge, skills, attitudes and values from within or across traditional subject areas to develop a more powerful understanding of key ideas.¹ Engaging children in curriculum that allows for flexibility, builds on their prior knowledge and experiences, unifies their learning, reflects the real world and matches the way they think is surely one of the greatest gifts educators can offer. The place of the arts in such flexible learning and meaning making among children has long been salient.

In this issue, Nicole Jamison reminds us of the importance of children experiencing and making sense of their environments through different forms of understanding. She goes on to show readers how arts-based research involving children can be a powerful way to investigate, inquire and explore the social and cultural contexts along with the lived realities of children within educational settings. Vanessa Fraser and Heather Miller, ECEC Award winners in 2013, share with us how the art projects and instruction in their classroom created space for multiple literacies, especially for the children's language development. Readers will share the teachers' enthusiasm for art as a vehicle for language learning when they read of the children's success. Dramatic play, too, sits front and centre as teacher and facilitator of meaning making and story creation. Gisela Wajskop and Shelley Stagg-Peterson draw on their observations in Brazilian and Canadian classrooms to present their convincing argument that play, especially dramatic play, is fundamental to children's literacy and conceptual and social learning.

It is an exciting time to be a teacher. Never before has so much been known about how children learn and never have there been so many instructional alternatives to meet children's diverse needs. Robbin Gibb and her colleagues shed light on brain function in early learning and share their exciting work with parents and caregivers in shaping preschoolers'

executive functioning. Their work holds promise, and we await further outcomes. While new findings hold intrigue, the past cannot be forgotten. Sherry Waitte and Larry Prochner suggest that knowing the historical trends of early childhood education helps teachers envision the future.

Teachers are lifelong learners. Children and other teachers are the beneficiaries. In telling her story, Brittany Miller explains how her personal experience of being a struggling reader as a child has contributed to being a committed, informed, compassionate teacher. Hers is a story of success—achieved through dedication and persistence.

Some readers will recall that in times past girls sometimes locked and always carefully hid their diaries to keep them from the prying eyes of teasing siblings. Today, personal notes and passionate memos are usually, but not always, encrypted behind passwords. In a new journal feature, readers are not only allowed but invited to read pages from the diaries of three recently retired lifelong educators. Janice, Mary Anne and Rhona share their reflections and lessons learned from their vibrant, trail-blazing careers as teachers and administrators.

Promoting and supporting children's learning is a complex and complicated process. Among other traits, teachers must be creative problem solvers, ready and able to act upon solid knowledge of ever-increasing informative research from many fields. Through sharing their discoveries and reflections, contributors to this issue of *Early Childhood Education* have added significantly to available research and have enriched readers' thinking and pedagogical practice by doing so. Authors' contributions substantively support their teaching colleagues and the work of the Early Childhood Education Council. They are gratefully acknowledged.

In closing, I would like to express my appreciation to the Early Childhood Education Council for the opportunity to serve as editor for this issue. As I pass the reins to the next editor, I am conscious of the tireless efforts of many council members and the fine work that the ECEC does to support educators and children in the province and beyond. I am happy to have had an opportunity to be a part of your strong and powerful team. 🌟

Pamela Winsor

¹ Alberta Education. 2007. *Primary Programs Framework for Teaching and Learning*. "Curriculum Integration: Making Connections," 2.

Arts-Based Research with Children

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Abstract

In this article, educators are introduced to the importance of art in the early learning classroom and how art can be used as a form of inquiry or research to investigate an issue, topic or theme. It defines arts-based research and provides current examples of how digital photography and video, drawing, and mixed-media approaches have been used to engage in arts-based research with children. The article then discusses the importance and significance of arts-based research in education. It concludes with suggestions and possible themes that educators could use as a starting point for using arts-based research in their own classroom.

Introduction

This article introduces how various forms of art can be used to engage in arts-based research with children in a classroom context. When art moves beyond technique, craft or creation of a product, it becomes a vehicle for exploration and communication (Loomis, Lewis and Blumenthal 2007; Marshall 2014). Investigation through various art forms, such as painting, sculpture, drawing, photography or drama, provides a window into how a person negotiates his or her knowledge or understandings of the world and makes meaning (Fasoli 2003; Frei 1999). Many times art acts as a springboard (Loomis, Loomis and Blumenthal 2007) for ideas and emotions to be explored and brought to reality when words are unable to explain. That is why it is important to allow children to organize and make sense of their environment (Gattenhof and Radvan 2009) through “different forms of understanding” (Barone and Eisner 2012, 10). The increased availability of new media, including video, digital and electronic imagery, and

film, now allows for new ways of knowing, and possibilities and concepts to be created (Barone and Eisner 2012; Kirova and Emme 2008). There continues to be a growth in the use of art in both education and research. This approach of using art to explore a theme, issue or context is known as arts-based research.

What Is Arts-Based Research? Its Forms, Purposes and Participants

Arts-based research is a participatory method (Mand 2012) that allows a teacher and/or researcher and participant(s) to explore a particular topic or inquiry through the making of art products and engagement in creative expressive forms (Barone and Eisner 2012). This can be achieved through drawing, sculpting, painting, photography, video, drama, dance, mapping, construction, stories, songs or poetry (Carter and Ford 2013; Frei 1999; Griebing 2011; Literat 2013; Kirova and Emme 2008; O’Kane 2008; Wright 2007a). Through art, individuals are “free to explore, interpret and expand on reality through imaginative means” (Marshall 2014, 14), and express or communicate their knowledge (Blagojevic and Thomes 2008). They can also demonstrate critical learning (McNiff 2011), their perceptions of the world (Carter and Ford 2013), inner stories and lived realities (Literat 2013). “With an emphasis on visual representation of ideas, [these arts-based research approaches are particularly significant in education because they] can be designed to work with children of different ages with varied literacy skills” (O’Kane 2008, 132) without a reliance on written or oral language skills (Literat 2013). Often it is used with the hope of deepening insight or knowledge (Kirova and Emme 2008), as a means to express multiple meanings (Barone and Eisner 2012) and a new way of seeing (Marshall 2014) or interpreting the world.

Arts-based research in education often lends itself to inquiries focused on social justice, qualities of life

and developing a greater knowledge of people, places or situations (Barone and Eisner 2012). "In arts-based research, the aim is to create an expressive form that will enable an individual to secure an empathic participation in the lives of others and in the situations studied" (Barone and Eisner 2012, 8–9). Carter and Ford (2013) identified arts-based research as a suitable way, even for young children, to engage with existing social realities. This is because artistic thinking and the manipulation of different media or materials (Kay 2013) allows for the "moving back and forth between creation and reflection, images and written text" (Marshall 2014, 14) in a personally relevant manner. Through this process of creation of art there is an opportunity and a space for their ideas, viewpoints, voices, perspectives (Spyrou 2011) and experiences to be heard (Mand 2012) and valued in the research exploration. The new knowledge generated can extend and shape a discipline or domain, much as scientific inquiry or research brings to light new understandings, theories and practices (Marshall 2014).

Arts-Based Research Through Photography in Educational Settings

With increased access to digital technology, many recent arts-based research projects have opted for the use of digital photography for storytelling (Blagojevic and Thomes 2008) and photovoice (Literat 2013). This use of technology has the potential to empower young children as competent participants (Carter and Ford 2013; Popa and Stan 2013) because they are not limited by their inability to read, write or draw (Kirova and Emme 2008). For young children, photography and video can also represent their ideas and fulfill a similar purpose to that of their drawings (Carter and Ford 2013). For example, Popa and Stan (2013) successfully used photography with preschool children to position them as data collectors regarding their perceptions about their learning space at school. Students were interviewed and asked to describe what they had selected to photograph and why. The photographs showed, without relying on drawing or writing, that they themselves, their teachers, instructional resources and decorative elements indoors and outdoors were extremely significant to them (Popa and Stan 2013). This photographic evidence could then inform educators about how to set up the classroom in a way that is meaningful and relevant to the children.

Kaoruko and Sjöberg (2012) similarly examined the use of a camera as an effective way to represent a child's perspective. Participants were either young Japanese children or Swedish youth living in

another country. These children were asked to take photographs of people, places or things that were personally important. At first the visual images of expression were ambiguous to an outsider, but through the accompanying verbal narration the children were able to attach meaning to the images. Similarly, Kirova and Emme (2008), designed and managed a "fotonovela" study with Grades 4 and 5 immigrant students. Students were given predetermined topics; however, "it was the children who decided what story to tell, which pictures to use and in what order, and who would play each character and which thoughts or words would be linked to each character using text balloons" (p 37). The children selected their own photographs to represent their topic and created a visual story to reflect their understandings. The children also began to view their daily scenarios beyond just taking a picture. They then staged photographic scenes to capture their thinking, and this moved into dramatic tableaux performances to portray emotions and actions that accompanied their photographs (Kirova and Emme 2008). Digital photography is an advantageous tool because one photograph can poignantly reflect a person's daily life, social and cultural influences, sense of belonging and identity (Kaoruko and Sjöberg 2012).

Arts-Based Research Through Drawing in Educational Settings

Despite the growing use of digital media, drawing also remains extremely valuable in arts-based research with children. The process of drawing is truly a child-centred activity (Mitchell 2006). Many children enjoy drawing at the level of their capabilities (Mand 2012; Mitchell 2006). A drawing allows a child to represent experiences and understandings, unconstrained by the language and literacy skills (Mand 2012) of reading and writing. The purpose of drawing in arts-based research is not to attend to a specific form or technique of drawing, but rather to use drawing to communicate knowledge, understanding and learning (Schulte 2011). We "learn by *making* things, and thus the very act of generating a creative drawing is a valuable learning opportunity" (Literat 2013, 89). A drawing completed by a child "give[s] insight into the underlying cognitive and emotional processes located within the child" (Hallam, Lee and Das Gupta 2014, 167).

In one example, Bland and Sharma-Brymer (2012) used drawing and accompanying written narratives to explore learning environments and school design from a child's perspective. This was done to potentially help educators and planners identify what physical features of a school are

important to the children inhabiting the space. Year 5 and Year 6 students from nine primary schools in Queensland, Australia, created drawings for the Imagine a School project. The drawings were analyzed for “students’ choices of general environment, types of buildings and grounds, environmental considerations, and any special features, such as lakes and fountains, solar power, farms and gardens” (Bland and Sharma-Brymer 2012, 78). Several themes emerged from the drawings. The children requested that the schools possibly have physical features such as animal-related features (eg, petting zoo or farm), trees, plants and gardens, varying forms of water, and, for the male participants, elements of sports. Students also requested that schools be environmentally aware, with solar or wind power and climate control. The use of colour was also a key feature, and many students requested the presence of rainbows as an essential feature. The findings of this arts-based exploration “could result in the creation of learning spaces where more imaginative pedagogical relationships and student-centred pedagogical styles can be implemented” (Bland and Sharma-Brymer 2012, 83).

Another process that emerges from engagement in drawing is the concept of graphic–narrative play, as Wright (2007a) illustrates in her study. Through a meaningful drawing experience, children engage in self-narration (Wright 2007a), or cocreate narratives around the images drawn (Hallam, Lee and Das Gupta 2014). This self-narration continues the story or perspective that they are presenting on paper. Through graphic–narrative play, the child takes “on multiple roles – author, artist, director, scripter, performer and narrator. ... The child can select when and how to play with all the available voices offered through the multimodal media” (Wright 2007a, 2–3). In her work with two elementary schools, Wright (2007a) randomly selected 108 five- to eight-year-olds to participate in a drawing session and subsequent discussions about what the future will be like. The children were able to effectively draw their imagined futuristic worlds, and through ongoing narration and dialogue were able to bring meaning to what was represented. The children made intentional choices about what objects and events to include in their drawings (Wright 2007a, 2007b).

There is meaning and purpose to the marks that children put onto a page when they are drawing. Through drawing, children are free to express themselves, their identities (Literat 2013), interpretations, experiences and imaginations (Carter and Ford 2013). Their voice or viewpoint is represented in the drawing (Mand 2012) because

they are creating the visual image. By honouring the purpose or function of the drawing we can begin to understand the child’s goals in its original creation (Wright 2007b). “As observers, we need to be conscious that drawings can serve various purposes and functions; we must try to understand the young artist’s goals in relation to these” (Wright 2007b, 38).

Arts-Based Research Through Mixed or Other Media in Educational Settings

Arts-based research with children and youth is not limited to the use of digital technology and drawing. It can also involve the use of sculpting, painting, drama, dance, mapping, construction, beading, stories, songs or poetry (Carter and Ford 2013; Frei 1999; Griebing 2011; Literat 2013; Kay 2013; Kirova and Emme 2008; O’Kane 2008; Wright 2007a) to express understanding and knowledge. As Kirova and Emme (2008) found in their study, photography lends itself quite readily to other forms of artistic expression. This is also the case for many arts-based research projects. Many times the artistic exploration is achieved through a mixture of artistic forms and media.

In one example, Mand worked for two years with one group of Bangladeshi children aged 9 to 10 in London to create art pieces representing their concepts of *home* and *away* for a final art exhibit. The children explored their understanding and interpretation of these concepts through sketches, printmaking, drawings and embroidery. “The choice of image that represented ‘home’ and ‘away’ was left entirely up to the children’s discretion and collectively speaking there was considerable variety in the images produced” (Mand 2012, 153). Through this exploration of mixed media the children began to develop and refine their understanding of *home* and *away* in relation to belonging, gender identities, forms of symbolic and material capital, and Bangladeshi culture.

Sonn, Grossman and Utomo used a participatory school-based arts program as a platform for youth from a refugee background to use photos, individual narratives and dance performances to tell their story and share their voice. This was part of an attempt to identify the refugees’ settlement experiences through the exploration of themes of well-being, belonging and inclusion, and their engagement with learning in the midst of their personal upheaval. Photo-elicitation allowed the participants to take photographs and select what they found to be important in their social worlds, and why it was personally meaningful (Sonn, Grossman and Utomo 2013). The use of arts-based education had a number of positive effects for the refugees, including greater social inclusion,

development of strong community relationships, and a sense of belonging and safety (Sonn, Grossman and Utomo 2013).

All of the examples presented above highlight the power of the arts. Individuals at any age, from any culture or background are able to choose the creative outlet that best reflects their thoughts, understandings, perspectives or outlooks. There is no right or wrong way to express such understandings, perspectives, thoughts or feelings through art. The process of their exploration through art involves (1) selection of the art medium to best reflect a thought or idea, (2) creation of the product and (3) explanation and reflection of the choices made. It is important to note that in using arts-based research in an educational setting the adult takes on the role of a facilitator (Wright 2007a).

[A]lthough students are working independently, the teacher in this approach is very active and engaged; she facilitates the process by setting parameters, giving guidelines, steering students toward information, ideas and sources of inspiration, and organizing group dialogues. All of these methods not only keep the process manageable and on-track, but also enable students to take their ideas way beyond expectations. (Marshall 2014, 18)

Why Arts-Based Research Is Important

The results and findings generated from arts-based research with children and youth can add important knowledge to various disciplines. In the field of education, the outcomes and results of the research have the potential to affect the direction of educational policies, curriculum reform and provision of services (Alderson 2008; Bland and Sharma-Brymer 2012). Recognizing the role of children and youth also respects their rights (Alderson 2008), and this practice can continue to improve their position and influence within society. As with any research, limitations or hindrances can occur when children are not fully engaged or recognized as researcher or co-researcher. However, for children who truly participate in the role of researcher or co-researcher, some powerful, transformative processes occur. Through arts-based research, children are honoured as competent (Schulte 2011) and capable researchers. They are not actively or passively silenced or excluded because of perceived inexperience or immaturity (Alderson 2008). Rather, they have a voice and place in “both the artistic process and the development of product” (Gattenhof and Radvan 2009, 213) and a right to be involved in the decisions that will affect them (O’Kane 2008). This

process also allows children to select the creative outlet that best reflects them and to express their viewpoints (Griebling 2011).

These products can also represent a new truth (Mand 2012) or meaning as reflected in the art process and product. “Such open-ended, personal forms of knowing, expressing and communicating unleash and reveal children’s deep meaning, multiple perspective-taking and fluidity of thought” (Wright 2007a, 24). When children are given the opportunity to talk about their creations and subjective meanings (Kaoruko and Sjöberg 2012), the processes involved in complex decision making, information gathering and problem solving (Griebling 2011; Pavlou 2013) can also become apparent to all. Allowing children the opportunity to share in a social context with others is also important because this process has the potential to generate more accurate realities, as children may gain greater confidence to participate, speak and share their perspective (Barrett, Everett and Smigiel 2012). Engaging in arts-based research can also allow both children and outsiders to take on multiple perspectives and consider alternative positions or new truths (Mand 2012). Regarding children as competent and capable researchers also allows their voice, perspectives and insights to come to the forefront (Alderson 2008; Kirova and Emme 2008; Sonn, Grossman and Utomo 2013).

The use of art enables participants to tell their stories, construct new knowledge and express multifaceted meanings (Kay 2013). This can have a lasting impact on the individuals participating in the research process because they are empowered to manage their realities (Lee 2013). This can also occur for outsiders who experience the arts-based research secondarily. Arts-based research products are the personal stories and representations that belong to the individual; however, they can become a powerful symbol for those who can identify with the story (Kirova and Emme, 2008) being told or the themes that are being explored. Even viewing visual arts allows the development of creativity in thinking, and this permits the viewer to make connections and to think differently and innovatively (Pavlou 2013).

Although arts-based research continues to be a powerful instrument to successfully explore a variety of issues and themes, there can be constraints on the true representation or accuracy of the data presented. One of the limitations is a tendency to involve children for the appearance of involving them (Alderson 2008), and “even if children state that they feel involved, this does not automatically mean that they are actually part of the research process” (Kaoruko and Sjöberg 2012, 15). This

occurs when adult or outsider opinions, requirements, parameters or agendas determine what should be displayed, where to display the art and how to put the art together. When this occurs, the children's voices, experiences and perspectives become silenced or muted. In the event of a public exhibition or performance, the children can also be silenced if pieces and products are purposely excluded (Mand 2012). This could be because the pieces are thought to be of "poor" quality, or the children are considered vulnerable or lacking competence (Spyrou 2011). As a result, the art could "be edited, re-formulated or truncated to fit our agendas" (Roberts 2008, 264), leading to a misrepresentation or misreporting of the children's views (Alderson 2008).

Classroom Applications and Conclusion

Using art is a powerful way to conduct research, investigate, inquire and explore the social and cultural contexts and lived realities of children within educational settings. It continues to grow in popularity because the child is viewed as a socially competent and capable individual (Popa and Stan 2013; Schulte 2011). The use of various forms of art provides even young children with an appropriate channel to express their insights and knowledge (Kirova and Emme 2008) and multiple ways of interpreting their world (Marshall 2014) and how they make meaning (Barone and Eisner 2012). Recognizing that the adult and the child are equals allows the child's perspectives, experiences and views to come to the forefront and be considered valid (Alderson 2008; Barrett, Everett and Smigiel 2012; Kirova and Emme 2008; Sonn, Grossman and Utomo 2013). Children then have the power to take on multiple perspectives, consider alternative positions and learn new truths (Mand 2012).

Through continued use of photography, drawing and mixed media in the classroom, young children can easily take on the role of researcher or co-researcher with greater flexibility in how they document and represent their thinking. There are several themes or ideas that educators could use as a starting point for facilitating arts-based research with young children (Marshall 2014). One possible theme could focus on the investigation of children's perspectives and opinions regarding their learning spaces or their imagined environments. Similarly to Popa and Stan's (2013) project, young children in the classroom could use digital photography to capture and represent what elements at school are important to them. A second broad theme could focus on examining the perspectives and

experiences of young children in their school life, social worlds, or connections between home and school. One way to do this would be to give the children a concept such as *school* or *home*, as Mand (2012) did, and have them use various forms of art to investigate what these ideas represent to them. Finally, a third theme might involve an exploration of identity, belonging or culture. Similarly to Mand's (2012) project, art explorations with young children could focus on what it means to belong, what their culture represents to them or how they view their identity. Each of these possible explorations through art can provide a way for young children to have their voices, experiences, ideas, viewpoints and perspectives heard and valued (Mand 2012; Spyrou 2011).

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The Connection Between Art and Language: A Place for Multiple Literacies

Vanessa Fraser and Heather Miller

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Children need the freedom to appreciate the infinite resources of their hands, their eyes, and their ears, the resources of forms, materials, sounds and colours ... Creativity seems to emerge from multiple experiences, coupled with a well-supported development of personal resources, including a sense of freedom to venture beyond the known.

—Loris Malaguzzi

The Connection Between Art and Language: A Place for Multiple Literacies

Young children draw on their senses in every experience. As their vocabulary grows, they develop a means to describe their experiences, learn from others and make connections.

As Malaguzzi¹ reminds us in his comments on Reggio philosophies (Edwards, Gandini and Forman 1993), through well-supported development of their own resources (hands, eyes, ears) and intentional structure of the environmental resources (forms, materials, sounds, colours), children can appreciate a deeper meaning from their experience, make

connections between themselves and the world around them, and commune with others within their shared experiences and environments (Edwards, Gandini and Forman 1993). With this intention in mind, we strive on a daily basis, as educators, to keep daily experiences lively and engaging for all of our students—using all of our senses—while supporting their language growth and development along the way.

The research question we aimed to answer through this classroom-based research project was “How do regular, intentional, one-on-one interview conversations with an adult assist students in growing in their ability to talk critically and reflectively about their artwork?” The following discussion will examine the pedagogical background behind our research, describe the process we followed and, finally, give concrete qualitative examples of our findings.

Why Art and Language?

One of the daily pleasures of many young students lies in their abilities to create—whether construction of vehicles at the block centre, stories at dramatic play, shared communities in Lego, or drawings made to bestow upon those they love. Left unattended, children’s play and creation evolve within the parameters of their own skills and experiences. However, when their peers, environment or teachers give additional intention and attention to their processes, there can be dramatic growth as a result of these conversations and supports.

Such growth is a common experience for anyone engaging with art. For example, while visiting an art gallery, the viewer naturally wonders about the artists—their life stories, their communities, the stories they have to share. Similarly, as our youngest artists develop, we need to know more

¹ Loris Malaguzzi (1920–94) was a 20th-century Italian early education specialist.

about them in order to fully understand their work and, most important, to help them move forward by identifying next steps for their learning.

Just as the viewer of a work in an art gallery achieves a fuller understanding of the art after reading the artist's description of the work, other types of art may be better understood through communication in any of the many possible and diverse modes of communication. For example, a listener could read a synopsis before hearing an opera, or listen to an interview with a musician before hearing a concert. Communication must take multiple forms, or multiple languages in the Reggio sense, for us to really understand the work and the artist who created it.

The formal definition of *art* is "the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power" (www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/art). In Alberta's program of studies, expectations for creative expression can be condensed into two main expectations: "The child explores self-expression through creative thought and through language, art, movement, music and drama" and "... becomes aware of various forms of expression" (Alberta Education 2008).

When we consider words like *imagination*, *beauty* and *emotional power*, and when we reflect

on our past classroom art activities, we must acknowledge that the confines of our procedural instructions and specific expectations sometimes left little room for imagination or emotional power. One of the key considerations of this project was to meaningfully take steps to separate the products of *art* and *craft* and to ensure that students are given regular opportunities to explore and express themselves as artists—supported by offers of technique refinement, exposure to experts and their work, and the use of high-quality artists' materials and tools. Typically in the kindergarten classroom, craft lessons result in carbon copies of the teachers' product, and leave very little room for personal expression or choice. The distinction for us was to provide open-ended explorations connected to the arts, resulting in individualized processes and products.

It is with this intention that we chose to pay particular attention to the artwork of our students this year, and to use it as a vehicle to support language development in our kindergarten classroom. In this context, the subject of art worked well as a vehicle for language development for several reasons. First, in the artistic process there is no right or wrong way to do things. This means that all of our students, regardless of their ability, could participate fully in creating artwork that represented their ideas and imaginations. Second, the artistic realm is largely based on the personal choices of the



Students had the opportunity to explore repetition, colours, and shapes after examining *Desserts*, by Wayne Thiebaud. (Photo by Heather Miller)



After exploring *Desserts*, by Wayne Thiebaud, Chase explores his use of repetitive shapes to communicate that even common things have artistic value. (Photo by Heather Miller)

artist, and in society this is a topic of lively conversation. In the classroom this meant there was much for students and teachers to discuss, and students had the opportunity to speak to their work in a way that would have been much more difficult if we had chosen to focus on a subject like numeracy, in which students with foundational background knowledge are quickly separated from those who don't. Finally, students have pre-existing, personal connections to their creations; that is to say that they already have stories, ideas, scenarios and thoughts about their artwork. We were able to use this as a building block to encourage the students to begin talking about their ideas in a more concise and meaningful way. The open-ended nature of artistic endeavours served our purpose well.

Furthermore, students were challenged to grow in their appreciation of art by looking critically at their own work, the work of their peers and the works of masters. The goal was to help students notice and appreciate that artwork is an individual experience, and that just as all artists are different, each of our works of art differs—something to celebrate and take note of, not something to shy away from! Alongside their artistic development, the students' language skills development was challenged as well. The artistic and language development processes were intertwined, and were structured to reinforce each other as the students grew.

Methods: Context and Process

This research took place in an elementary school in Calgary, Alberta. The larger educational landscape is informative in situating the classroom. Our class in the 2013/14 school year represented a diverse population of students, including 32 per cent with a mild or moderate Code 30 for speech and language development, 21 per cent presenting severe speech and language delays,² and 37 per cent dual language learners.³ Recognizing this class profile, language development was a key focus in our classroom, and we took a variety of intentional approaches to help our students reach their goals, stated in individual program plans (IPP) or otherwise. At the provincial level, 24.1 per cent of students experience difficulty or great difficulty in language and thinking skills, while 31.4 per cent are lagging in communication and general knowledge

skills (Early Child Development Mapping Project Alberta 2014). While confronting this reality on a daily basis, we must look at ways to narrow the gap between those who have the basic age-appropriate skills and those who don't.

The setting for this research was a class of 56 kindergarten students, with three teachers and one educational assistant. Given the class size, we decided to divide our large group into three smaller groups of 18 to 19 students for the purpose of the art lessons. We had noticed that some of our more reserved and/or challenged students rarely felt comfortable sharing their ideas in the large group setting; we wanted to give them the opportunity to speak and give ourselves a better chance of being able to record, document and listen to the work happening around us.

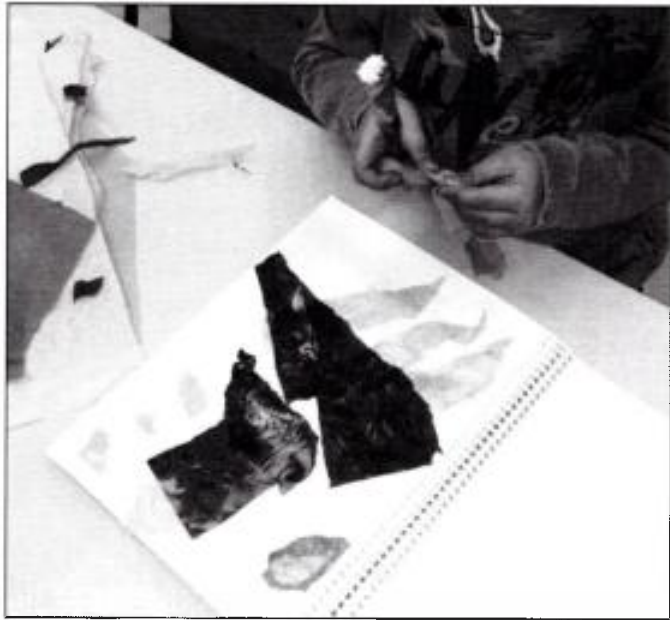
Our main focus throughout this research process was language development and how we can use art as a framework in which to weave interesting, in-depth conversations, develop and introduce new vocabulary, and promote personal storytelling. Language development is a central focus in almost every kindergarten classroom, and is critical in relation to children's ability to move forward as future readers and writers. Trehearne (2012) discusses the critical importance of oral language development and how it pertains to literacy development:

The preschool child's language development is vital to the child's progress in reading. We are concerned not only with the development of vocabulary, but with the range of flexibility of the patterns of sentences that the child is able to control. The child's development in this behavior is critically dependent on the preschool opportunities the child gets to converse with an adult. (Trehearne 2012)

With this in mind, we very intentionally planned how to guide meaningful conversations with our students and how to ensure that there were opportunities for every voice to be heard. Our classroom comprised students from a wide variety of backgrounds who have different personal experiences, learning styles and abilities to express themselves. We have students who are very comfortable speaking in front of the large group, and we have students who are very nervous or shy when it comes to speaking publicly. This is part of the reason that we decided to have two different

² Student characteristics derived from Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals—Preschool 2, administered by speech-language pathologist, as well as the Early Years Evaluation, administered in October 2013 by teachers and used by teaching staff to plan both individual and classroom strategies.

³ Student characteristics derived from parent disclosure of first language origins upon district registration.



Students explored using paper in new ways by cutting, rolling, folding, and ripping after examining *How Beautiful Life Is when It Gives Us Riches*, by Frida Kahlo. (Photo by Heather Miller)

types of conversations. The first was a large-group conversation in which students were invited to give their input to the topic at hand and to share and grow ideas with their peers and teachers. The second was an individual conversation that took place between one teacher and one student and was based on a specific set of questions that the teachers identified beforehand.

For these same reasons, students were arranged into two smaller groups, with two teachers (one leading and one facilitating/recording). We followed a basic structure for our art sessions:

1. Group carpet time (large-group discussions):
 - a. Introductory game/activity
 - b. Show a piece of art on the interactive whiteboard or a poster
 - i Ask students for general observations: What do you see? What do you notice?
 - ii Tell students additional information about the artist/artwork
 - iii Ask additional guided questions to facilitate discussion
 - c. Demonstrate a related technique
2. Individual work time for creating/exploration of the technique
3. One-on-one interviews about student work, processes and problem solving (individual discussions)
4. Exhibition, documentation and display of student work

Group Conversations

The large-group conversations took place before any artwork was created. They were designed to introduce new vocabulary and art techniques, to encourage the use of imagination and to generate ideas and questions that were personally relevant and thoughtful. We structured these conversations to be casual and informal, in the hope that students would feel comfortable expressing their own ideas, listening to the ideas of others, thinking about the ideas of others and adding their own ideas. Throughout these conversations we were very cognizant of the role of the teacher. We intentionally made efforts to avoid leading the conversation too much, but rather tried to create an environment in which the students were the main contributors to the conversation and in which they valued the input of their peers.

The following transcript is a small portion of one such large group conversation, based around Romare Bearden's painting *Maudell Sleet's Magic Garden*. In the first part of the conversation, the children have not yet seen the artist's work, but are having a conversation about what they would have in their own imaginary magic garden. Part way through, the teacher puts up a photo of the painting, and the conversation continues:

Teacher: What would be in your magic garden?

There are no wrong answers.

Student: Somebody climb up the little leaf magically!

Student: A magic tree where chocolate grows out of the tree!

Student G: A magic flowers turn to lollipops!

Student: She just grows flowers, and bunnies!

Student: Magic potatoes can make you fly!

Student: Like if you eat the magic potatoes you can fly!

Student: The roses talk.

Student: Giant people, giants in the garden.

Teacher: Fun ideas, now can I show you a picture? This picture is called *Magic Garden* ... Let's take a look at all the details in this picture. The person who made this picture called it a magic garden; what do you think about when you look at this picture? (Teacher puts image of painting on interactive whiteboard.)

Student: There's magic.

Teacher: What do you think, M?

Student M: [silent]

Teacher: OK—I'm going to come back to you in one minute; try to think about it.

Student: Is she living there? Maybe it's grandma's?

Student: It's like a wood house, 'cause it has wooden stairs.

Student: My backyard have a woods.

Teacher: It kind of looks like this house is not in Calgary.

Student M: I think it's far away, 'cause there's only one house there.

Student: I never seen a house like that.

Student: Maybe there's magic roses.

Student: The trees are woods—that means you have to go in the woods, you have to search for a bear.

Upon reading through this conversation it is evident that the ideas of the students built on one another. The focus of this conversation was on using imagination and expressing ideas. It was fine if the ideas were fanciful or unrealistic, as we were asking the student to imagine a world that was beyond reality. (In other lessons, the focus was on more concrete, realistic observations.) Some students even started posing questions upon looking at the artwork, and others responded, trying to make sense of it together. The focus was on expressing ideas that made sense to them, and to use their words to communicate their ideas in a way that others could understand, and to shift away from black-and-white, recall-based or concrete answers.

Perhaps one of the most important factors in guiding these group discussions was the use of prompts and being aware of which students were voluntarily contributing and those who needed to be a little more formally invited to share their ideas. For example, when the teacher in this scenario noticed that Student M was not participating, she directly



*After exploring *The Gourmet* by Pablo Picasso, Jakob explores making new tints of blue by adding white in varying degrees. (Photo by Heather Miller)*

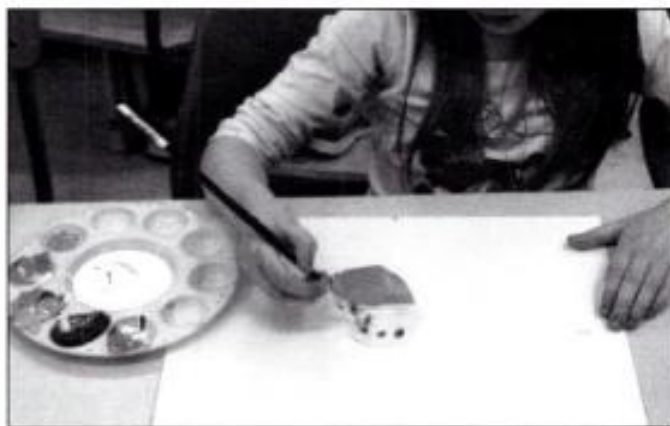
asked him for his input. When he had nothing to say, she told him that she would be coming back to him in a minute, so he should be thinking about it. Shortly thereafter, he volunteered an idea himself, without a direct request from the teacher. By offering open-ended conversation-starters, we supported the ideas of the students without trying to guide them forcefully in any one direction.

Individual Conversations

The individual conversations took place after the students had completed their artwork. The aim was to have students reflect on the choices they had made and tell about the process they had followed to create their artwork. Below are the questions that were asked individually to all students upon completion of their artwork:

- Tell me about your artwork.
- Tell me about how you made it.
- Where did you get your ideas from?
- What materials did you use to make it?
- Did you run into any problems when making your artwork?
- How did you solve the problem?
- What do you like best about your artwork?

We intentionally started these conversations with a very broad statement, "Tell me about your artwork," and continued to keep the questions broad and open ended, so that students were not held back by our questions; instead, the questions had multiple possible answers and could be answered differently by each student based on what was most meaningful to the student. The following



*Students created paintings by beginning with one colour and adding varying amounts of white, as inspired after examining *The Gourmet* by Pablo Picasso. (Photo by Heather Miller)*

excerpts are from our conversations with three students, all of whom were at varying levels of understanding and expression.

Student H is an inquisitive dual-language learner who is often very hesitant to share her ideas in large group settings. Student M is older than many of his peers and usually refrains from talking because of his severe articulation delay and difficulty recalling relevant vocabulary. Student G has a colourful personality and loves to tell stories and engage with others when he can. He has worked intensely with his teachers concerning social communication, expressing his needs and understanding and respecting the needs of others, and language basics such as the appropriate use of pronouns. All three experienced communication challenges in different ways, but similarities existed between how they manifested on a daily, conversational level. In conversation during the first two weeks they described their artwork this way:

Student H: I made a house. I made grass. A window and a chimney.

Student M: So, I was trying to make a little bit dark and the apple a little bit.

Student G: I make it when first I put the plastic and I have these two and I have these two and that one and I got some glue there and I wipe it off and then I make these water and I make and I have this one and I make that—it almost looks like a seashell and it's cool and I like this puffy eyeball.

While all three students have different backgrounds and learning challenges, all three struggled to use descriptive or specific vocabulary in describing their work. As with any practised experience, all three developed more confidence and brought meaning to their work as their learning developed over the course of the next four weeks. The following excerpt is from a conversation after those four weeks:

Student H: This is the ocean and these are the little fishies and this is the octopus. Um, one of these are shark, this one [points]. This octopus is going to eat this shark. These are the waves.

Student M: [My picture is] when the downtown sinked. Everything flooded. Water everywhere. I was putting paint everywhere so water can sink all the buildings and stuff ... I got my ideas from thinking. I was thinking about ... I drew it, um, before when I drew this, I drew on the buildings so they could sink ... I saw it with my mom, it was up a hill and we was seeing downtown by it. There wasn't water [up] there though. It was where people play hockey ...

Student G: So, first I put a purple paper and after that I put some grass and some blue water, and after that I put a grey tongue and a pink eyeball and a sun and you helped me with that and the cloud. And that's everything! I made it because my dad just got that snake and then I made it. That's how I know how to make a snake. [I learned it] from my dad. He says "How to make a snake: put a loooooong body and have a long tongue and the eye and some grass and water and some clouds and sun." Okay, so I put some glue and I press it with my finger. Like a toothbrush. No, no, not a toothbrush, that would be silly! What's it called again? A paintbrush!

In describing their artistic processes, they began to recall personal experiences (learning that sharks can be eaten by octopuses, seeing the local flooding during the previous summer from atop a hill, having a pet snake) and used more detailed vocabulary to share with others the thoughts and processes behind making their artwork.

Discussion

The examples provided above are just a small sample of the growth and development we observed in all of our students throughout the course of this project. The skills and abilities that they developed in discussing their work, thinking critically about their choices, developing new vocabulary, and talking with their peers and teachers about their experiences using more detail began to spill over into their other classroom work. We learned through this process that the intentional questioning periods were helping students talk not just about their artwork, but about their thoughts, ideas, motivations and personal stories in general. For example, when listening to children talk with each other during centre activities (block centre, playdough centre and so on), we noticed them asking each other more meaningful questions like "How did you build that?" "Was it hard?" and "Why did you build it that way?" It was an exciting process to see the students go through—it was if we were watching the walls between them open up, and watching them engage and interact with each other in a whole new way. These conversations between students began to pop up all over the classroom and began to spark new collaborative friendships among students who were interested in growing an idea together. Students were taking ownership of their ideas and work, and were finding ways to solve problems and communicate their needs. For example, students were thinking of ideas for new

centre activities that they wanted to design for their friends, they were communicating to teachers about the materials they would need and they were creating a process for other students to follow at their new centre.

We observed students who had been typically quiet, reserved and unsure of themselves coming out of their shells, expressing more and more ideas to their teachers in the one-on-one setting, and even beginning to share ideas with the large group on a more regular basis. We observed outgoing students who loved to talk thinking more critically, using more specific or descriptive vocabulary and sharing ideas that were more concise and on topic. Through their experiences in the art lessons, students were challenged to use a variety of new art materials and techniques. This resulted in students becoming more excited to try new things and experiment with new materials and techniques, and not shying away from things new or unfamiliar. We decided to create an *atelier*, or art studio, space filled with high-quality art supplies that the students could use during centre time at their own discretion. Before we knew it, students were buzzing about this new space, signing up for specific times and thinking about how they would use their time at the atelier to make their own creation using materials and techniques of their own choosing.

Taking the time to conduct these large-group and individual conversations was an invaluable use of our teaching time and benefited all of our students. While it was difficult on a daily basis to find time to have these meaningful, intentional, individual conversations, we recognized that it really helped us to better understand all of our students and to guide their individualized programming accordingly. Often in the hustle and bustle of a busy classroom, our most reserved and quiet students can go unnoticed or unacknowledged for long stretches of time. Making sure that we had these individual conversations with each student after each work period ensured that we connected with each of these children individually for at least a few minutes that given day. Conversely, sometimes our most talkative children are not challenged enough to refine their ideas and communicate them effectively. Having these individual conversations encouraged them to stop and think about the information they wanted to communicate, and to do so in a clear and concise fashion. These intentional questioning and conversation periods have been invaluable to our teaching practice and will be a permanent fixture in our teaching process. Through these intentional conversations, we are eager to learn more about student voice, ideas, connections, and wonderings for years to come!

Conclusion

At the outset of our project, we had one goal in mind—to further support the language development of all of our students in a way that was accessible and challenging to everyone. Specifically, we looked at key areas of appropriate language development, including using prepositions, increasing vocabulary, following directions and sequencing, together with the descriptors incorporated in our art program. We note, however, that we could have incorporated these into any aspect of the program of studies—environment and community awareness, citizenship and identity, mathematics, or personal and social responsibility—just as easily within a similar structure of investigation, questioning and exploration.

Our process began with a consistently scheduled shared art critique and evaluation of ideas, inspiration and works of artists, followed by an exploration of techniques, first as a group and later individually. Having shared a practice of verbalizing an interpretation of the works, the tools and the process, our students were empowered and more confident to do the same on their own. After following such a routine for a number of sessions, we found that our students were more likely to connect with their peers and school community about their work, artistic and otherwise, through exhibiting their work both formally and informally to others. As their teachers, we were ecstatic to see a steady increase in their language abilities alongside impassioned motivation for communicating with others.

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Pages from Our Diaries ...

Lessons from the Energy and Honesty of Children

Janice Sheets

Janice Sheets is a now-retired teacher and administrator in Lethbridge School District No 51.

I often consider myself fortunate to have been involved in a profession that has brought me such joy, challenged me to learn and to be flexible, made me look at things differently and taught me so much about myself.

After 40 years of teaching, mainly K-6, and administration, I have learned many lessons—from children, parents and colleagues. When I first started teaching I was quick to judge parents who did not meet all of the expectations that I had of them. I still see that some children need more than what a parent may provide, but I now know that I have not yet met any parents who aren't doing the best they can within the circumstances in which they live. I gradually realized that it was my job to support them and their children as best I could. It was not my place to judge them by my standards, but to work with them as a team to help their child to experience success.

As a beginning teacher I saw quickly that the children who learned easily moved forward despite me, and those who did not were not progressing ... I constantly thought, "How could I do things differently so that students all would move forward under my care?" I learned quickly that I needed to find materials that would help children become literate no matter how old they were or what the roadblocks were. I discovered that *using literature to teach across the curriculum* was the key: enticing children to love reading and writing as much as I did, showing them my struggles by modelling and listening to their voices of frustration and elation so that we could move forward together. *Building relationship* was the key to their success and mine. No matter the age, when I truly listened, some measure of growth happened.

I built a learning framework for them with expectations and goals, and through modelling, they saw what was expected. With this framework and ongoing support, I was then able to give them space to create, to respond truly, to think, to read, and to write from their own experiences. They developed ownership of their learning through discussion and taking responsibility no matter what grade level they were.

When I forgot to listen (and I did), things did not go well.

It makes me sad to see how often our children are plugged in now. I believe that for them to become thinking, creative, responsible learners, *they need to be a part of a vibrant thinking and learning community*. For many children, school is the only community they know; it should be a platform for them to be able to find out who they are through expression of ideas in a secure and loving environment.

I miss the energy and honesty of children and know that over the years they have taught me far more than I have taught them. As teachers we need to be open to the voices and ideas of children and to respect them for who they are, so they have the confidence and the knowledge to take care of this fast-paced world in which we now live.

Dramatic Play as a Meaning-Making and Story-Making Activity

Gisela Wajskop and Shelley Stagg Peterson

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Dramatic play supports children's meaning making. It provides rich, complex and varied experiences for students' conceptual learning, story making and overall literacy development. As such, dramatic play, defined by Smilansky (1968) and Elkonin (2005) as play in which children take on pretend roles, has an important role in teaching and learning in preschool and primary classrooms. Alongside the many curriculum-directed learning activities of a typical school day, dramatic play offers children the possibility of choosing and controlling the directions that their interactions and learning will take as they create stories together (Brougère 2009).

In their dramatic play, children use explicit language, metalanguage and narrative language, which are important to early literacy (Pellegrini and Galda 2000). Children select, develop and put their imagination and knowledge into practice without direct adult intervention. Indeed, recent research shows that children's play may be more developed in the presence of peers than in presence of adults (Pellegrini and Galda 2000). This allows children to think about and solve problems free from the situational pressures of their immediate reality (Vygotsky 1978). As such, play is fundamental to children's literacy and conceptual and social learning, and should have a place in preschool and primary classrooms.

Starting with a play context in a Brazilian childhood education centre, we draw on our observations in Brazilian and Canadian classrooms and the literature on dramatic play to present our argument. We end with suggestions for classroom practice that makes the most of the meaning-making and story-making qualities of dramatic play.

Dramatic Play as a Meaning-Making Practice

Five-year old-Diana, Maria and Juliana (all names are pseudonyms) are playing with José in a house centre in their suburban São Paulo daycare centre. They prepare breakfast with materials from the play kitchen and discuss what food they should have for breakfast. After they eat, the three girls prepare to go off to work as housekeepers, but José makes no move to leave the pretend house. He says, "No, no. I'm going to stay home and watch TV." Diana grabs him by the arm and says, "No! You have to go to work! Everybody has to work!" José replies, "But I don't have any work." Immediately, Diana opens a make-believe door and stands on the street, hailing an imaginary taxi. José looks at her with surprise as Diana shoves him into the taxi, saying to the taxi driver, "Take him to work!"

In this play context, the four children are rewriting stories of their lives, constructing new understandings about roles and relationships among family members within an imaginary world. The children are not simply recreating lived experiences and observations of everyday interactions. They are not merely retelling stories told by friends or relatives. Nor are they only re-enacting stories read to them by others or viewed on television and movies. Rather, they are giving new meaning to their observations of adult family members' work and absence of work outside the home by negotiating and using explicit language to communicate their ideas.

José's observations lead to an understanding that the unemployed household members stay home

while others head off to work. Diana has drawn a different conclusion: "I'm saying that everybody has to work!" She attempts to revise the meaning proposed by José by bringing in an imagined object and character with a particular role, that of a taxi driver who finds work for people who are unemployed. Through the imagined play situation, adult practices that do not seem right to the children can be reimagined. Sawyer and DeZutter (2009) explain that "before children can read and write, improvisation during play provides an opportunity for children to interact with and operate on the texts they encounter in the wider culture" (p 25). This negotiation of meaning between José and Diana occurs because they disagree "with their peers' interpretations of roles and events being enacted. ... Interpretative negotiations typically involved reflecting on the nature of the language a character used and making alternative suggestions. In other words, the process of negotiations during dramatic play results in children reflecting metacognitively on the social and linguistic process of their interactions, as evidenced by their use of such meta-terms as *say*, *think*, *talk* and *words*" (Pellegrini and Galda 2000, 60).

The children's dramatic play has provided a context for the children to make connections between the multifaceted and fragmented understandings that are generated from the immediate or vicarious experience, and to gain a deeper understanding of "different characteristics of the assumed role, its responsibilities and the relations with other roles and to generalize these understandings to other situations" (Wajskop 2009, 22). Dramatic play also allows the children to take up features of adult roles that are puzzling, interesting or striking or have some other reason to be salient to the children at the time of their play, and come to a deeper understanding of what the possibilities are for the adults they will become and to come to understand the interactions and roles of adults in their lives (Göncü et al 1999). In sum, dramatic play is a meaning-making practice in which children engage in multiple thinking processes (eg, inferring, reflecting, generalizing, applying) to construct understandings of their social and physical worlds.

Play as Story Making

We argue that children's dramatic play is a story-making practice, as it involves children's use of different kinds of objects, together with explicit language, metalanguage and narrative language. In their dramatic play, children create characters in imagined settings and imagine characters' motivations for actions that are woven together into plots. The imagined characters' actions often align

with the social conventions of the real-life roles taken on by the imagined characters. In their play, children revise the plots, exploring relationships between characters, problems and ideas through the play activities. In this way, children's dramatic play is a short story in action that children can later dictate or write on their own.

Children use specific, explicit language in their interactions in order to explain the roles and relationships of the imagined characters. They support the play using gestures, such as opening an imaginary door, and use objects at hand as tools to represent objects in the imagined setting. For example, in a dramatic play centre in a rural Canadian classroom, Markus uses a broken curling iron as a sword and an ironing board cover as a shield in a sword fight. He and his classmates at the centre create a new narrative from those that they have experienced vicariously in family storytelling, literature, television and movies, other texts, and lived experiences. Their use of an object to represent something else that has no real-life functional similarities and very few physical similarities parallels the symbolic thought needed to be able to write. As such, children's symbolic transformations in play "strengthen children's general representational skills and prepare them to engage in the symbolic representation involved in writing" (Sawyer and DeZutter 2009, 22).

Pellegrini and Galda (2000) show that, on the one hand, functionally ambiguous objects (eg, pieces of wood) elicit young children's use of explicit language because the children need to explain and communicate with their peers the new meaning of the object they are using to play. For better explanation and communication with peers, children reflect on the meaning of words they have elected to use. Pellegrini and Galda (2000) explain that "when preschool children play with ambiguous props, they spend considerable effort verbally explicating the meaning of these props in play episodes. Consequently they do not have many cognitive resources to spend on embedding these individual transformations in longer, more involved themes" (p 61). On the other hand, explicit props/objects (eg, dolls) used intentionally in pretend play become a path for building more complex narratives and mature play as children use the language to negotiate meanings of rules, characters and plots that they play with. Similar pretend play story making occurs when children are introduced to narrative literature and movies, underscoring the importance of enriching children's preschool and primary school environment with stories and explicit objects, as well as materials that they can use to represent objects in the imagined settings created in their play.

The symbolic thinking that leads to the creation of the dramatic play narrative parallels the symbolic thinking involved in writing (Pellegrini and Van Ryzin 2007). Additionally, children's audience awareness is nurtured through play, as children must make their ideas clear and appealing in order to convince peers to take them up in the play (Sawyer and DeZutter 2009). They have to think about what others know and understand as they introduce new characters, objects, themes and actions for the play. As Paley (1981) explains when assessing Wally's dramatic play that follows from stories he has dictated in her kindergarten class in Chicago, dramatic play makes many demands on children's knowledge of language and the conventions of dialogue. The children's contributions to imagined characters' dialogue have to fit with the structure of the play narrative and must make sense to peers so that they can follow with the next action/contribution to the dialogue.

Three Principles for Bringing Dramatic Play into Primary Classrooms

The views we have presented on dramatic play have led us to develop three principles for building on the meaning-making and story-making potential of children's dramatic play: (1) teachers should observe and record children's meaning making and story making in dramatic play settings, (2) observations of children's meaning making and story making in their dramatic play should inform the planning of learning activities, and (3) teachers should create classroom environments that allow children to control the direction of their dramatic play.

An understanding that dramatic play offers content to inform teachers' planning leads to the principle that teachers should observe and listen to children's dramatic play to get a sense of the conceptual and social understandings that children are constructing in their play. These observations can serve as starting points for developing curriculum that is student centred, because it builds on what students know and can do (Rogers 2011). It is important, then, that teachers engage in what Dahlberg and Moss (2005) call a "pedagogy of listening" (p 98).

A pedagogy of listening may involve observing and listening to how children use objects to support their play. It would be helpful to note whether children use implicit or explicit objects. Children who use implicit objects develop a more abstract understanding of words because they have to use

metalinguage to negotiate with peers the meanings of words that they use to refer to the implicit objects. Explicit objects place children in a context where they are free from this negotiation and, as a result, can build a narrative centred on stories that they know about those objects (eg, a king's crown is worn by someone in the role of king, and there are certain expectations about the stories that can be created about kings, based on children's experience with literature, stories they have been told, movies and so forth). Teachers might also consider how children explain the meaning of the use of objects and characters' actions when they use implicit objects. They might also record whether children discuss the meanings of the words they use or their images of characters, for example.

A pedagogy of listening might also involve observing how children choose peers to engage in their dramatic play. This might include noting whether children are open to playing with children who are not close friends or whom they do not know well, for example. It might also involve observing how children engage in assigning or taking on roles and relationships among children who are friends and children whom they do not know well. Teachers could record these observations and add them as useful assessment information for gaining a holistic picture of children's learning.

A second principle is that teachers should use information gathered through observing children's play to plan learning activities that follow from the dramatic play. These activities include inviting children to tell and to write some of the narratives they have enacted in their dramatic play. For example, Claudete, the four Brazilian children's early childhood educator, gathered all the children together and started telling a story: "Once there was a family with four girls and one boy. They were making breakfast one morning and the girls were getting ready to go to work. The boy said he wasn't going to work. He wanted to stay home and watch TV." Recognizing this story, Maria piped up, "Nobody should stay at home. Everybody should go to work." The early childhood educator agreed, "Yes, and in the story, Diana grabbed the boy and shoved him into a taxi to make sure that he went to work." Making visible the story-making (representational) dimension of dramatic play, the teacher told the children that this story was created by Diana, Maria, Juliana and José in the house centre that morning.

Teachers might also encourage children to write stories placing the characters from their dramatic play in other social or imaginative contexts, or to write using other genres (eg, a guide to help José find a job in the play). Children might also draw

their characters or create figures of them using clay or other materials. They might create a mural or make implicit objects from everyday or scrap materials in the classroom to support their play.

A third principle is that play should be spontaneous, with the children in control of the starting point and the direction of the play. Their dramatic play might be drawn from something that happened in their lives outside the classrooms or it might come from curriculum learning in more teacher-directed parts of the school day. For example, children might explore or reflect on a concept introduced in a content area lesson. They might take up a theme or storyline, or include a character from a story read by the teacher. Regardless of the starting point for the dramatic play, the children should make the decision about what their dramatic play will be.

In Summary

In this paper we have argued that dramatic play is a narrative-building practice. In their dramatic play, children use objects that may or may not have a close functional and physical representation of the objects in the imaginary situation, and gestures to indicate actions that characters take in the imagined setting. Dramatic play is an enjoyable learning experience for children as they create stories and explore ideas, values and daily life through their dramatic play. Through creating stories, children develop their imaginations. They ask questions and reflect on peers' explanations and ideas. They use the explicit language that characterizes written language to communicate the roles and relationships of characters and objects in the imagined setting. As such, dramatic play is a rich linguistic practice that supports children's literacy.

Dramatic play is also a meaning-making practice in which children use metalanguage to negotiate meanings of implicit objects and gestures that represent objects and actions in the play. They use multiple thinking processes to explore new ideas and to make sense of their experiences and observations about storying and stories, about concepts, and about social and cultural expectations, assumptions, and relationships.

Dramatic play provides opportunities for children to explore and come to new understandings about experiences and observations from everyday life. Children create stories and gain symbolic understandings, particularly when using implicit objects in their dramatic play. Play should be viewed as quality pedagogy, regardless of the perspectives underlying teachers' instructional practices. Dramatic play has meaning to the child players that

is more readily evident when teachers adopt a pedagogy of listening. Because of these transformative qualities and because teachers can learn so much about their students' learning through observing dramatic play, providing regular opportunities for children to engage in dramatic play is a valuable investment for both children and teachers.

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Building Adult Capability with the Intent to Increase Executive Function and Early Literacy in Preschool Children

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Abstract

Well-developed executive function and early literacy skills are paramount for school and life success. Yet many adults (parents and early child educators) are unaware of what these skills entail and how they can be developed in preschoolers. In a pilot study, a curriculum designed to enhance executive function and early literacy in children ages two to five years was introduced to parents and the early childhood educator at a Stay and Play program running at the Coalhurst Parent Link site in southern Alberta. Although the study is still under way, preliminary reports suggest that parents and the early childhood educator have improved their understanding of executive function and early literacy and are enjoying the activities that build these skills in children.

Background

Executive function (EF) is a blanket term used to describe the important functions of the brain's executive—the prefrontal cortex. EF is considered to include attentional control, self-regulation, inhibition, working memory, goal setting,

planning, problem solving, mental flexibility and abstract reasoning (Diamond and Lee 2011). Likewise, *emergent literacy* (EL) refers to the literacy development that occurs *before* children learn to read. Both executive function and emergent literacy are fundamental to positive brain development and can be enhanced in the preschool years with targeted programming (Diamond et al 2007). It has been reported that fortifying EF and EL in the preschool period of life provides a means for improving school and life success by contributing to a lifetime of productive learning skills (Mustard 2009; Moffitt et al 2011). Fortunately, the preschool period of life is considered the most economically efficient period of human development for targeted intervention (Heckman 2007). In other words, investments in early childhood programming to promote brain development in preschoolers have a much higher economic benefit than interventions undertaken at any other time during the lifespan. This is in large part due to the high degree of brain plasticity that characterizes the first five years of life. We also know that the foundation for a child's life path is based on primary educators (ie, parents and early childcare educators) knowing and modelling these two critical learning skills. Yet, although mounting evidence is demonstrating the importance of well-developed EF and EL skills for kindergarten readiness and school success, most parents are unfamiliar with these terms and findings.

The Problem

Alberta Education has recently begun to test kindergarten children across the province for school readiness using the Early Development Instrument (EDI). The EDI tests five components of development: social competence, language and thinking skills,

physical health and well-being, emotional maturity, and communication skills and general knowledge. In a recent release of the EDI results for the County of Lethbridge (Early Child Development Mapping Project Alberta 2013), the Coalhurst area was shown to have a higher percentage of children entering kindergarten experiencing great difficulty (32.4 per cent) in one or more areas of development than both the rest of the county (20.5 per cent) and the provincial average (26.85 per cent). This result suggested a need for targeted early childhood and family support in this community.

Given the evidence that improvements in EF and EL can be made through intentional activities with preschool children (Bierman et al 2008; Bodrova, Leong and Akhutina 2011; Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University 2011; Ciccantelli and Vakil 2011; Diamond et al 2007; Diamond and Lee 2011; Kray and Ferdinand 2013; Müller et al 2009; Zelazo, Carlson and Kesek 2008), the authors sought to develop a curriculum consisting of activities (games) that have been reported to be effective in improving these skills.

In addition, several studies have examined the importance of intentional early parenting in the support and scaffolding of EF (Bernier, Carlson and Whipple 2010; Bibok, Carpendale and Müller 2009; Dennis 2006; Hammond et al 2012; Hughes and Ensor 2005, 2009; Landry, Smith and Swank 2002).

The goal of the current Child Strength study was to design a curriculum aimed at supporting EF and EL acquisition by providing adults who routinely engage with preschool children (ie, parents and early childhood educators [ECEs]) with pragmatic strategies to engage and immerse young learners in developmentally appropriate activities. A systematic review of the literature regarding skill development and outcomes for both EF and EL was conducted. Playful activities that were reported as effective in improving these skills were considered for inclusion in the curriculum. Step-by-step activity sheets were developed for each game and a paragraph detailing the EF and EL skills that were targeted for development was included to inform the parents about the purpose of the activity. The curriculum was introduced to parents during the Stay and Play program offered twice weekly at each Parent Link Centre site. The program received human ethics approval from the University of Lethbridge before the study was undertaken.

Pre- and Postassessment

All parents were asked to complete a demographic survey reporting on level of education, daily language interactions with their children and types

of play activities. This was a researcher-created form intended to capture the parental understanding of EL. In order to assess the EF, the Behavioural Rating for Executive Function—Preschool Version (BRIEF-P) (Gioia, Espy and Isquith 2003) was completed by parents for their child(ren) at the beginning of the program. The ECE in charge of the Stay and Play program conducted Ages and Stages (ASQ) evaluations of the participating children during the first three months of the project. This represents the baseline data to which the postassessment results will be compared. Both the BRIEF-P and the ASQ will be completed again at the conclusion of the project. At completion of the pilot project, parents were asked to respond to questions related to their increased awareness and understanding of EL and EF for their child(ren), as well as general feedback on the activities that were introduced in their weekly program. We intend to interview parents and to ask them to complete a parent engagement survey as a postprogram assessment.

The Program

The Child Strength program started with a parent information night geared toward developing in parents and early childhood educators in the targeted communities an understanding of the importance of EF and EL and how best to support their development. At the information night the audience was shown the short video *How Brains Are Built: The Core Story of Brain Development* (Alberta Family Wellness Initiative 2013) to raise awareness of the importance of early experiences and strong EF skills in a child's life. The video depicts EF as air traffic control and makes a case for having strong skills in this domain to prevent "collisions," or problems, later in life. A comment from one of the mothers attending the session was "My husband and I watched the brain video and we were very surprised that a little stress is okay. We thought no stress at all would be the best for our children. We loved the video—it was only five minutes long and it really touched us as parents."

Our pilot study featured a developmentally appropriate activity each week that was explained step-by-step on a printed handout sent home with the parent. The activities were selected to target a child's ability to resist distractions, control his or her thinking and engage in goal-directed activities that promote learning. The activity sheet also highlighted the features of EF and EL that were supported by the activity. The ECE was briefed about the activities before the parents were introduced to them, and the research team answered any questions that arose during that briefing. The entire curriculum

(ten activities) was offered over the course of ten weeks in the pilot study for the project.

We learned from the preliminary feedback that the activities seemed rushed and it was hard for parents and their children to embrace so many new activities over such a short time period. As a result, the study was altered to focus on one activity each month and the number of activities offered to parents was reduced from ten to eight. The current program started in September 2014 and will run until June 2015. Another new feature of the Child Strength program is a monthly visit by the research team to the Parent Link Centre at each site to talk with parents and answer any questions they may have.

In one example of the monthly activities, the “Stroop task” (Gerstadt, Hong and Diamond 1994), children are shown two pictures in a deck of ten that have opposite depictions (day/night, clean/dirty and so forth). They are required to respond to the picture, as quickly as possible, with the “false” answer. For example, when shown the sun, children should respond with “night”; when shown the moon, children should respond with “day.” A tally of correct answers is recorded and children are encouraged to increase their correct responses in the next hand. Once the child has mastered a deck of cards with a single theme, another theme may be added to the deck. Multiple themes can be added to a single deck as the child progresses. There are two main concepts supported by this activity—*inhibit* and *shift*. Children are required to inhibit their natural tendency to respond with the correct answer and to respect the oral instructions. They are required to shift their responses when more than one theme is added to a deck, in order to be successful. In addition, working memory is required by the children to remember the instructions, so that they know what they are supposed to be doing. Monitoring is required of the children to play the game (looking around, hearing feedback). The children must exhibit emotional control whether or not they complete the game successfully.

If the executive function skills are the air traffic control, then emergent literacy (EL) skills might be likened to airplanes—they enable the children to get to their destination of understanding and using effective communication. Given that EL skills during the early years are foundational for future academic success and effective language development, various activities were used in the Child Strength research study to further enhance EL skill development. It was ensured that the selected activities emphasized a range of skills such as oral language, alphabet knowledge, vocabulary building, phonological awareness and print concepts—all of which will

build upon and contribute to future conventional literacy skills acquired in the classroom. For instance, “circle time with lips and ears” (Bodrova, Leong and Akhutina 2011) requires children to take part in a turn taking, where pictures of ears and lips are distributed among the group. Children are encouraged to take turns listening (when given ears) and sharing information (when given lips) during circle time. Although this activity exercises various EF skills, it also promotes narrative and vocabulary skills pertaining to EL. More specifically, the child’s ability to share information or describe a story or event places great emphasis on narration. Additionally, vocabulary—both expressive and receptive—is being used, allowing the child to verbally share information on a decided topic, as well as the ability to isolate words required for understanding what is being heard by others. On the part of the listeners, listening comprehension is greatly promoted, because children must attend to directions prior to the start of the game and during the game.

A third example of a monthly activity is shown in Figure 1, which demonstrates the type of information given to the parent(s) with each activity.

ECE Comments

The researchers learned from the ECE at the test sites that she found her understanding of EF and EL was increased by her engagement with the program components (activities and handouts, researcher involvement, and parent discussions).

As the facilitator of the program called Stay and Play where parents with child(ren) ages 0–5 attend together, this project has enhanced my program. The project has given me activities to introduce to parents during circle time, snack time and/or free-time play. It has given me purpose and an understanding of the importance of what I do with the families that attend my programs. I find the parents are now using terms that before the project would have never happened. I am thrilled to be part of this project with the University of Lethbridge and to supply my parents with cutting-edge research and knowledge of early childhood development. Parents really want their children to reach their potential and are excited to receive the activities. I am truly shocked at what children are able to understand at such a young age. To see a 17-month-old child stop dancing and look at the card I was holding and put their hands on their head to match the card—I wish I had gotten that on video. It was amazing.

Parent Comments

The unsolicited parental comments provided to the ECE and set out below demonstrate that the parents are thoughtfully observing their children in play. This mindfulness parlays into awareness of how to adapt and adjust the activities, hence differentiating

them in order to engage their child in play situations to reinforce the learning opportunities. As stated by numerous parents, the EF and EL activities are used in unstructured ways as a means to interact with their children. It is plausible that the parents are forming a closer attachment [with their children] while reinforcing EF and EL skill development.

Red Light Green Light [5 minutes]

Activity Description: Younger children should attend to the oral instruction; older children should attend to the sign and oral instructions.

DIRECTIONS

1. Have the children line up (side by side) at one end of your space facing the adult.
2. The adult stands opposite of the children and faces the children.
 - a. Instructions are provided to the children at this point.
 - b. All children must attend to the oral directions and or to the colour sign
 - c. Children can either start the game at the back of the room and move toward the adult during the game (goal is to get to the adult) OR play within one-minute segments and see how much space the child can travel within the room.
3. When the adult shouts "Green Light!" the children walk quickly or run (depending on your space) towards the adult or around the room if that is the instruction (re 2c).
4. When the adult shouts "Red light!" the children stop where they are and freeze.
5. The adult continues to shout "Red light" or "Green light" until the children get to her and then all the children go back to the starting line and the game starts again.
6. Play the game again (attend to the directions in #2), but this time alter the words to words that are similar to red and green but change either the beginning sound or ending sound. For example, red = bread, said, Ned, stead; green = greel, Greek, greed.

Optional: Children also take turns being the ones to shout "Red light" and "Green light," to display the colour signs or, for older students, to create differing words for red and green.

SKILL DEVELOPMENT

EF: Supporting two big concepts: *Inhibit* to respect the red light and *Shift* the behaviour. In addition, *Working Memory* to remember the instructions about what you are supposed to be doing, *Monitoring* what you are doing (looking around, hearing feedback) and *Emotional Control* related to achieving successful completion of the game (or, alternatively, controlling one's emotions if not successful).

EL: Supporting two big concepts: *Listening comprehension* for attending to the directions prior to the game and during the game, and *Concepts about print* for connecting the words to the print on the signs. In addition, *Rapid naming of objects and colours* for identifying the signs, and *Phonological awareness or sensitivity* to distinguish between the sounds in the words. The signs were made by the ECE: green on one side and red on the other with go printed on the green side and stop printed on the red side. Parents were asked to construct one for their own use at home.

Figure 1: An example of an activity sheet handout distributed to parents of children participating in the program. The activity is detailed in step-by-step instructions with suggestions of alternate ways to play. The skill development section alerts the parent to the aspects of EF and EL that are supported by the activity.

My boys ages 2½ and 4½ play Red Light Green Light without support from me. They take turns; it is really fun to watch. That learning happens all day, every day. They are like sponges.

I added a twist to Red Light Green Light. The kids pretended to be mice and I held out cheese. When they saw cheese they could move (green light), when I covered the cheese they stopped (red light).

It's okay for a child to be disappointed, sad, frustrated before the age of five. They need to have all emotions when they are young, less likely to have road rage when they are an adult.

I have raised my expectations of what my child is able to do and understand.

The activities are not difficult to understand. I love how the activities are broken down into steps. I like the list of skills attached to each monthly activity. I know what they are working on.

Sometimes, we get a little bored in the house. The activities are a wonderful way to keep them busy on cold winter days. They seem to be happier after we play together.

I'm really interested in these activities. I have gone online and found more executive functioning activities for children five and under.

I find myself being intentional about how I interact and look for clues that their executive functioning is working. For example, I give my oldest a set of three instructions and then I wait to see if he can do them. So often, he is distracted and wants to play with his brother instead, so he needs a reminder, but slowly, slowly, I can see him prioritizing my instructions over his own desires.

Expected Outcomes

Through the parent information night combined with the activities included in the developmentally appropriate curriculum, this program aims to increase parent awareness of brain development and the importance of EF and EL skills, thereby building adult capability. A potential strength of the current program is its informative nature. There are step-by-step descriptions of activities that have been shown to build EF and EL skills in preschool children that parents can use to engage with their children.

As researchers and authors, we would be remiss if we failed to mention the importance of strong nurturing relationships in building healthy brains (Brazelton and Greenspan 2000). The program described will undoubtedly increase parents'

interaction time with their children and will help strengthen the quality of the existing relationships. This change in relationship, in turn, could have a positive influence on observed outcomes. Ultimately, the goal is to strengthen EF and EL skill in preschoolers; the means by which this goal is achieved is of secondary importance. The main purpose for implementing the Child Strength curriculum is to improve EDI outcomes of the kindergarten children in this community. By improving kindergarten readiness through enhancing EF and EL, we expect children will show better school and life success (Moffitt et al 2011).

Conclusion

The Child Strength Study is still under way, so it remains to be seen if the program has had the desired effect: strengthening EF and EL in preschool children by improving adult capability with respect to these concepts. Effects will only be known after the postprogram assessment is complete.

What we have learned from parent feedback is that the knowledge they have gained by participating in the study is both valued and important. The research team would like to thank the ECE at the study sites for her skillful modelling of the activities. Her helpful insights on how to inform the parents while engaging the children in their care in the curriculum activities is much appreciated.

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The History of Early Childhood Education Affects Everything: Preservice Early Childhood Teachers' Connection to Educational History

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Abstract

This article examines connections that preservice early childhood teachers make between the study of education history and the development of their teaching philosophy. It builds on our earlier research in which we examined various aspects of the history chapters of early childhood textbooks, leading us to ask where preservice teachers saw the value of educational history. In our examination of the data from the preservice teachers, we also referred to the *Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation* (National Association for the Education of Young Children 2010) to determine where connections were made between educational history and philosophy development. We found general agreement that knowing the field's history was a critical part of becoming a professional.

It is generally agreed in teacher education that knowing the field's history is a critical part of establishing a solid foundation for a teaching professional. Understanding history has also been seen as a direct building block for the establishment of one's teaching philosophy. This article reports on preservice early childhood teachers' views on studying history and their ideas on its impact on the

evolution of their teaching philosophy. It builds on our earlier research on history chapters in early childhood education textbooks, in which we found a general agreement that knowing the field's history was a critical part of becoming a professional (Prochner 1998; Prochner and Woitte 2013). In these analyses, we found commonalities and areas for discussion in four areas: the authors' rationale for studying history, the dominant historical story, the reliability of the historical information, and perspectives used in the examination of history. As part of this examination, we also found general agreement that knowing the field's history was a critical part of becoming a professional. However, we were left to wonder, what did students think? While teacher education students' views on studying educational history have received some attention from researchers, none have looked at the views of early childhood education (ECE) students. In his study of secondary education students' views on the value of educational foundations studies, Birkel (1983) found that history was ranked lowest, with sociology the highest. As a way of explanation, he noted that this "may reflect the strong present orientation of young people today" (p 85). Would we find this to be the case with ECE students? We begin the article by reviewing the place of history in the professional standards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) before sharing results from our student survey. We end by highlighting connections between the student views and the connections that they were able to make between their understanding of educational history and the development of their personal teaching philosophies, concluding that educational history has permeated our teacher education programs and continues to be of value.

NAEYC Standards and Connections to History

The *NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs* (NAEYC 2011) include at least four that reinforce the importance of historical knowledge. Standard 1 states, "Candidates prepared in early childhood degree programs are grounded in a child development knowledge base" (NAEYC 2011, 29). The knowledge base includes a study of the history of child development to the extent that child development ideas are derived from historical theories—for example, those of Freud, Piaget, Vygotsky and so on. Standard 4, appropriate planning and positive outcomes, and standard 3, linkages to play as a teaching strategy, both link to philosophers, theorists and teachers such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel and Dewey, as well as approaches to ECE such as Waldorf, Montessori and Reggio Emilia. In addition, standard 6 focuses specifically on "Becoming a Professional," connecting directly with early childhood history and the establishment of professional identity. As standard 6 states,

[The] early childhood field has a distinctive history, values, knowledge base, and mission. Early childhood professionals, including beginning teachers, have strong identification and involvement with the early childhood field, to better serve young children and their families. Well-prepared candidates understand the nature of the profession. ... They consider current issues and trends that might affect their work in the future. (NAEYC 2011, 39)

Claims for the value of studying ECE history are strong, both in professional standards and in teacher education curricula. Feeney, Moravcik and Nolte (2013) state that history can give student teachers a sense of the past, including an understanding of whether current practices have previously been used in the education of young children; it can provide insights into current philosophical debates and whether they "mirror issues that have been going on for a long time" (p 61); it can explain how past early childhood educators and philosophers have influenced the field today; and finally, it can help provide an overview of contemporary approaches to the education of young children.

ECE Students, History and Philosophy Development

In order to understand the extent to which students make connections, we surveyed

34 bachelor of education students at the end of their introductory early childhood education course. As part of the course curriculum, students reflected on their philosophy of early childhood teaching and read about and discussed early childhood history and educational models as described in their textbook (Feeney, Moravcik and Nolte 2013). At the end of the course, we asked them to write about how they believed their understanding of early childhood history helped them, and in particular, how it helped them to formulate a personal teaching philosophy.

Before we share our findings, let us pause and briefly explain how educational history played a part in the introductory course. As noted, this course is the first one of five that prepare the students with a minor in early childhood education. A survey course, it covers many topics, including educational philosophy, early childhood programs, child development, relationships and guidance, health and safety, the early childhood learning environment, learning through play, early childhood curriculum and planning, and working with families. Following the format of the Feeney, Moravcik and Nolte (2013) text, the course begins by examining early childhood teaching philosophy and then returns to this topic at the end of the term through an examination of the professional teacher. Although the examination of educational history is not a major portion of the course, it is linked to development of one's teaching philosophy during the course. The course is also taken in conjunction with another on concepts of childhood in history, which provides greater historical understanding for the preservice teachers.

We analyzed responses thematically, identifying two broad themes: first, that history broadened their view, and second, that history provided a context for current practice. As students described, learning history had shown them the diversity of approaches in early childhood education. Some noted that the history provided them with "a variety of perspectives" and a "range of approaches" that they might consider in their own teaching practices. Learning history revealed continuity as well as changes within the profession. One wrote "education and methods are always changing, evolving and changing" and another that "everything seems to come full circle." One student cautioned that it is important "not to reinvent the wheel" but to use what we have already learned about early childhood education. Another shared a similar sentiment, noting that "The variety of philosophies presented through history allows us to think about and choose bits/pieces of what we also believe and understand to suit our own

personalities.” As a further example of the way history broadened their view, one student noted that learning about models of early childhood education such as the Waldorf, Montessori and Reggio Emilia programs “opened my eyes to new ideas and concepts regarding how young children learn and how to best encourage and help facilitate this learning.” Another student explained this by saying, “learning about history helped me to realize that this is an ever-changing profession and we have to take from all theories, not just one.”

As an example of an idea supporting the second theme, that historical knowledge helped students understand the basis for current practices and programs, one student noted that “Education has been built upon throughout the years as old and new theories have emerged and contributed to the field.” Another wrote that history helps us to “think critically” and “provides a foundation” for judging our own experiences; another that history enabled her “to look objectively at my own experiences and whether they were beneficial to my educational experience.” Many also described how history helped them understand the social context for ECE, that historical knowledge gave them a “new perspective on children’s roles in society” and the “value of children.” One made the broader claim that “The history of early childhood education affects everything.”

A few students wrote that learning history had little value. One felt that learning about a diversity of approaches and ideas was of little use, because they would have “to teach the way my [school] district requires.” Another believed they would “learn more of my professional development while I am out teaching and gaining new experiences” rather than in their courses. However, the majority of students believed that historical knowledge was a valuable part of their development as teachers, revealing a range of possibilities for their teaching and providing them with a way to evaluate ideas and practices.

The views shared by students in our survey reinforce the importance of educational history in teacher education. Indeed, the themes identified in the students’ reflections corresponded with the rationale for the study of history in teacher education proposed by Violas (1990), in his classic

article in *Teachers College Record*, that “history can ‘stand in’ for and enlarge our experience” and that “we can use that experience to understand our present and ourselves” (p 372). Though they may substitute interactive whiteboards for audiovisual methods, our students would likely agree with Violas, who wrote

Is it possible to conceive of a teacher who would not be better equipped to understand and sensitively utilize the techniques learned ... as a result of studying John Amos Comenius, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and Robert Owens? Will not the teacher who has studied Plato’s Republic and the Jesuit Port Royal Schools profit more from a methods course in early childhood education than if he or she had been historically ignorant? (p 379)

And our ECE students confirmed that learning educational history helped them to avoid this ignorance and lead them to the development of sound personal teaching philosophies. In fact, the study of historical trends has helped them to envision their futures as educators and, especially, to develop the philosophy upon which they will build their practices.

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Pages from Our Diaries ... Thinking About Connectedness

Mary Anne Murphy

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Today, as a retired teacher and administrator, I am thinking about a word that is frequently used in current educational conversations ... *connectedness*. I know that it often refers to how, through technology, we link to other cultures, other languages, other places and other ideas and that it is essential to fostering the growth of strong global citizens. On this day, however, a few years away from the classroom, I recall students' love of learning and a different kind of connectedness—an intimate relationship with nature.

When the first snowflakes of the season start drifting to the ground and you are in the middle of your best-planned lesson (which is not about the properties of snow), what do you do? You watch those little ones stop everything and move to the windows. They crawl up on chairs and get as close as they can to those snowflakes, their little hands up against the cold glass, their eyes growing larger as the snowflakes come down faster. And it is so quiet. The students teach me. Stop and wonder. Know beauty, surprise and change of season. Honour it.

I say, "Let's put on our coats and head outside." And we go. Truly not dressed for the weather, but we risk it. We just have to welcome winter! Out on the schoolyard, we examine the shape of the snowflakes as they land on our jackets. We stick out our tongues and catch a few of the diamonds and feathers as they fall. We feel the cold on our cheeks and our ears. We run and make tracks in the rapidly growing whiteness underneath us. One of us even tries to make a snow angel, but the attempt is not successful. Maybe tomorrow there will be enough snow to try again. The wind gets a bit more biting. We scurry inside bringing wet, messy feet and runny noses back into the warmth.

So what now? I am a teacher. My planned lesson waits for another day. We warm up on the story rug. We talk about what we saw, what we felt, what we smelled, what we did or did not hear, and I write it down. We make our poem about snow. We read it together. Our "Ode to Snow." We *connected* and just fell a bit more in love with nature.

I hope and trust that my future grandchildren will attend schools where excursions to neighbourhood parks, wetlands, mountains, coulees, farmlands and ranch lands are commonplace. I want next generations to experience both small and large moments of connectedness to the natural world. Students' curiosity, wonder and play with mud and grass and rocks and water, picking flowers and thistles and dandelions, and running after butterflies and bugs and birds will cultivate a deep commitment to caring for our world. A virtual experience just will not do. A planet that is loved and cared for from generation to generation depends on the real thing.

Understanding My Past to Serve My Future

Brittany Miller

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Meet Brittany, a Grade 4 student who has had a long-standing learning disability, primarily in literacy. Her struggles with reading were recognized when she was in Grade 2, and she received resource teacher assistance. In Grade 3, her reading abilities had not improved, and she required resource teacher assistance for math. Although her parents worked with her every night, Brittany did not show significant improvement. She read quite fluently; however, she had difficulty with simple words rather than more challenging ones. Although she did well on her spelling tests, she could not apply her understanding of the correct spelling to her written work. Brittany also had difficulties expressing her thoughts coherently in writing.

Brittany was taken to a reading centre in Calgary, where she completed a variety of tests on various

areas of literacy. Her test results indicated that she had a “phonological processing difficulty which has interfered with her ability to learn to decode and spell written language.”¹ Brittany’s comprehensive receptive and expressive scores showed that she fell into the average range. Receptive and expressive skills are the two key components of oral language. *Receptive* refers to understanding language that is heard or read, while *expressive* refers to putting thoughts into words and sentences in a way that makes sense and facilitates communication. Essentially, these skills allow for the development of “vocabulary, inferencing, expressive language and listening skills” (Bowyer-Crane et al 2008, 423). However, Brittany’s receptive score was considerably weaker than her expressive score; therefore, it was concluded that Brittany had a difficulty with dual-coding.

Dual-coding is the process that “links images to language”;² this in turn has significant implications for the comprehension process. In relation to dual-coding, Brittany took the Woodcock Word Attack Subtest (Woodcock 1987); this is a measure composed of four subtests: letter word identification, word attack, reading fluency and spelling of sounds (Kerins 2006, 248). The Woodcock measure is a pure measure of “decoding ability since no guessing can take place.”³ On this test, Brittany’s score was extremely weak on word attack ability. Kerins (2006) explains that this is the ability to “decode phonetically regular non-words” (p 248). It was concluded that this was Brittany’s most significant underlying problem for her literacy and numeracy disabilities.

It was decided that the best approach for Brittany was to receive an intensive one-on-one specialized program in which she would undergo training in reading, especially decoding. The program would specifically focus on stimulating phonological awareness, sound-symbol links and linking images to language. This would take place over a 40-hour time frame.

Brittany was reassessed at the end of this time frame. Her assessment results indicated that her ability to segment, process and blend sounds (the beginning process of decoding) had improved. Brittany's sound-to-symbol connection also improved due to the improvement in phonemic judgments. However, her results revealed that her ability to decode real words and her spelling had not improved from her original assessment. It was suggested to Brittany's parents that her progress be monitored closely, and they were told that she would definitely require more intensive work.

Today, Brittany has recently completed her combined degrees of bachelor of fine arts and bachelor of education at the University of Lethbridge. She still notices remnants of her childhood learning difficulties; however, with hard work she has achieved an excellent GPA and much success in her student teaching. Brittany is excited about what her future holds and she looks forward to bringing her experiences to teaching and helping children like herself.

This Is Me

I know Brittany's struggles and successes intimately. I struggled with reading and writing to the point of not reading in Grade 3 and, unfortunately, this affected me for the rest of my life. Although my outcome has been a successful one, to this day those difficulties still remain. As a 21st-century educator, I am intrigued by the complexities of reading and how teachers and others can help children with literacy and numeracy disabilities. I believe strongly that it is crucial for teachers to use their own experiences to guide their teaching to help their students. In this case, I ask myself how my reading experiences can help me teach students to read and write.

Although my intensive training was somewhat beneficial to my isolated skill development, current research suggests that there are more significant and better ways to teach literacy, which would likely have produced better results in my case. In particular, using a balanced approach to literacy instruction, in which the key component is linking all knowledge back to reading and in which no one dimension of literacy is prioritized over another (Pearson et al 2007), would, no doubt, have been beneficial to me. To tell my story in a meaningful context, I first focus on the history of literacy instruction and how it affected the way I learned to read, then shift attention to differences in reading programs. Finally, I conclude with recommended research-based strategies for 21st-century teachers in the hope that their early literacy instruction reaches the children like me in their classrooms.

History of Literacy—What Is the Right Way to Teach Reading? Top Down or Bottom Up?

Literacy and numeracy can be traced back to the beginning of time, so one can imagine that there has always been great debate concerning the correct approach to teach beginning reading. It is one of the most "politicized topics in the field of education" (Adams 1990, 13). For example, in the colonial times, the earliest method of reading instruction was a two-step process: teach the code (the alphabet), and then have the students read. During this instruction, teachers explained the basics of phonological awareness, such as sounds and simple syllables, but this approach was missing a key component of reading: no attention was paid to comprehension. Thus began decades-long discussions about the best practices for teaching children to read. Dubbed the "reading wars" (Pearson 2004), those discussions, over time, have been informative to scholars and practitioners.

Traditionally, the term *reading wars* was used to suggest a dichotomy between teaching phonics and teaching whole words/meaning. In the 1950s, Rudolph Flesch (cited in Adams 1990) made the argument that "English is alphabetic and thus "phonetic" by definition ... phonics instruction is the only natural system of learning how to read: teach the children the identities of the letters, teach them the sounds that each represents, and teach them by having them write ... children will be able to forever read and write" (Adams 1990, 23–24). This observation eventually made its way to the government policy makers (in the United States), causing the best scholars and researchers internationally to take note. Eventually, scholarly discussion and research led to designing contemporary instructional programs, many of which are referred to as promoting a balanced approach to literacy.

Another way the core concept underlying the reading wars has been explained is as a bottom-up versus a top-down approach, depending whether readers begin with small units (letters and sounds) or larger meaningful units. Tompkins (2010) speaks of the perceived dichotomy in yet another way—that is, as a choice to teach through a teacher-centred approach or a child-centred approach. Like many others, she recommends not one or the other, but rather, a balanced approach to reach all children. A balanced literacy program is a combination of "explicit instruction, guided practice, collaborative learning and independent reading and writing"

(p 14) or a balance between teacher-centred instruction and child-centred instruction. A balanced approach to instruction assumes a comprehensive view of reading—oral language foundation, phonological awareness, decoding and reading comprehension. It also involves a variety of instruction—individual, small group and whole class—for various purposes. As a beginning teacher, I know it is complex to teach reading. I appreciate that achieving balance among the many components of instruction means that teachers must be knowledgeable and flexible.

When I received my instruction in reading as a child (the late 1990s and early 2000s), the concept of a balanced literacy program was only just coming into effect in local schools. My teachers were beginning to combine aspects of their previous approaches with top-down strategies. For example, they might ask students to use meaning to make predictions as they read or to look at the whole of the sentence in order to understand an individual word. But they included many aspects of a bottom-up approach in which they taught first the alphabet and phonics (the code), then decoding of individual words. I do not remember there being much attention to the meaning of larger units in my classroom.

My reading centre assessment states, “Brittany is a strong top-down reader who uses context cues very well to predict (guess at) words in context. However, in the long run, this is an inefficient strategy.”⁴ My tutoring program was specialized to remap my learning using the bottom-up approach. The attempt to change my way of learning was actually more ineffective than effective. Research, as well as my recent experience, shows me that this approach is not appropriate for all learners. I have seen first-hand how effective, or not, such an approach can be for some learners. My observations as a student teacher remind me of the need for me, as a teacher, to be vigilant in meeting all students’ instructional needs.

My reading issues lay primarily in phonological awareness development. My tutors at the reading centre focused on the traditional approach, teaching phonology and phonics, or the bottom-up approach. To say that this type of training was totally wrong would be an inaccurate statement. I was a beginning reader at a time when literacy research was plentiful and there were many changes happening in literacy-related practices. Nevertheless, the final results of my tutoring program were not nearly as effective as they could have been had it also employed my strengths as a learner and used a top-down, meaning-making approach, balanced with teaching me decoding fundamentals.

Balancing Oral Language Components and Connecting to Meaningful Reading

The notion of a balanced literacy program has eased much of the tension and discourse among educators. We may no longer hear or read much about the reading wars, but discussion about phonics instruction is still important. As Adams (1990) explains, “the issue before us translates from one of ‘what’ into one of ‘how much’” (p 50). Understanding the relationship between phonology and orthography is fundamental to learning how to read. There is “abundant evidence that demonstrates the contribution of phonological awareness to success in decoding” (Kerins 2006, 244). More specifically, initial phonological awareness influences reading; however, once the student acquires the skills of phonology, the process of reading influences phonological awareness (Hogan, Catts and Little 2005). It is essential that we teach students phonology and, specifically, phonics; however, excessive instruction in phonics alone does not enhance growth (Adams 1990). This is clearly demonstrated through my own early literacy experiences. In my case, a great deal of emphasis was placed upon relearning the skills of phonemic awareness, word attack and decoding. My postassessment scores indicated a positive improvement not only in phonemic awareness and sound-to-symbol connections, but also in word attack of nonsense words. The gain, however, was not significant enough for my instructors to be truly satisfied nor for me to feel as though I was now a successful reader. “Brittany’s phonemic judgment has improved, her ability to connect the letter to the sound is much easier; however, she could use more exposure to the code as 90 per cent is considered minimally acceptable.”⁵ My preassessment score was 66 per cent and post-assessment was 88 per cent for sound-to-symbol connections. In addition, my pre- and postassessment scores for sight words and spelling were 95 per cent and 99 per cent respectively—both remained the same. Although my sound-symbol matching had improved and my scores fell within the average range, I was still not able to decode real words. The same result of being within the average range was attributed to my phonological processing, except my scores were still only at the 47th percentile. I did improve on phonetic spelling, the report notes. The question, then, is why did my decoding scores not change significantly or at all? My answer is that I was not reading meaningful text.

At this point, research is informative. Bowyer-Crane and his colleagues (2008) conducted a study

on two emergent literacy domains, inside-out skills (letter knowledge and phoneme awareness) and outside-in skills (vocabulary and grammar skills), or what he called the P&R program (phonology and reading) and the OL program (oral language). Using two comparable groups, he compared the differences in outcomes between the group using the P&R program and the group using the oral language program. He found that the P&R group had an advantage over the OL group in letter knowledge, spelling and prose reading; however, the OL group had an advantage in grammar and vocabulary, as predicted. The study concluded that the method for teaching children to read is to provide them with “training in the Oral Language programme before school entry to reduce the numbers of children at risk of reading difficulties, and to provide those with continuing difficulties with an integrated approach combining aspects of the P + R and OL programmes” (Bowyer-Crane et al 2008). In other words, the best approach to teach reading is through a multifaceted balanced literacy program.

Because my early literacy instruction was focused almost exclusively on teaching the specific phonological skills, I missed the component of connecting my learning about sounds back to real reading. This is the key to assisting children who have reading disabilities. Duff, Hayiou-Thomas and Hulme (2012) strongly agree that “the linkage between phonological awareness and reading is important and that training either skill in isolation is not particularly effective” (p 2). Had I experienced instruction that encouraged me to make connections to the texts I was reading—not only those specifically chosen for instruction, but also pleasure reading—it is very likely that my scores would have improved in all components of literacy. The connections I made would have been become more concrete because I would have been able to link my strengths such as “just remembering” (sight words) to those skills in which I was weaker, but needed to develop. My beliefs about my experience are an example of the general consensus that Duff, Hayiou-Thomas and Hulme (2012) explain. That is, “approaches which involve training phonological awareness and letter-sound relationships while explicitly linking these skills to the task of reading are effective for the majority of children with reading difficulties” (p 622).

Balanced Literacy Programming and Strategies for Teachers

As a once struggling reader who has enjoyed much academic success, I can offer three

suggestions to teachers of young readers. I make these suggestions with much hope that they will lead to success, such as I have achieved, among the young learners in 21st-century classrooms. My suggestions are widely supported in current research, but to me they are both personal recommendations to others and commitments to myself concerning my future teaching.

My first recommendation is to incorporate a balanced literacy program as the first step toward 21st-century learning and meeting the needs of all children. Balance today requires attention to multiple dimensions of the context and content of instruction. Pearson et al (2007) borrow from the scientific terminology when they speak of “ecological balance” to refer to “a system that works together to support each individual component” (p 47). Such a system, they contend, is needed to balance the relationship of four essential components of a balanced literacy program: comprehension, composition, literary aspects and language conventions. If children are given a balanced program of instruction they will be able to develop all the skills they need to read with understanding. Time spent on learning basic skills is necessary, as it was for me, but that time must be balanced with real reading and writing of materials of interest to children.

My second recommendation is to fill classrooms with hundreds of books. It is important to create a library that is rich and full of reading material that interests children. At the end of the day, students need to read; it should not matter what level they are, but that they are reading and that the teacher focuses on improving those developmental skills through having children read meaningfully. Further to reading themselves, children need to enjoy the books through listening to them being read by others. It is essential that older children, teachers and other adults demonstrate a love of reading and thus encourage young children to read.

My third and final recommendation is to create an environment that is literacy rich and “supports young children’s experimentation with print” (Tompkins 2010, 12). Children need opportunity and encouragement to do some discovering about how printed language works as they attempt to read and write. Although explicit instruction is beneficial, so too is exploration. An example of such learning is encouraging writing with invented spelling. At the same time as they learn through exploring, some children will benefit from supports in the environment. An example of a support is a high-frequency word wall in the classroom, so that students have access to words at all times. Reminders of strategies for things like decoding by

analogy (words students already know through association) displayed clearly is another example. The child reader and writer that I was would have benefited from these recommendations. The teacher that I am is committed to offering them.

The Student Becomes the Teacher



I am a child of the reading wars. I am a child who experienced severe struggles with reading and writing; occasionally, I still struggle. Let me be clear in saying that I do not believe the specialized instruction that I received as a child was harmful to my development as a reader. It simply was not as helpful as it might have been. As research strongly advocates, “phonics is best learned in the context of reading and writing” (Strickland and Cullinan 1990, 428). I do believe my instruction could have been beneficial in so many more ways had it been connected to real reading of real literature that I enjoyed. Exactly how I might have benefited from instruction that blended multiple components into a comprehensive whole is not known but, as a teacher, that is the kind of instruction I want to offer my students. I was a child of the reading wars. I am an educator of balanced literacy instruction.

Notes

- 1 Taken from the *Remedial Therapy Summary Report*, communicated to the author on January 4, 2002.
- 2 Taken from the *Report of Assessment*, communicated to the author on November 9, 2001.
- 3 Taken from the *Report of Assessment*, communicated to the author on November 9, 2001.
- 4 Taken from the *Report of Assessment*, communicated to the author on November 9, 2001.
- 5 Taken from the *Remedial Therapy Summary Report*, communicated to the author on January 4, 2002.

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Pages from Our Diaries ...

Courage

Rhona Harkness

Rhona Harkness is a retired teacher, Lethbridge School District No 51.

After reflecting and thinking about my last 27 years of teaching, a certain book immediately came to mind: *Courage* by Bernard Waber. In this picture book, published by HMH Books in 2002, Waber explores the various kinds of courage in our everyday life in a simple text format. I began to think of my role as a teacher and how it has evolved over that time. I think I have learned many life lessons about teaching and myself. So, to paraphrase Bernard Waber,

- Courage is admitting that all lessons are not perfect or meant to be perfect. It's actually the ones that aren't where we learn the most about teaching.
- Courage is trying to understand the other person's point of view.
- Courage is learning to teach from the heart.
- Courage is dismantling your room every June only to set it up once again every August.
- Courage is making *all* children feel that they *can* learn.
- Courage is dressing up on mismatch day so your students see your fun side.
- Courage is listening to others' ideas and being willing to try them.
- Courage is learning to see the best in all students and celebrating the differences.
- Courage is taking the time to sit and have lunch with your students to learn more about them and to hear their stories.
- Courage is understanding that it is the process, not necessarily the answer, that is true learning.
- Courage is trying not to giggle when a student tells you he can't work because he broke a bone in his brain.
- Courage is coming to school even when you know the snake is loose so that you can model how to deal with things that frighten you.
- Courage is giving hugs to students, colleagues or parents who need that personal touch to know someone cares and understands.
- Courage is knowing when to talk and when to stop and really listen.
- Courage is learning to bounce those letters on your bulletin board. It doesn't really matter if they are out a millimetre, does it?
- Courage is saying goodbye to your kids every June.

- Courage is seeing each day as an opportunity instead of a to-do list.
- Courage is listening to a crying child telling you Grandpa is sick in the hospital.
- Courage is learning to laugh at yourself.
- Courage is admitting that you lost your cell phone, only to find it in the fridge. The busy life of a teacher ...
- Courage is learning to stay calm as a parent yells at you.
- Courage is disagreeing with colleagues but respecting them at the same time.
- Courage is admitting that you are never too old to learn.
- Courage is being able to say I let my kids down today but tomorrow is a new day to try again.
- Courage is asking a student what he is doing with his hands in his pockets.
- Courage is learning that teaching is not just about training the mind but the whole child.
- Courage is, at my age, getting to the bathroom door only to realize it is locked.
- Courage is being late for the staff meeting because you stopped to share a significant moment with a student.
- Courage is learning to set the bar high in your classroom but creating an environment where students feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes.
- Courage is learning to be mindful and purposeful each day.
- Courage is about making personal connections with your students.
- Courage is showing you *care* to all your students. Even the ones that act out. They sometimes require the most care.
- Courage is showing your kids you will give them *time*. Time to create, to laugh, to dance, to sing, to doodle, to act silly, to read, to question, to nourish and rest.
- Courage is greeting each student with a smile each day. You never know the power of that smile.

It takes lots of courage to be a teacher today, but the rewards make it worthwhile. In what other job do you get hugs at the end of the day, and they say you are the best teacher ever? It takes courage not to cry!

Guidelines for Contributors

Early Childhood Education is published to

- promote the professional development of educators in improving practice in early childhood education and
- stimulate thinking, explore new ideas and offer various points of view.

Articles from all educators and educational researchers are welcome. Classroom teachers especially are invited to consider writing about topics that interest them.

Submissions are requested that will stimulate personal reflection, theoretical consideration and practical application. Teachers appreciate articles that present differing perspectives; innovative classroom and school practices; recent literature reviews; trends and issues; research findings; descriptions, reviews or evaluations of instructional and curricular methods, programs or materials; and child-related humour.

Please submit manuscripts by e-mail as a double-spaced Word document. A cover page should include the contributor's name, professional position, degree(s) held, address, phone number(s), and e-mail address. To ensure blind review, use only the article title in headers within the manuscript.

Manuscripts may be up to 3,500 words. References to literature made in the text of the submission must appear in full in a list at the end of the article. Literature not cited in the text but providing background material or for further reading should be similarly listed.

Photographs, line drawings, diagrams and poetry are welcome. To ensure quality reproduction, photographs should be clear and have good contrast. Drawings should be originals. A caption and photo credit should accompany each photograph. The contributor is responsible for obtaining releases for use of photographs. Contributors whose manuscripts are used will receive two copies of the issue containing the published article.

Following the review process and acceptance of an article for publication, authors will be asked to submit the article by e-mail, along with a short biographical sketch of the author(s).

Early Childhood Education is a refereed journal published annually. Submissions are accepted on an ongoing basis. Although contributions are reviewed by an editorial review committee, the editor reserves the right to edit for clarity and space.

Manuscripts and photographs, accompanied by the Copyright Transfer Agreement, may be sent to

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 - Yes, I agree to have my child's written work posted on the ECEC website, using a first name only.
 - No, I do not want my child's written work posted on the ECEC website.
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Council Notes

Constitutional Objective

The objective of the Early Childhood Education Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association is to improve practice in early childhood education by increasing members' knowledge and understanding of this specialty.

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* The 2015/16 executive will be elected at the November 2015 conference.

Membership

Total membership of the council is currently 1,982.

Conference and Other Programs

The council organizes an annual conference for its members on early childhood education. Attendance at annual meetings over the last several years has averaged 700. For information on the 2015 conference, contact Lynn McEachern, lynnmce@gmail.com.

Several regional organizations of the council carry on programs for members in their areas. The council supports these regionals. It also occasionally offers workshops and other activities in areas where regionals have not been organized.

Publications

The Early Childhood Education Council publishes a newsletter, *Issues, Events & Ideas*, and a journal, *Early Childhood Education*. Members of the council receive these publications as part of their membership. Nonmembers wishing to receive copies of these publications may obtain them by paying the subscription rate of \$30 (Canadian funds) annually and writing to the Early Childhood Education Council, ATA, Barnett House, 11010 142 Street NW, Edmonton, AB T5N 2R1.

Website

The council maintains an Internet site at <http://ecec.teachers.ab.ca>.

Personal information regarding any person named in this document is for the sole purpose of professional consultation between members of The Alberta Teachers' Association.

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