

Dimensions of Early Childhood

Volume 47
Number 1, 2019

**SPECIAL
ISSUE**

*Embracing
the Joy*

**How to Create a DIY
Child-Centered, Natural Playground**

**Patio de Juegos Natural y
Recreativo de Uso Infantil**

**Connecting to Popular Culture to
Support Preschool Children's
Numeracy and Literacy Development**

**Supporting Young Children's Joy and
Independence through Practical
Life Exercises**

**Innovative Strategies for Joyful
Learning In a Higher Education
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Southern Early Childhood Association

Editor: Mari Riojas-Cortez, Ph.D.
Dimensions of Early Childhood

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Finding Joy

JO CARROLL, SHREVEPORT, LOUISIANA

For professionals in the field of early childhood, it is vitally important that we maintain joy within our classrooms for the children in our care. There are many approaches to achieve what sounds like a simple thing, but today's world of pressure to achieve at the highest level possible can affect even the youngest of children.

Joy in learning should be a lifelong goal for everyone, but if we crush the spirit of excitement and exploration, we crush the desire to learn. Think for a moment about babies and how they first explore their own bodies. If their immediate needs are not met, they do not have the security they need to continue exploring the environment around them.

The word "joy" expresses a feeling of



great pleasure and happiness. What brings you pleasure and happiness? What brings pleasure to young children? To find joy in

something, we have to feel secure. We can help our children find joy in learning by providing them a secure and safe place to explore and learn. They need time to be comfortable with the materials available to them and multiple opportunities to explore the environment where they are. Learning is like building blocks that stack on top of one another but can also be formed in many new arrays.

As adults who work with and for young children, we also need to maintain our own JOY of learning. We need to find something every day that brings us joy. We need to strive continually to learn in our daily lives in the ways we expect our students to learn. Go forth and find joy—just observe youngsters!

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The Importance of Adult-Child Interactions

DIANE W. BALES, PH.D., GUEST EDITOR

Joy should be an essential part of any early childhood experience. Finding ways to embrace joy and to encourage joyful play in children can help ground early childhood educators and provide the energy needed to face the challenges that come with the care and education of young children. The four articles included in this special issue give us different perspectives on embrac-

ing joy. Dana Bush and Mary Sciaraffa explain how teachers can use Montessori-based practical life exercises to encourage joy and independence in children, even in non-Montessori programs. Allison Sterling Henward and Leah Schoenberg Muccio help us look at children's superhero play as a powerful reflection of their home culture. Courtney Beers and Lisa Monroe

share their experiences creating a child-centered play area with limited resources. Finally, Karen Dennis shows us how to bring joy to preservice teacher education through hands-on collaborative planning and presentation of STEAM concepts. We hope that each and every one of you enjoy these four different ideas for embracing joy in early childhood.

La alegría debe ser una parte esencial de cualquier experiencia de la primera infancia. Encontrar maneras de abrazar la alegría y fomentar el juego alegre en los niños puede ayudar a los educadores de la primera infancia y proporcionar la energía necesaria para enfrentar los desafíos que conlleva el cuidado y la educación de los niños pequeños. Los cuatro artículos incluidos en este número especial nos dan diferentes per-

spectivas para abrazar la alegría. Dana Bush y Mary Sciaraffa explican cómo los maestros pueden usar los ejercicios prácticos de la vida basados en Montessori para fomentar la alegría y la independencia en los niños, incluso en programas que no son Montessori. Allison Sterling Henward y Leah Schoenberg Muccio nos ayudan a ver el juego de superhéroes de los niños como un poderoso reflejo de la cultura de su hogar. Courtney

Beers y Lisa Monroe comparten sus experiencias al crear un área de juego centrada en el niño con recursos limitados. Finalmente, Karen Dennis nos muestra cómo brindar alegría al aprendizaje de la formación docente mediante la planificación colaborativa práctica y la presentación de los conceptos de STEAM. Esperamos que disfrute estas cuatro ideas diferentes para abrazar la alegría en la primera infancia.

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DIY Child-Centered, Natural Playground

BY COURTNEY BEERS DEWHIRST & LISA MONROE



Early childhood teachers use intentional instructional activities to promote children’s development. They frequently plan for learning opportunities in their classrooms, but sometimes overlook the learning possibilities outside the classroom walls. The outdoor environment offers a space for learning equal to that of any indoor area. It features a continuously changing landscape and climate, where modifiable natural materials are abundant (Bento & Dias, 2017). The natural outdoors provide the perfect arena for children to engage in multi-sensory experiences and explore, discover, and investigate their surroundings. It is a creative space that supports children’s curiosity, learning, and development and provides opportunities for children to do what they do best – play (Kemple, Oh, Kenney, & Smith-Bonahue 2016; Malone & Tranter, 2003).

Children feel an emotional connection to the outdoors and are instinctively drawn to the life (e.g., plants and animals) and elements (e.g., rocks, soil, sunlight) that exist within its essence (Bento & Dias, 2017). Many early childhood educators seek more natural spaces that positively promote children’s cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development (Malone & Tranter, 2003). However, such a task can appear daunting. This article shares our preschool’s journey towards the construction of a new outdoor learning space. The preschool aimed to create an outdoor learning environment that was aligned with our school philosophy and within the restraints of our early child-

hood budget. Our story is shared here with the hope that it will help other teachers resourcefully and purposefully plan for their natural and stimulating outdoor play spaces.

Our Story

During the 2016–2017 school year, our administrator informed us that our building would be torn down and we would need to find another facility for our preschool program. He explained that we would have the winter break to pack up and move out of our building entirely. We took a deep breath and felt the panic set in! Where would we go? What would we tell the children and families? How would we pay for it? Most of all, how would we ever create a natural playground like the one we currently had outside our building?

We quickly organized and created a plan, established our priorities, and delegated responsibilities between us. We agreed on a list of facility and playground needs and sent it up the chain of command.

A new location was finally determined: a building behind an existing child care center. We were permitted to use a section of their playground. The local child care center uses two common plastic climbers and slides, visible in some of the pictures. A metal wire fence divided an “L-shaped” area for us. At first, our designated outdoor space was bare.

Our resources for creating an outdoor space were limited. The administration was willing to help us with the major costs of relocating our school. However, the

emphasis was on the inside of the school, and funds were allocated for the physical modifications needed in the classroom. It was important to us that the playground was not forgotten, as it is a major component and learning opportunity for our children. While acknowledging its importance, the administrators still were not willing (or able) to allocate many funds for its development. We were forced to look for creative solutions to build the outdoor learning space we envisioned.

Priorities and Planning

Realistically, we needed to distinguish between must-haves and wants. First, it was important for us to consider the function of a playscape, and not necessarily its aesthetic appeal. Research finds that a high aesthetic evaluation score does not necessarily promote healthy development or positive behaviors (Maxwell, Mitchell, & Evans, 2008). Aesthetically pleasing playgrounds are often “sterile” and offer little flexibility for creative, rich play (Kemple et al., 2016). Plastic playground equipment can also be fixed and unstimulating, thus limiting children’s ability to engage in creative thinking and problem solving (Dowdell et al., 2011).

Continued on page 8.

Desired Playground Materials and Characteristics

- Natural Gardens
- Mud Kitchen
- Shaded area
- Water access
- Covered play space
- Varied surfaces – concrete, grass, dirt
- Shed for outdoor material storage
- Bike path
- Tire swing
- Sand box
- Tree log for climbing
- Tornado shelter

Patio de Juegos Natural y Recreativo de Uso Infantil

POR COURTNEY BEERS DEWHIRST Y LISA MONROE

Los docentes de primera infancia emplean actividades didácticas deliberadas para fomentar el desarrollo de los niños. Con frecuencia planifican oportunidades de aprendizaje dentro de sus salones de clase, aunque en ocasiones, ignoran las posibilidades de aprendizaje que existen fuera de las paredes del aula. El entorno exterior ofrece un espacio de aprendizaje equivalente a cualquier área interior. Cuenta con un paisaje y clima en constante cambio, en donde los materiales naturales modificables abundan (Bento & Dias, 2017). Los entornos exteriores proporcionan el escenario perfecto para que los niños se expongan a experiencias multisensoriales y exploren, descubran e investiguen sus alrededores. Es un espacio creativo que fomenta la curiosidad, aprendizaje y desarrollo de los niños, y además proporciona oportunidades para que los niños realicen aquello que mejor saben hacer: jugar (Kemple, Oh, Kenney, & Smith-Bonahue 2016; Malone & Tranter, 2003).

Los niños sienten una conexión emocional con las áreas exteriores y se ven atraídos de forma instintiva a la vida (por ejemplo, plantas y animales) y elementos (por ejemplo, rocas, suelo, luz solar) que forman parte de su esencia (Bento & Dias, 2017). Muchos docentes de primera infancia buscan más espacios naturales que influyen de forma positiva el desarrollo cognitivo, socio emocional y físico de los infantes (Malone & Tranter, 2003). Sin embargo, dicha tarea puede parecer desalentadora. Este artículo comparte nuestra travesía preescolar hacia la construcción de un nuevo espacio de aprendizaje al aire libre. Un espacio preescolar con la finalidad de crear un entorno de aprendizaje al exterior que se alineaba con nuestra filosofía escolar y se enmarcaba dentro de los límites de nuestro presupuesto de primera infancia. Compartimos nuestra historia aquí con la esperanza de que ayude a otros docentes a planificar de forma ingeniosa y deliberada sus espacios naturales y estimulantes de juego al aire libre.

Nuestra historia

Durante la temporada escolar 2016-2017, nuestro administrador nos informó que nuestro establecimiento sería demolido y deberíamos buscar una instalación diferente para la implementación de nuestro programa preescolar. No indicó que teníamos hasta el receso de invierno para empacar y trasladarnos de nuestro edificio completamente. ¡Respiramos hondo y sentimos como el pánico se instauró! ¿A dónde iríamos? ¿Qué le diríamos a los niños y a sus familias? ¿Cómo pagaríamos por ello? Pero, sobre todo, ¿de qué forma llegaríamos a crear siquiera un patio de juegos natural como aquel que teníamos actualmente fuera de nuestras instalaciones?

Rápidamente nos organizamos e ideamos un plan, estableciendo nuestras prioridades y delegando responsabilidades entre el personal. Se elaboró una lista de las necesidades en materia de instalación y patio de juegos y se remitió a los mandos superiores.

Finalmente, se determinó una nueva ubicación: un edificio detrás de un centro existente para cuidado de niños.

Se nos permitió utilizar una sección de su patio de juegos. El centro local de cuidado de niños cuenta con dos muros para escalar y toboganes de plástico común, los cuales pueden apreciarse en algunas de las imágenes. Una cerca de alambre metálico dividía una área “con forma de L” para nosotros. Al principio, nuestro espacio al aire libre estaba vacío.

Nuestros recursos para crear un espacio al aire libre eran limitados. Las administración estaba dispuesta a ayudarnos con los principales costos de la reubicación de nuestra escuela. No obstante, la atención se centraba en el interior del establecimiento escolar, y los fondos se designaron para las modificaciones físicas necesarias en el salón de clases. Era importante para nosotros que el patio de juegos no fuese olvidado, ya que constituía el principal componente y una oportunidad de aprendizaje esencial para nuestros niños. Aunque reconocían su importancia, los administra-

dores aún no estaban dispuestos a (o tenían la capacidad para) destinar varios fondos para su construcción. Nos vimos forzados a buscar soluciones creativas para estructurar el espacio de aprendizaje al aire libre que imaginábamos.

Prioridades y planificación

Razonablemente, debíamos distinguir entre obligaciones y deseos. En primer lugar, era importante que tuviésemos en consideración la función de un parque lúdico y no necesariamente su aspecto estético. Las investigaciones determinaron que una alta puntuación estética no implicaba necesariamente el fomento de un desarrollo saludable o conductas positivas (Maxwell, Mitchell, & Evans, 2008). Los patios de juegos estéticamente agradables a menudo se consideran “estériles” y disponen de poca flexibilidad para desarrollar un juego vivaz y creativo (Kemple et al., 2016). Los equipos plásticos de juego para el patio también pueden arreglarse y ser poco estimulantes, y, por ende, limitan la capacidad de los niños para desarrollar sus capacidades de pensamiento crítico y reso-

Continúa en la página 9.

Materiales y características deseados del patio de juegos

- Natural
- Jardines
- Cocina para pasteles de lodo
- Área sombreada
- Acceso a agua
- Espacio de juego cubierto
- Diversas superficies: concreto, pasto, tierra
- Cobertizo para almacenamiento de materiales de exterior
- Ciclovías
- Columpio de llanta
- Arenero
- Tronco para escalar
- Refugio para tornados

Continued from page 6.

While we wanted to limit the commercial plastic materials on our playground, we also needed certain functional elements such as a shade structure and a weather resistant sand box. The team discussed where natural materials could be incorporated and which items from our old playground could be repurposed in the new space. We settled on a fabric tarp for shade and a small plastic sand box; we added simply constructed wood-framed garden beds, a digging pit, tree log balance beams and tree stumps for hopping. Next, we brought over our wood frame “house” structure and converted it into a mud kitchen and placed it next to a digging pit. We relocated a wooden pallet and turned it into a “boat-like” structure, adding to the dramatic play space. Our beloved wood shed from our old school could not be transplanted, but we took one of the doors and attached it to the fence (with the hope of coming up with a creative use for it).

Recruitment of Volunteers

We recruited a student from the local university who was studying landscape architecture to help us design our playground. Our university contacts also fortuitously put us in touch with a community volunteer who had a background in science and outdoor education. These two volunteers contributed physical labor, as well as their content expertise to the project.

We reached out to families and expressed a need for help with outdoor manual labor projects that required more technical skills than program staff possessed. Two extremely handy and talented parents responded and volunteered to help. They worked tirelessly on the construction features, for example, bolting the tire tunnel together, cutting tree stumps, and making modifications to our mud kitchen. Program staff took on projects that required fewer technical skills, such as sanding, painting, hauling, and digging. The children made their mark on the playground by providing ideas and by painting structures.

Final Play Spaces

The following play spaces represent different areas in our playground; we presented these to the children when they came back to school in January. We are sharing these ideas because they can be easily replicated and tailored to your outdoor environment.

Fenced Play Space (Photos 1, 2, 3, & 4)

The school grounds deliver a means for preschoolers with diverse abilities to engage in a variety of activities that encourage creative expression.

1. This young girl stopped her tricycle ride to add her personal touch to the piece of art. The paper was hung up on the fence with clothespins.

2. Teachers provide paint materials to encourage artistic expression.

3 & 4. An acoustic area made from recycled household products, including pot lids, pans, and garbage bins, offers opportunities for sound exploration.

Continued on page 10.

Fenced Play Space /Espacios de juego cercados



1



2

All numbered photos courtesy of the authors.

Continuado de la página 7.

lución de problemas (Dowdell et al., 2011).

Si bien deseábamos restringir los materiales plásticos comerciales en nuestro patio de juegos, también necesitábamos ciertos elementos funcionales tales como una estructura de sombra y un arenero resistente al clima. El equipo debatió el lugar en donde podían implementarse materiales naturales y qué elementos de nuestro antiguo patio de juegos podían tener un propósito distinto en el nuevo espacio. Colocamos una lona de tela para crear sombra y un pequeño arenero de plástico; añadimos arriates de madera de montaje sencillo, una fosa para excavar, vigas de equilibrio hechas de troncos y tocones de árbol para saltar. Después tomamos una estructura de madera que solía ser parte de una “casa” y la convertimos en una cocina de lodo que colocamos junto a la fosa de excavación. Reubicamos una tarima de madera y la transformamos en una estructura “similar a un bote,” que incorporamos al espacio de juego dramático. Nuestro querido cobertizo de madera de la antigua escuela no pudo in-

sertarse, aunque quitamos una de sus puertas y la fijamos a la cerca (con la esperanza de pensar en un uso creativo para esta).

Reclutamiento de voluntarios

Reclutamos a un estudiante de una universidad local especializado en arquitectura de paisaje para contar con su ayuda en el diseño de nuestro patio de juegos. Nuestros contactos universitarios, casi de manera fortuita, lograron comunicarse con un voluntario de la comunidad que contaba con formación en ciencias y educación al aire libre. Estos dos voluntarios contribuyeron con el trabajo físico, así como también con su experiencia de contenido al proyecto.

Nos acercamos a las familias y les expresamos una necesidad de ayuda referente a los proyectos de trabajo manual al aire libre que requerían de habilidades más técnicas que aquellas de las que disponía nuestro personal. Dos padres extremadamente hábiles y talentosos respondieron al llamado y se ofrecieron voluntariamente para ayudar. Trabajaron sin descanso en los detalles de la construcción, por ejemplo, fijaron los tornillos del tunel

de llantas juntos, cortaron los tocones de árbol y efectuaron modificaciones a nuestra cocina de lodo. El personal del programa se encargó de los proyectos que requerían de menores habilidades técnicas, tales como el lijado, pintura, transporte y excavación. Los niños dejaron su marca en el patio de juegos sugiriendo ideas y pintando estructuras.

Espacios finales de juego

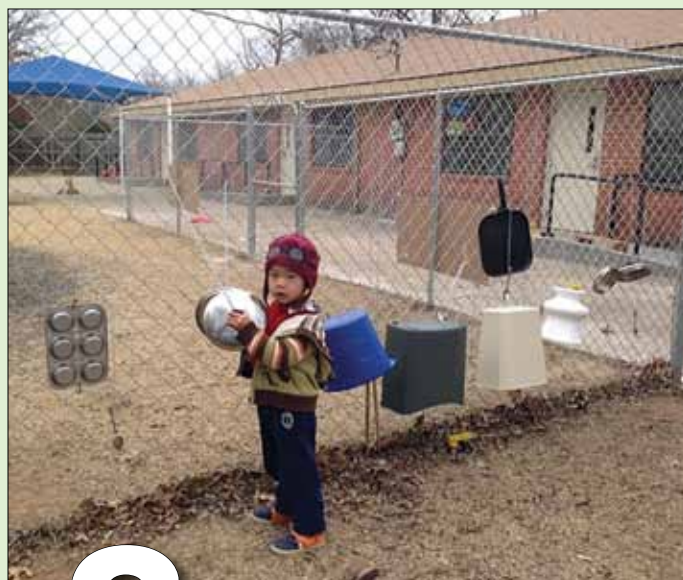
Los siguientes espacios de juego representan distintas áreas en nuestro patio de juegos; le presentamos estas a los niños cuando volvieron a la escuela en enero. Compartimos estas ideas porque pueden replicarse con facilidad y moldearse a su entorno al aire libre.

Espacios de juego cercado (Fotos 1, 2, 3, y 4)

Los territorios de la escuela ofrecen un medio para que los alumnos en etapa preescolar con diversas capacidades participen en una variedad de actividades que fomentan la expresión creativa.

Continúa en la página 11.

Fenced Play Space /Espacios de juego cercados



3



4



Large tractor tires supply great hiding places and spaces for collaboration!

Continued from page 8.

Tire Play Space (Photos 5, 6, 7 & 8)

Donated tires facilitate a variety of learning opportunities, including climbing, balancing, problem-solving, collaborating and role-playing.

5. The teachers and children believe these donated tires and shaded canopy create a perfect outdoor classroom space to sing songs and engage in discussions.

6. Tires that can be moved provide opportunities for building strength and creative play.

7. These tires afford developmentally appropriate, independent, risk-taking opportunities for young children.

8. Children use recycled tires in creative ways.

Continued on page 12.

Tire Play Space /Espacio de juego con llantas



5



6

¡Las llantas grandes de tractor aportan excelentes lugares para esconderse y espacios para la colaboración!

Continuado de la página 9.

1. Esta pequeña detuvo su triciclo para añadir su toque personal a la obra de arte. El papel estaba colgando de la cerca con pinzas para la ropa.

2. Los maestros proporcionan materiales de pintura para fomentar la expresión artística.

3 y 4. Una zona acústica fabricada de productos caseros reciclados, incluidas tapas de olla, sartenes y contenedores de basura, proporciona oportunidades para la exploración del sonido.

Espacio de juego con llantas (Fotos 5, 6, 7 y 8)

Las llantas donadas propician una variedad de oportunidades de aprendizaje, entre las que destacan: trepar, balancearse, resolución de problemas,



colaboración y juego de roles.

5. Los docentes y niños creen que estas llantas donadas y marquesinas sombreadas crean un espacio de aprendizaje al aire libre perfecto para cantar canciones y participar de debates.

6. Las llantas que pueden desplazarse ofrecen oportunidades para desarrollar la fuerza

y fomentan el juego creativo.

7. Estas llantas proporcionan oportunidades de riesgo e independencia apropiadas en términos de desarrollo para los más pequeños.

8. Los niños emplean las llantas recicladas de manera creativas.

Continúa en la página 13.

Tire play space/Espacio de juego con llantas



7



8



Continued from page 10.

Tree Trunks and Stumps Play Space (Photos 9,10,11&12)

Teachers integrate recycled, natural materials

like old logs and tree stumps that can facilitate children's development.

9. Children engage in beam walking on old pieces of logs and stepping-stones. By

Children engage in beam walking on old pieces of logs and stepping-stones.

participating in risk-taking behaviors, children feel a sense of self-confidence and a belief in their ability to master skills (Bento & Dias, 2017). They also build resilience for future difficult tasks and situations (Little & Wyver, 2008).

10. This tree trunk offers a sitting place for a child engaged in cooperative play. Diverse experiences like these motivate children to practice cooperation and perspective taking skills (McClintic & Petty, 2015). Through various sensory experiences and social interactions, children learn how to express and control their emotions and be assertive in their own needs (Kemple et al., 2016).

11. A simple log provides a challenge for an anxious child.

12. Experiencing success with encouragement from a responsive adult.

Continued on page 14.

Tree Trunks and Stumps Play Space / Espacio de juego con troncos y tocones



9



10

Continuado de la página 11.

Espacio de juego con troncos y tocones
(Fotos 9, 10, 11 y 12)

Los docentes integran materiales naturales reciclados como troncos viejos y tocones de árbol que pueden propiciar el desarrollo de los niños.

9. Los niños disfrutan de caminar sobre vigas creadas a partir de viejos restos de madera y rocas para pisar. Al participar en conductas que impliquen la asunción de riesgos, los niños desarrollan un sentido de autoconfianza y una creencia en su capacidad para dominar habilidades (Bento & Dias, 2017). También desarrollan su resiliencia para futuras tareas y situaciones difíciles (Little & Wyver, 2008).

10. Este tronco de árbol proporciona un lugar para sentarse y para que los niños participen de un juego cooperativo. Las diversas experiencias como estas motivan a los niños a practicar la cooperación y habilidades para adoptar una perspectiva (McClintic & Petty, 2015). A través de varias experiencias sensoriales e interacciones sociales, los niños aprenden de qué forma expresarse y controlar sus emociones y ser asertivos con sus necesidades (Kemple et al., 2016).



11. Un simple tronco proporciona un desafío para un niño ansioso.

12. Experimentar el éxito con el aliento de un adulto receptivo.

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Tree Trunks and Stumps Play Space / Espacio de juego con troncos y tocones



11



12

Continued from page 12.

Mud Kitchen and Digging Pit Play Space (Photos 13 & 14)

Outdoor areas as simple as digging pits, and mud kitchens afford limitless learning possibilities.

13. Children can be messy and creative in the outdoors. They also interact with natural elements that help to build immunity against diseases (Bento & Dias, 2017, p. 158). The girls in the picture are making mud pies. The dirt came from the digging pit. It was mixed with the water they obtained from a nearby hose.

14. This picture demonstrates how teachable moments occur in an outdoor space. The children were playing in the “digging zone.” They created trenches and incorporated water to create rivers. At one point, the children noticed that the water was soaking into the soil. The teacher asked them how they thought they could keep the water from disappearing. After some discussion, the children believed foil could be the solution and added it to their trenches. The

teacher provided the children with some liquid bio color to further promote their inquiry process. The children used sticks to push objects downstream and they felt pleased in their creative pursuits.

Loose Parts and Gardens Play Space (Photos 15, 16 & 17)

Teachers incorporate loose parts and plant gardens in an outdoor playground to sustain and extend children’s learning.

15. Children develop thinking skills by making observations, hypothesizing, reasoning, and using trial and error strategies. They build greater memory and language skills from exposure to complex surroundings as they classify, sort, and organize objects and loose parts (Kemple et al., 2016).

16. Natural materials are readily accessible to children on this playground. Loose parts include natural, manufactured, or recycled materials (McClintic & Petty, 2015). Children prefer playgrounds that contain loose parts, as these allow for multiple functions

(Maxwell et al., 2008). For example, natural materials, such as dirt, water, and plants, are moveable and variable (Acar, 2014). Some artificial elements are integrated for child-led interests and enjoyment.

17. This preschool community engages in “schoolyard greening,” adding natural habitats such as plant and vegetable gardens (Dowdell et al., 2011, p. 26). When children learn to take care of the outdoors, they form a sensitivity for environmental stewardship (Acar, 2014). The boots lined up along the garden beds are used as planters; the preschool’s families donated them after children had outgrown them.

Lessons Learned

Children spend a great deal of time in child care and school settings. Therefore, it is often the teachers’ task to provide positive outdoor learning opportunities (Kemple et al., 2016; McClintic & Petty, 2015). Teachers tend to see the outdoor playground from two perspectives. The first perspective is that

Continued on page 16.

Mud Kitchen and Digging Pit Play Space/ Cocina de lodo y fosa de excavación



13



14



15

Continuado de la página 13.

Espacio de juego con cocina de lodo y fosa de excavación (Fotos 13 y 14)

Áreas al aire libre tan sencillas como fosas de excavación y cocinas de lodo permiten una infinidad de oportunidades de aprendizaje.

13. Los niños pueden tener un comportamiento de desorden y expresar su creatividad en entornos al aire libre. También interactúan con elementos naturales que ayudan a desarrollar su inmunidad contra enfermedades (Bento & Dias, 2017, p. 158). Las niñas en la foto están horneando pasteles de lodo. La tierra proviene de la fosa de excavación. Se mezcló con agua que obtuvieron de una manguera cercana.

14. Esta foto muestra cómo las oportunidades de enseñanza ocurren en un entorno al aire libre. Los niños estaban jugando en la “zona de excavación.” Crearon trincheras y agregaron agua para conformar ríos. En un punto, los niños se dieron cuenta de que el agua se impregnaba en el suelo. El maestro les

preguntó de qué forma podrían evitar que el agua desapareciera. Luego de algunas discusiones, los niños creyeron que el papel podría ser la solución y lo incorporaron a sus trincheras. El maestro les dio a los niños algo de bio color para potenciar su proceso de investigación. Los niños usaron varas para empujar objetos río abajo y se sintieron satisfechos con sus actividades creativas.

Espacio de juego con piezas sueltas y jardines (Fotos 15, 16 y 17)

Los docentes implementaron piezas sueltas y jardines de plantas en un patio de juegos al aire libre para sustentar y ampliar el aprendizaje de los niños.

15. Los niños desarrollan habilidades de pensamiento realizando observaciones, formulando hipótesis y empleando estrategias de ensayo y error. Desarrollan mayor capacidad de memoria y habilidades lingüísticas como resultado de su exposición a entornos a medida que clasificaban, ordenaban y organizaban objetos y piezas sueltas (Kemple et al., 2016).

16. Los materiales naturales son de fácil acceso para los niños en este patio de juegos. Las piezas sueltas abarcan materiales naturales, fabricados y reciclados (McClintic & Petty, 2015). Los niños prefieren los patios de juegos que contienen piezas sueltas, ya que estas permiten distintas funciones (Maxwell et al., 2008). Por ejemplo, los materiales naturales, tales como la tierra, agua y plantas, son móviles y variables (Acar, 2014). Algunos elementos artificiales se integran dependiendo de los intereses y diversión de los niños.

17. La comunidad preescolar participa de un proceso de “reverdecimiento del patio de la escuela” en donde se incorporan entornos naturales como plantas y jardines vegetales (Dowdell et al., 2011, p. 26). Cuando los niños aprenden a cuidar de los entornos exteriores, desarrollan una sensibilidad por la protección del medio ambiente (Acar, 2014). Las botas alineadas a lo largo de los arriates se utilizan como sembradores; las familias de los preescolares las donaron una vez que los niños ya no podían usarlas.

Continúa en la página 17.

Mud Kitchen and Digging Pit Play Space/ Cocina de lodo y fosa de excavación



16



17



Continued from page 14.

it exists as a place for children to take a break and release their energy between indoor content-driven activities, also referred to as the “surplus energy theory” (Malone & Tranter, 2003, p. 299). The second perspective is that the outdoor space is an important extension of the indoor classroom, where classroom walls have “boundaries [that] seem transparent” (p. 299). Thus, we see a conflict in teachers’ beliefs, understandings, and practices with outdoor classroom learning spaces (McClintic & Petty, 2015). Early childhood teachers need to use the environment in intentional ways so that they can stimulate children’s curiosity, exercise investigative skills, promote complex play, and provide space and opportunity for running and rigorous activity.

Our preschool team’s perspective of and philosophy regarding natural outdoor play was the driving force behind the playground construction. The teachers saw the outdoor space as another critical learning environment where children could autonomously

explore their surroundings and construct their knowledge. Although the preschool’s funds were limited, it was the teachers’ desire to support student learning that ultimately pushed the project forward. We also found that the responsibility of endorsing outdoor play did not solely rest on the shoulders of teachers. It was a group effort, involving the children, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders (McClintic & Petty, 2015).

We needed to compromise to be successful; an all or nothing approach would have halted our progress. Consequently, we used the resources available around us. These resources included materials as well as many helpful hands. As you can see from the photos, most play spaces incorporated natural and manufactured materials. In our outdoor space, children use brightly colored plastic buckets, shovels, vehicles, and other materials to support their play, as well as sticks, rocks, and dirt. They have opportunities for and are engaged in dramatic, physical, and cooperative play that is immersed in a primarily green environment, utilizing diverse materials.

We enjoyed the time we spent together building our outdoor space, and we acknowledge that this construction is an ongoing process. It will take time to understand which elements work best to capture children’s interests and increase rich play behaviors. In the meantime, we take pride in the preschool community’s response to an overwhelming, but very rewarding project.

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Lecciones Aprendidas

Los niños pasaron bastante tiempo en entornos de cuidado infantil y educación. Por lo tanto, con frecuencia, la labor de los docentes es proporcionar oportunidades positivas de aprendizaje al aire libre (Kemple et al., 2016; McClintic & Petty, 2015). Los maestros tienden a ver el patio de juegos al aire libre desde dos perspectivas. La primera perspectiva es que existe como un lugar para que los niños descansen y liberen su energía entre actividades basadas en el contenido, también denominada como la “teoría de energía excedente” (Malone & Tranter, 2003, p. 299). La segunda perspectiva es que el espacio exterior conforma una importante extensión del aula interior, en donde las paredes del salón poseen “fronteras [que] parecen transparentes” (p. 299). Por ende, se aprecia un conflicto entre las creencias, comprensiones y prácticas de los docentes respecto de los espacios de aprendizaje en aulas exteriores (McClintic & Petty, 2015). Los maestros de primera infancia deben utilizar el entorno de formas intencionales para que puedan estimular la curiosidad de los niños, ejercitar habilidades de investigación, fomentar el juego complejo y proporcionar un lugar y oportunidad para correr y realizar actividades exigentes.

La perspectiva y filosofía de nuestro equipo preescolar en torno al juego en un ambiente exterior natural conformaba la fuerza impulsora detrás de la construcción del patio de juegos. Los docentes catalogaron el espacio exterior como otro entorno crucial de aprendizaje en donde los niños podían explorar de forma autónoma sus alrededores y desarrollar su conocimiento. Si bien los fondos preescolares eran limitados, fue el deseo de las maestras de respaldar el aprendizaje de los estudiantes lo que en última instancia impulsó el proyecto. También determinamos que la responsabilidad de avalar el juego externo no descansaba únicamente sobre los hombros de los maestros. Era un esfuerzo de grupo que involucraba a niños, padres, maestros y otras partes interesadas (McClintic & Petty, 2015).

Debíamos comprometernos a tener éxito; un enfoque de todo o nada hubiese interrumpido nuestro progreso. Por consiguiente, utilizamos los recursos disponibles a nuestro alrededor. Estos recursos contemplaban materiales, así como varias manos de ayuda. Como pueden apreciar en las fotos, la



mayoría de los espacios de juego incluían materiales fabricados y de corte natural. En un entorno al aire libre, los niños utilizan baldes con colores brillantes, palas, vehículos y otros materiales para fomentar su juego, así como varas, rocas y tierra. Tienen la oportunidad de participar en un juego dramático, físico y cooperativo que figura inmerso en un entorno primordialmente ecológico, aprovechando los diversos materiales.

Disfrutamos el tiempo que pasamos juntos construyendo nuestro espacio al aire libre, y reconocemos que esta construcción en un proceso en curso. Tomará tiempo comprender qué elementos funcionan de mejor forma en la captación de los intereses de los niños e incrementan conductas de juego vivaces. Mientras tanto, nos enorgullece la respuesta de la comunidad preescolar ante un proyecto abrumador, pero gratificante.

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Power Up Your Classroom:

CONNECTING TO POPULAR CULTURE TO SUPPORT PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S NUMERACY AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

BY ALLISON STERLING HENWARD & LEAH SCHOENBERG MUCCIO

Four-year-old Javier, a dual language learner of Spanish and English, arrives at school early one December morning. His teacher, Ms. Garcia, notices that he is wearing a Spider-Man costume. Ms. Garcia has observed him closely since the beginning of the year. She notes that he usually watches other children talking and playing, yet chooses to play by himself. Ms. Garcia notices that Javier rarely interacts with the other children, most of whom also speak Spanish and English. On this day, when he walks into the classroom, Gabriella and Michael immediately approach him. They begin talking animatedly, asking him about his Spider-Man costume, and inviting him to play. Javier joins them in the dramatic play center and they play together until clean up time. From this day on, Javier wears his costume to school each day and 'plays Spider-Man' during free and guided play. Through playing Spider-Man, Javier builds his positive self-concept, social skills, and develops his Spanish and English language proficiency. The children's common interest in Spider-Man has opened the door for Javier. He is talking, negotiating and relating to children in new ways.

Introduction

As Javier and his friends demonstrate, popular culture—which for preschool-aged children is typically comprised of characters and stories from television, movies, and more recently from digital handheld devices—is an important part of many children's lives. Walking in the doors of their preschools, children carry backpacks emblazoned with Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Minions, and My Little Pony. They wear shoes with Superheroes, Star Wars, and Angry Birds across the toes. Young children literally carry these things, and knowledge about them, into their preschool classrooms. As many parents and preschool teachers can attest, these characters are often important to children. In the preschool classroom, they can give children shared things to talk about and common ideas for play, in turn fostering



literacy development and prosocial behavior (De-Souza & Radell, 2011; Paley, 2014).

Children's shared interest in specific characters can be especially powerful when the children in the classroom come from a variety of cultural backgrounds and life experiences. But many teachers have concerns that their preschool classroom will be "taken over" by the images and ideas children see on television and in other media (White & Walker, 2007). As a result, not all early childhood teachers feel comfortable having children talk about and incorporate these characters into their playful learning in the classroom (Henward, 2015).

Intentional teachers can demonstrate that they value and honor children's diverse experiences by using all aspects of children's culture, including their interest in and connections to popular culture, to promote and enhance children's learning and development (Epstein, 2007). Children's cultures form the context in which they learn and develop (Vygotsky, 1978) and provide children with the content for their thinking and problem solving (Lickey & Powers, 2011). In this article, we provide background information and strategies for how and why teachers can use popular culture in instructional

ways within the early childhood classroom, specifically related to children's numeracy and literacy development.

Supporting Research

Culture can be defined as the shared values, practices and norms of communities, often tied to the ethnicity and the heritage of children. Cultural practices can include art, music and language. However, culture is also the ordinary, quotidian practices of children and families (Halliday, 1999), including unspoken cultural norms, interaction styles, and the things people do for enjoyment, including popular culture. Popular culture can include the television and movies that children and families watch and other media they interact with at home (Henward & MacGillivray, 2014)

Even though popular culture is a part of children's lives cultural practices related to media are not always welcomed by early childhood teachers. Researchers (Seiter, 1999; Henward, 2011) found that teachers from middle class backgrounds are typically less comfortable inviting television or commercialized culture into the classroom. This discomfort often extends to the materials and toys a teacher might allow the children to bring to the classroom or the teacher-approved topics of conservation and play. Hartmann and Brougere (2004) found that Austrian preschool teachers, when given the choice of selecting toys featured in movies and television shows (i.e., fashion dolls and action figures) or toys of characters that did not come from popular culture (i.e., baby dolls), overwhelmingly chose non-commercialized materials. The teachers described toys and games from popular culture as undesirable when they were given the choice of non-media related materials.

Nevertheless, teachers' attitudes toward children's interests can influence children's learning. When teachers allow some chil-

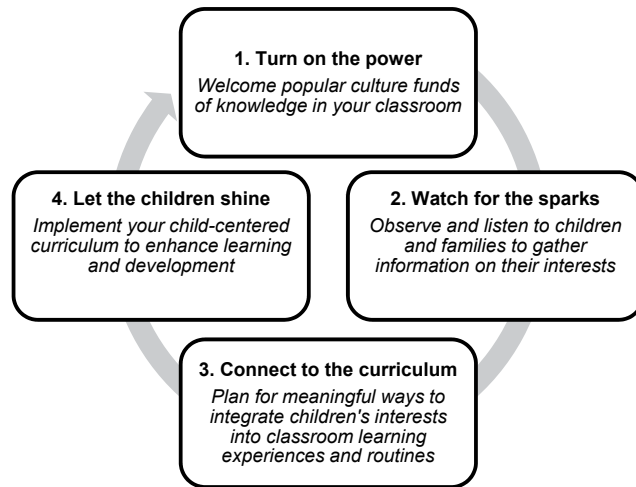
dren to talk about their interests (such as dinosaurs, tractors, and baby animals) and incorporate them in the learning activities and routines, but discourage talk about popular culture (such as cartoon and movie characters) and exclude them from teacher-led classroom learning, this difference can negatively influence some children’s motivation to learn (Marsh, 2000). By encouraging some topics, while discouraging others, teachers unintentionally create inequities for children who may not talk about topics that are valued in schools (Marsh & Millard, 2013).

A wide gap between the school culture and children’s home cultures can foster disparities in diverse children’s learning and growth (NAEYC, 2009). Early childhood literacy researchers Comber and Kerkham (2016) acknowledge that inequities can develop when teachers encourage some children to use knowledge or ideas “in their backpack” that typically align with school curriculum. The researchers note that when children bring up ideas outside of traditional school knowledge (e.g., popular culture), teachers can mistakenly assume those children come to school with little knowledge to contribute, i.e., with an “empty backpack.” In this paper, we show how intentional teachers can address this inequity by recognizing and valuing the contents of each child’s “backpack,” be it kitties, planets, or Star Wars.

Popular Culture Funds of Knowledge

Just as culturally responsive practices can improve young children’s learning and development in areas such as their numeracy development (Muccio, Kuwahara, & Otsuji, 2014), responding positively to children’s popular culture can also benefit children’s development. Using a strengths-based approach to popular culture (Grace, 2007) means recognizing that children are popular culture experts! Outside of the preschool classroom, digital media is part of most children’s everyday lives. It is no wonder preschool teachers often observe children in their preschool classrooms using media ideas as part of their play (Galman, 2017; Paley, 2014). In play scenarios and in talk, children are eager to share their expertise with their peers and teachers. Rather than putting rules in place that discourage play connected to media and popular culture, teachers can

Power Up: A Strategy for Integrating Popular Culture in the Classroom



facilitate and guide children’s play while building on what children already know. We suggest that by viewing children’s knowledge of popular culture as an asset rather than a deficit, early childhood teachers and programs can more effectively capitalize on children’s “funds of knowledge” (Barton & Tan, 2009; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Hedges, 2011).

Power Up: A strategy for integrating popular culture in the classroom

The Power Up strategy helps early childhood teachers to intentionally integrate children’s interests into the curriculum and individual lessons to enhance learning and development. In classrooms where teachers use the iterative Power Up process, children are invited to share their interests and experiences, and teachers thoughtfully integrate these interests in their practices. Teachers use children’s popular culture funds of knowledge (Barton & Tan, 2009) as a foundation for supporting the development of academic skills and knowledge, such as counting or story retelling. Thus, intentional teachers who take children’s interests seriously can help close the gap between what matters to children at home and in their communities and what schools value.

Step 1: Turn on the Power (Create opportunities for children and families to share)

Early childhood teachers can provide classroom environments where the everyday

experiences of young children and their families are welcomed. The learning formats of instructional conversation (Goh, Yamachi, & Ratliffe, 2012; Tharp & Entz, 2003) and daily routines (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) provide meaningful forums to learn about songs, television shows, computer games, and movies that are a part of the children’s lives. Chats over snack or conversations during pick up allow teachers unique opportunities to discover parts of the children’s home cultures that are meaningful to them, including their interest in and connections to popular culture. These informal discussions and opportunities to share as part of the routines of the day send an important signal to the children. The teacher demonstrates that all aspects of the children’s experiences are opportunities for authentic connections to promote learning and development (Hedges, Cullen & Jordan, 2011). In the opening, when Ms. Garcia saw Javier’s intense interest in Spider-Man, she welcomed him and his interests by allowing him to come to school dressed in his Spider-Man costume. She supported this interchange and created an opportunity to connect to his out of school interests. By including popular culture and honoring his voice, she created a space for Javier to begin to co-construct learning opportunities and play (Hedges, 2000; 2011).

Step 2: Watch for the Sparks (Observe for and document children’s connections)

When children and their families feel

safe to share all of their knowledge and experiences, including those from media and popular culture, teachers can gain rich information from observing and listening. Especially during free play or choice time, the interests of the children will be evident in their topics of discussion and in the characters they pretend to be. Teachers observe children and document their work to identify their needs and areas of strength as staples of their practices (Reifel, 2011). However, observing for the purpose of understanding the children's interests and connections to popular culture tends to be a less frequent form of early childhood assessment. Using observations for an additional purpose, teachers can collect information about popular culture connections and look for trends or commonalities. These data provide an additional layer of assessment information that can significantly enrich and inform preschool teachers' planning and instruction. Prompts such as "tell me about who you are pretending to be" and "let's draw what we watched on TV last night" provide forums to build children's language, cognitive and metacognitive, and motor skills while collecting valuable information to guide future instruction and learning experiences (Lillard et al., 2013). As Javier became more comfortable playing Spider-Man with the other children, Ms. Garcia took anecdotal records of the content of their play, their dialogue, and the roles they filled. She recorded which children shared Javier's interest and the storylines the children acted out.

Step 3: Connect to the Curriculum (Plan Meaningful Learning Experiences)

Once teachers document children's popular culture as funds of knowledge (Hedges, 2011), they can apply their understanding of the children's interests to their lesson and curriculum planning (Marsh, 2000; Wohlwend, 2015). The degree to which teachers integrate these connections will vary depending on the philosophy, curriculum model, and program mandates. Using the same learning goals or targets for children in terms of their development of academic skills, the content of the learning experiences can connect to popular culture. Children can develop their one-to-one correspondence counting matchbox cars or develop their understanding of the parts

of a story by dictating their own version of Moana, for example. Teachers can expand an existing learning experience to include materials or ideas from popular culture. For example, inviting children to bring in sets of items from home as counters for the 100th day of school to include toys such as Shopkins figurines helps to build children's understanding of comparing the number of items in sets. To promote and enhance writing, children can dictate stories about Disney princesses in the writing center to focus on story elements (Wohlwend, 2015). In classrooms with theme-based curricula, teachers can plan learning activities incorporating characters from popular culture in writing centers and cooking centers (Marsh, 2000). In classrooms where teachers implement an emergent, negotiated or co-constructed curriculum, teachers can facilitate projects based on child-initiated topics (Helm & Katz, 2011). Ms. Garcia planned for a project based on the children's interest in Spider-Man with a focus on comparing Spider-Man to real spiders to promote the children's abstract thinking skills. Within the project, she integrated learning goals connected to the children's language, cognitive, and motor development through learning opportunities in the content areas of science, mathematics, and literacy.

Step 4: Let the Children Shine (Implement the Lessons and Curriculum)

With the careful planning to support their teaching, teachers complete the Power Up cycle by carrying out the lessons or curriculum connected to children's interests in popular culture. Ms. Garcia carried out her 6-week project on spiders with the children. Using a project-based learning approach (Helm & Katz, 2011) she was able both to meet required state learning standards and to engage in child-centered practices. During a focusing event, Ms. Garcia bridged the children's existing knowledge about Spider Man (from television) to what they wanted to know about real spiders. To explore their wonderings, she facilitated a variety of learning experiences connected to the theme. In a whole group, the preschool children listened to and acted out both fiction and nonfiction stories about spiders. They engaged in finger plays and felt board literacy retelling activities in Spanish and English. They later conducted guided science ex-

periments to learn more about their webs. Outside, they engaged in gross motor and math activities to imitate and measure how spiders climbed walls.

When implementing this strategy, teachers should also be aware of any concerns parents may have about the value of learning experiences related to popular culture. Teachers can approach these concerns openly and without judgment, explaining that popular culture is just another topic that children know about and also discussing the value of incorporating children's interests into the preschool classroom. Ms. Garcia shared with a father, who wondered if Spider-Man was an appropriate topic for learning that the children in her class explored how spider webs worked. She also explained that Spider-Man placed importance on helping others, thus connecting to early learning standards within the content areas of science and social studies.

Documenting the children's work is also key to determine how children are developing and if they are meeting learning goals (Giudici et al., 2001). Teachers can also document new interests that emerge from the learning experiences. Ms. Garcia noted that the children grew interested in the buildings in the backgrounds of the Spider-Man comics and other animated cartoons, and introduced a new project on cities and skyscrapers since the classroom was located in a downtown area. Her classroom became a more engaging, individualized, and joyful place for children and families from a variety of backgrounds and with a variety of experiences.

Conclusion

Although teachers should use a critical eye to evaluate all media, it is important for them to honor the ideas that children use in their play and talk by welcoming them in the classroom. In a student-centered and family-centered classroom, teachers can expand their culturally responsive practices to include purposeful connections to the characters and ideas from popular culture that are already part of children's lives. Moving these parts of children's culture and interests from the backpacks in children's cubbies into the classroom through teacher-facilitated learning experiences provides teachers with another way to spark learning. Plugging into such a powerful resource can give teachers of young

children additional tools for enhancing preschoolers' learning and development in many different settings.

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“I Can Do It!”

SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN’S JOY AND INDEPENDENCE THROUGH PRACTICAL LIFE EXERCISES IN A NON-MONTESSORI CLASSROOM

BY DANA BUSH & MARY SCIARAFFA



Repetition is the secret of perfection; and this is why the exercises are connected with the common activities of daily life. If a child does not set a table for a group of people who are really going to eat, if he does not have real brushes for cleaning, and real carpets to sweep whenever they are used, if does not himself have to wash and dry dishes and glasses he will never attain any real ability. And if he does not live a social life based on proper education he will never attain that graceful naturalness which is so attractive in our children.

—Maria Montessori (2007, p. 94).

Maria Montessori’s ideas were considered radical in 1907 when she opened her first Casa dei Bambini or Children’s House (Mooney, 2000). Yet, her research into young children and what they need to learn has affected the fundamental ways early childhood educators think about children today. Montessori’s theories about young children have influenced the structure of all early childhood programs, not just those called “Montessori” programs. In her 1946 London Lectures, Maria Montessori explained,

When we speak about the behaviour of men and animals, we refer to their purposeful movements. This behaviour is the centre of their practical life. It is not just the practical life in a house, cleaning rooms, watering plants, etc., that is important, but the fact that everyone in the world must move with a purpose and must work, not only for himself but also for others”(2012, p. 166).

The focus of this article is on one aspect of the Montessori method: Practical Life Exercises. We discuss how this method can be fully utilized to bring joy back into all early childhood classrooms through the use of intentional, purposeful activities. Intentional teachers who include practical life exercises within their early childhood curriculum will help children learn intentional, purposeful movements and actions. Through these exercises, children also have the opportunity to learn that their purposeful work affects their classroom community, thus contributing to their awareness of intent and purpose.

Practical life exercises are purposeful work activities that practice the tasks adults perform each day in order to maintain order

in their environment and meet basic needs. Examples of these activities include washing floors, polishing wood, watering plants, and preparing and serving snack or lunch (Joosten, 2013). Children observe adults perform these tasks and become familiar with them. According to Lillard (2007), these activities are used in the early childhood classroom to help children practice purposeful movement, concentration, sequencing steps of a task, and care for the environment. Children find meaning in practical life exercises because they want to help perform real-life adult tasks. According to Mooney (2000), Montessori believed that real-life work builds children’s self-esteem in a way that more contrived or artificial activities cannot. In addition, children engaging in practical life exercises develop fine motor skills, strengthen cognitive development, enhance concentration, and improve self-efficacy and autonomy.

Practical life exercises are meaningful to children for many reasons. They provide an opportunity for children to see immediate consequences of their actions. When children squeeze a wet sponge, water appears. Practical life exercises also have a sequence. They focus on performing smaller tasks at first, such as grasping and squeezing, and then gradually increase in difficulty as the child gains control. Practical life exercises connect the child to the community within the classroom through meaningful activities. For example, when the child sets the table for snack, this purposeful work benefits not only the child, but also others within the class community. Through these activities, the child gains a sense of belonging and being a contributing member of the community.

Purposes of Practical Life Exercises

Through practical life exercises, children learn a wide variety of skills, including organizing steps of a given task, independence,

concentration, hand-eye coordination, social awareness, and self-esteem. Children can also learn to find meaning in everyday activities that sustain life (Lillard, 2011). Practical life exercises are organized around four main concepts: independence, education of movement, precision of thought, and restoration of energy.

Independence

Montessori saw guiding children toward increased independence as a primary goal of education. Practical life exercises encourage independence through the repetition of tasks. Through this repetition of routine tasks, children can gain a sense of accomplishment and view themselves as effective agents in the world (Lillard, 2007).

Education of Movement

The second important practical life concept, education of movement, is encouraged by engaging the child to perform specific tasks in which a child can become more orderly and precise (Lillard, 2007). The belief is that practice makes perfect. Montessori also observed that children need order at a specific sensitive period in their development (Lillard, 2007). Young children systematically categorize their world; therefore, routines and order very important. The sense of calm that can accompany having a place for everything and everything in its place provides the child with opportunities for self-construction and self-regulation (Joosten, 2013; Lillard, 2007).

Precision of Thought

The third concept, precision of thought, engages the child's mind through concentration and following a specific sequence. Montessori believed that materials and routines were needed to help children appreciate precision that is not as readily apparent in nature (Lillard, 2007). Practical life exercises are viewed as serving an important role in nurturing children's ability to concentrate and work toward ordered sequential steps (Lillard, 2007).

Restoring Energy

The last practical life concept, restoring energy, focuses on restoring children's energy through caring for the environment (Lillard, 2007). Montessori believed that taking care of things already in the environment restores energy in ways that creating new things does not (Montessori, 1917).

Groups of Practical Life Exercises

Practical life exercises are important in the classroom because they teach children skills associated with everyday living and how to be a contributing member of the classroom community (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2005). Practical life exercises can be divided into four activity groups: preliminary activities, care of self, care of the environment, and social graces and courtesies. All of these groups include the practice of mindfulness, defined as focusing attention on the present moment in a non-judgmental way. Montessori practical life exercises incorporate mindfulness through concentration, mind-body integration, work on practical tasks, and specific exercises like The Silence and Walking on the Line. Within Montessori classrooms, teachers intentionally guide children to pay attention to the sensory experience of their body's movement during the practical life exercises. When implementing practical life exercises within the classroom, teachers need to help children be mindful by drawing children's attention to the moment in time and the movements they are conducting to complete the activities (Lillard, 2011). Through repetition and mindfulness, children can begin completing tasks with grace, dexterity, precision, and order.

A key component of mindfulness is being non-judgmental. Because teachers are the models of finding meaning within practical life exercises, they must practice mindfulness and withhold judgment in order to allow children to find their own joy within the meaningful task. It is important for teachers to remember that, by practicing the tasks within the following four activity groups, children are creating a sense of purpose and a joy in doing things for themselves and others.

Preliminary Activities

The first group, preliminary activities, includes basic movements of all societies. These elementary movements are important because they are related to the muscular and nerve development of the child. Intentional classroom activities in the preliminary activities group could include pouring, folding, carrying items, and walking on a line.

Care of Self

The next group, care of self, includes activities that serve as a means for children to

gain independence. Tasks such as caring of their personal hygiene are in this group. Intentional classroom activities related to care of self can include brushing teeth, washing hands, and learning how to button clothing.

Care of the Environment

Being part of a community means doing your part to care for it; thus, learning how to care for the classroom environment is an important aspect of practical life exercises. These practical life exercises include, but are not limited to, setting the table, dusting the shelves, washing the dishes, sweeping the floor, cleaning up spills, watering plants and gardening.

Social Graces and Courtesies

The last group, social graces and courtesies, includes the development of social relationships and skills for living within a social society. The children work on their interactions with people. These include both interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, such as shaking a person's hand, saying "please" and "thank you," serving others at a table, appropriate ways to interrupt someone, and how to cough and sneeze. These social skills are important aspects of the growth of a child according to Montessori (Lillard, 2007).

Implementing Practical Life Exercises in the Classroom

As stated earlier, Montessori's theories are important to all early childhood educators. Practical life exercises are especially important to include in early childhood classrooms because they enable children to learning independence through self-directed activity. For practical life exercises to be effective careful attention must be given to the environment and the teacher must plan intentional activities. Montessori emphasized that creating a beautiful and interesting environment is just as important for teachers as choosing books for the library (Mooney, 2000).

Teachers can intentionally include practical life exercises within their classroom either on a small scale with a few experiences, or on a larger scale with a classroom-learning center focused on practical life. Prior to implementing a practical life center, teachers need to evaluate their class schedule and environment. Teachers should intentionally schedule an independent-choice block of time within the day that allows enough time

for children to develop and carry out ideas. The physical space of a practical life center should be close to water and a drainage source because many of the activities include liquid and sometimes dirt.

Whether teachers wish to implement practical life exercises on a small scale or a larger scale, they must intentionally arrange activities and materials in places that are easily accessible for children. For example, placing materials on the low child-sized shelving encourages independence and conveys the message that the materials are intended for children's use. Teachers also need to be intentional about the number of tasks offered to children. A small number of tasks should be available, especially at the beginning of the school year. A minimalist approach is recommended when selecting and shelving materials. Teachers need to remember that having too many options can be distracting to the children. Items should be placed on trays, with a designated location on the tray for each item.

Next, teachers need to be intentional when defining workspace. This definition of workspace is important for children because it builds a sense of routine and promotes calmness, independence, and self-regulation. Workspace can be confined to a mat or tray. Items should be placed on the tray in order of use, from left to right (Lillard, 2007). For younger children, teachers can draw an outline on a foam mat and placed the mat on the tray to encourage the sequence of the activity. As children get older, they will understand the sequence and then the mat is no longer needed. Activities can be changed weekly, and skill levels can be advanced as the children's ability increases.

Practical life exercises invite the child to learn about their surroundings through the use of child-sized versions of activities commonly found in the home (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2005). All materials should be in good condition, child-sized, and in good repair. Materials should also match in color to teach children to place 'like with like' (Lillard, 2007). The child-sized objects allow children to utilize an object in the proper way, thus connecting the mind and body. By using real materials, teachers are intentionally giving children concrete objects to learn with and providing children with mental images necessary for cognitive development. Montessori made it clear that it is a serious teaching responsibility to "become the

keeper and custodian of the environment" (Montessori, 1995, p. 277).

Few practical life materials are standardized allowing teachers to design the materials that will best meet the needs of their classroom. Teachers should respond to the unique cultural make-up of their classroom and make necessary adaptations to this area of curriculum. Some adaptations could include the use of culturally relevant foods and plants. Teachers can also incorporate various materials native to a particular area, such as shells and rocks (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2005). In a Hawaiian Montessori school, for example, teachers may make adaptations to reflect Hawaiian culture in the surrounding natural environment. Stringing is done with flowers, seeds, or leaves; pouring and scooping are done with small shells and seeds; large shells are often used as pouring vessels; dressing frames are made with tapa-cloth designs; and food activities include preparations of rice sushi, pounding poi, and drying fruits and seeds (Bogart, 1992).

Conclusion

In conclusion, practical life exercises can be a valued addition to any early childhood classroom. These exercises can bring joy through meaningful activities that are carried out with intention, which in turn contributes to a sense of self and community. We all want to be masters of our own fate. Only through self-motivated accomplishments do we experience the joy of learning and living. Lillard (2011) draws this comparison between Montessori programs and mindfulness programs: "There is an emphasis on deep concentration as a source of personal development, leading to balance and joy and, by extension, to healthy relationships with other people and the environment" (p. 84). Teachers of young children are encouraged to bring joy back into the classroom by intentionally providing children with developmentally appropriate opportunities for practice and success through practical life exercises.

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Innovative Strategies for Joyful Learning

IN A HIGHER EDUCATION EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAM

BY KAREN DENNIS



Photos courtesy of the author.

Give the pupils something to do, not learn, and the doing is such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results.
(Dewey, 1916)

Setting the Stage for Joyful Learning

Had you entered the Oakdale Education Building at the University of Mobile's campus on presentation night, you would have seen an interesting group. Two students were bundled up in winter coats, scarves and mittens huddled in one corner of the classroom, while two others donned sunglasses and straw hats. A fifth student twirled an umbrella, while a sixth held a steamy cup labeled with the words "pumpkin spice." As the music started, you heard the familiar tune of Justin Timberlake's "Can't Stop the Feeling," but instead of the original lyrics, you heard the six students sing, "Can't change the weather." The entourage went on to sing about summer, fall, winter and spring, detailing the characteristics of each season. This group performance set the stage, quite literally, for the rest of presentation night. The next group delivered an innovation of Taylor Swift's monologue from

"Shake it Off," followed by a lyrical lesson to help memorize multiples of eight. Other groups also presented an integrated lesson for children, complete with new lyrics to a hit song, and then added choreography sure to engage those children with the visual effects to top it off. So, you may be wondering why college students are singing and dancing...

A Well-Rounded Education for Children

Teacher education programs provide instruction in effective practices that are developmentally appropriate for young children. It is crucial for future teachers to have a clear understanding of effective teaching and learning practices for the early childhood classroom (Gullo & Hughes, 2011). It is equally crucial that they have an understanding of federal, state, and local mandates that directly affect the early childhood curriculum. The U.S. Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015 as the newest iteration of the federal education law. The language of the ESSA includes a new term: "well-rounded education." The ESSA defines a well-round-

ed education as one having "courses, activities, and programming in subjects such as:

- English, reading or language arts, writing,
- Science,
- Technology,
- Engineering,
- Mathematics,
- Foreign languages,
- Civics and government, economics,
- Arts,
- History,
- Geography,
- Computer science,
- Music,
- Career and technical education,
- Health, physical education, and
- Any other subject, as determined by

the State or local educational agency, with the purpose of providing all students access to an enriched curriculum and educational experience" (US Department of Education, 2015).

One proven method of meeting ESSA requirements is to teach through an integrated curriculum. Innovative educators everywhere endeavor to create lessons that are engaging but also relevant and aligned to standards. Many have found success in weaving the arts – including dance, music, theatre, and visual art – into lessons focused on core academic subjects. Put simply, the arts enhance the process of learning (Jensen, 2002).

An Integrated Approach for Teacher Education

Teaching and learning are not simple undertakings. Educators must be well versed in both the content and best practice for delivering the content (Vitulli, Santoli, & Fresne, 2013). The School of Education at the University of Mobile strives to prepare teacher candidates to enter the workforce equipped with knowledge of the most effective strategies, as well as hands-on practice employing those strategies. Germane to an effective teacher education program

is an alignment between course content in the college-level classrooms and current pedagogical trends in early childhood and elementary classrooms. The School of Education routinely assesses coursework to ensure the alignment is sufficient using curricular mapping (Hutchings, 2016) to develop a matrix identifying the level to which each course meets instructional outcomes. The matrix illustrated that although our teacher candidates were exposed to ESSA requirements, they were not given ample opportunity to experience the planning and implementation of lessons that adhere to ESSA's well-rounded education tenet.

To provide additional experience for teacher candidates, we implemented a new course in the teacher education program titled Integrating the Arts, Health, and Movement in Early Childhood and Elementary Education that embraced the ideology of multi-modal instruction. As the title illustrates, the aim of this course is to explore theory and methods on the nature and determinants of creativity, aesthetics, and human movement through guided movement experiences in preschool and elementary age children, as well as methods for developing these traits. Emphasis is placed on fostering creativity through an interdisciplinary and integrative approach, with special emphasis on the integration of dance, music, theatre, visual arts, and physical education across the curriculum in early childhood and elementary classrooms. The course syllabus is based on developmentally appropriate practice set forth by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Specifically, activities must focus on what we know about how young children develop, especially with regard to the strengths, needs, and interests of the young students, as well as the social and cultural contexts in which they live (Cople & Bredekamp, 2009). In addition, recent research has shown that the integration of the arts aids in a young student's ability to problem solve. Science, technology, engineering, and math education (STEM) has now become STEAM, with the addition of A (Arts). STEAM places emphasis on creativity and encourages children to be an active part of their own learning (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2018).

In true multidisciplinary fashion, the students enrolled in the course show what

Figure 1. Teaching Multiples of Eight to the Tune of "Shake it Off"

Part 1: Standards for this Activity

Choose a standard from at least 3 strands of the Alabama Course of Study:

Arts Education Dance Media Arts Music Theatre Visual Arts

For each Arts Education standard chosen, describe, in detail, how that standard will be addressed in the activity.

We chose 3rd grade standards:

Dance: Change levels, directions, and pathway designs safely in a dance phrase while coordinating with a partner and other dancers (Standard 11). To master this standard, our dance required us to squat down to the floor at different times. We also moved to different coordinated locations throughout the song.

Music: Demonstrate selected musical ideas for a simple improvisation or composition to express intent or to describe connection to a specific purpose and context (Standard 3). We incorporated this standard by re-writing the lyrics to Taylor Swift's "Shake it Off" to teach a math concept, specifically the multiples of eight.

Theatre: Investigate how movement and voice are incorporated into drama/theatre work (Standard 10). We addressed this standard as we planned how our voices switched from rapping to singing and how our movements coordinated with the new lyrics.

Alabama Course of Study: Health Education

Standard: We chose standard 6 – Identify ways to create and maintain healthy friendships.

How will this standard be addressed in the activity? By having students work together to create a song with a choreographed routine, the students will learn that everyone has different opinions and ideas and they are all valuable. Through an activity like this, we will convey to the students that even when you have a different opinion, you can work it out and still maintain a healthy friendship with the people in your group.

Alabama Course of Study: Physical Education

Standard: We chose Standard 11 – Display good sportsmanship

How will this standard be addressed in the activity? This standard was addressed by encouraging students to compliment each other when different components of the lyric writing and choreography planning went well. We specifically asked students to give an "air five" (silent high-five) when we were working in collaborative groups.

Choose a standard from at least one academic content area.

ALCOS: Mathematics: Standard 3-OA – Fluently multiply and divide within 100, using strategies such as relationships between multiplication and division or properties of operations. By the end of grade 3, know from memory all products of two one-digit numbers.

ALCOS: Science:

ALCOS: Social Studies:

ALCOS: English Language Arts:

For each academic standard chosen, describe what part of the standard you expect the students to master as a result of participating in this activity.

To meet this standard, we focused on multiples of eight as the modeled routine. As an extension, each group was assigned a different numeral to sing about.

they have learned about how to deliver multimodal lessons by doing just that. Armed with the knowledge that music is a natural motivator for young children (Epstein, 2015), each collaborative group of students develops a lesson with music as the cornerstone. For the assignment, each lesson must

focus on standards from Alabama Courses of Study for Arts Education, Health Education, Physical Education, and at least one from Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, or English Language Arts. After a study of what songs are trending with the target age/grade level, the groups then compose new lyrics

Part 2: 'Piggy Back Song' Procedure

1. Choose a song that has a tune familiar or popular with the students.
2. Find a copy of sheet music for the song that includes the original lyrics.
3. Find an instrumental version of the song to be played during your presentation.
4. Focusing on your chosen standards, compose new lyrics, following the syllable and stress patterns of the original lyrics, paying particular attention to any parts of the song that can be retained to keep the 'flavor' or the 'vibe' of the original song.
5. Design choreography (movements), visual cues, and clothing options for the presentation.

Our song lyrics (to the tune of Taylor Swift's "Shake it Off")

Hey hey, hey

Just think while you've been adding and subtracting in the boring boring classes of the world

You could've been multiplying in this cool way

My teach-er brought this new sym-bol

We're like "Oh my word – let's use the number eight"

And to my friend over there with the really good hair

Won't you come on over buddy Multiply, ply, ply

Woah oh oh

8x1 is 8 8 8 8 8x2 is 16 yeah yeah 8x3 is twenty-four I multiply, multiply

8x4 is 32 ooh ooh 8x5 is 40 oh yeah 8x6 is 48 I multiply multiply

Integrated Curriculum Activity Presentation Guide

Be sure to include the following information:

1. Title of the activity
2. Target grade level of activity
3. All of the standards on which this activity focuses. Follow your lesson plan to be sure you name the standards from ALL Courses of Study.
4. Justification for choosing this particular song AS A TOOL to reinforce the chosen academic concept. Is this song already familiar? Popular? Catchy tune or movements? (There could be more than one reason.)
5. Describe in detail how this activity could be used with students of your chosen grade level.
6. Perform your song, with new lyrics and choreography.

**Conclusion:
Embracing the Joy**

If ever there was a time to revitalize teacher preparation courses in early childhood education, it is now. Embracing the joy of teaching should be on the syllabus of every course taken by those who strive to become our next foundation builders – our early childhood educators. The course Integrating the Arts, Health, and Movement in Early Childhood and Elementary Education offered in the early childhood education program at the University of Mobile has ignited the flame of joyful instruction. It is in courses like this one that a passion for teaching can be presented and nurtured, while keeping research-based pedagogical principles in place. This course also creates a venue for implementing Universal Design for Learning (Glass, Meyer, & Rose, 2013) strategies in fun, innovative ways. Overall, this class has shown promise in delivering a program that prepares teacher candidates to deliver a well-rounded education while sharing the joy of teaching and learning.

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that reinforce an academic concept. The students "go all out" by adding choreography and costumes. Figure 1 depicts a planning guide used by teacher candidates enrolled in the course as they work collaboratively to develop their lesson.

Joy Rediscovered through Hands-On Experience

The energy in the classroom on preparation days was as high as on presentation day. Discussions that emerged from planning days led to dialogs about best practices and developmentally appropriateness and Universal Design for Learning [UDL] (Glass, Meyer, & Rose, 2013) – true music to a professor's ears! The experience of planning and presenting a multimodal lesson resonated with teacher candidates as they

got to see first-hand how they can truly bring joy into their teaching. One student exclaimed, "At first, I thought, 'This is crazy!' but then when I worked through it, I had so much fun learning. I know my future students will have fun learning this way." (Personal communication, 2018) Another student commented, "This was such a cool way for me to practice how I should teach." (Personal communication, 2018) Further proof that the course is paving the way for teacher education courses to rediscover joyful learning lies in a comment made by a teacher candidate. She very poignantly stated, "This lesson made me remember why I am glad I am an early childhood major. I know now I can bring my passion of music and art into my future class." (Personal communication, 2018)

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LET'S READ! ¡VAMOS A LEER!

REVIEW BY DINA COSTA TREFF



The Big Umbrella is Amy June Bates' debut as a both the author and illustrator. This story is simple yet expansive. One umbrella is capable of covering and sheltering an array of diverse individuals. There is an understanding of inclusion and acceptance without the typical acknowledgment of the diversity present. The illustrations beautifully portray the differences among the population of the world.

In a time where exclusion is a common media topic, Amy June Bates' The Big Umbrella is a prime example of what we need more of in children's literature. This book can be a launching point for discussing differences individually or as a whole. This book is recommended for children ages 4-8, although children as young as 3 can definitely grasp the central theme of acceptance and inclusion.

El libro The Big Umbrella es el debut de Amy June Bates como autora e ilustradora. Esta historia es simple pero expansiva. Un paraguas es capaz de cubrir y albergar una gran variedad de individuos diversos. Existe un entendimiento de inclusión y aceptación sin el reconocimiento típico de la diversidad presente. Las ilustraciones retratan bellamente las diferencias entre la población del mundo. En una época en la que la exclusión es un tema común en los medios, The Big Umbrella de Amy June Bates es un excelente ejemplo de lo que necesitamos más en la literatura infantil. Este libro puede ser un

punto de partida para discutir las diferencias individualmente o en conjunto. Este libro se recomienda para niños de 4 a 8 años de edad,

aunque los niños de tan solo 3 años pueden comprender el tema central de aceptación e inclusión.



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It's All about Relationships!

Quality relationships in early childhood are very important for children's healthy socioemotional development (Séguin & MacDonald, 2018). Vygotsky believed that children learn from adults and peers and that learning occurs through the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Parents help build strong relationships by modeling and teaching (O'Connor, Nolan, Bergmeier, Hooley, Olsson, & Cann, 2016) often through funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzales, 1992) as families value such relationships. Furthermore, the nature of teacher-child relationships is important for quality learning experiences in the early childhood classroom (Albin-Clark, Shirley, Webster, & Woolhouse, 2018). We are looking for manuscripts that focus on different aspects of relationships in early childhood. The following include possible topics but it is not an exclusive list:

- Peer relations
- Relationships and children with special needs
- Relationships in play
- Child-child relationships
- Adult-child relationships (teacher or parent)
- Parent-teacher relationships
- Intergenerational relationships
- Quality interactions
- Diversity in relationships (including same sex families, immigrants families, one parent families, families in poverty)
- Social competence
- Problem-solving
- Classroom environment
- Temperament
- Behavior
- Emotions
- Self-control
- Trust
- Trauma, separation, loss
- Influence of technology
- Relationships vs. friendships
- Friendship

**Please send your submission by September 1, 2019 to
editor@southernearlychildhood.org.**

Mari Riojas-Cortez, Ph.D.
Editor

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