



DIMENSIONS

of Early Childhood

Meditation and Teacher Stress

Promoting Social and Emotional Learning in Pre-K

Building Curriculum during Block Play

Talking Science in an ESL Pre-K

Classroom Labels that Young Children Can Use

Accessible Family Involvement

Volume 43, Number 1, 2015



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Editor - Mari Cortez, Ph.D.

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Southern Early Childhood Association
1123 S. University, Ste 255
Little Rock, AR 72204
(800) 305-7322
info@southernearlychildhood.org
www.southernearlychildhood.org

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President's Message

Kathy Attaway

After more than 20 years as a preschool teacher I can honestly say that one of my favorite days of the school year was Grandparent and Special Friend Day. It was a designated day for grandparents and/or special friends to visit our classroom and spend the day with us. This day was a shining example of encouraging developmentally appropriate relationships, and the social emotional impact was phenomenal. Grandparents/Special Friends had a true sense of purpose that day, the pride shown on their faces as they introduced themselves and let us know who they were there to see. The children in the classroom were just as proud to invite their grandparent/special friend into their world.

These days I often find myself thinking about the importance of intergenerational relationships related to the development of the social emotional skills of young children. Perhaps this comes to my attention as I welcome my eight-day old granddaughter into this world and celebrate my mother's 95th birthday. I am so excited for them to meet each other because it is so important for them to share that special bond.

Many years ago, I had the opportunity to bring my parents and my daughter to the classroom when I was student teaching. Not only was their visit a great visual for the young children in the classroom, it was exciting for my parents to share stories with the children and enlightening for my teenage daughter to experience both ends of the spectrum of life. When we bring these generations together, we allow each of them to develop new skills. These relationships invigorate the older adults, reduce negative perceptions young children might have of older adults and allow the teenager to experience the continuity of life. The older adults were willing to share an unconditional form of love and the children had the opportunity to encounter first hand three stages of life.

What better way to encourage children to look at the world from different perspectives than to involve them in the life of an elderly person. Having the ability to see things from another's point of view correlates to compassion and understanding. Time spent together with older adults can relieve the fear of such things as wheelchairs, walkers and physical impairments by allowing children to ask questions to solve the mystery of these issues. This give-and-take relationship also permits the older adults to share cultural customs and the children to adopt some of those customs as they begin to develop their own cultural identity. These relationships foster a positive attitude toward aging and help to develop empathy and strong character.

I challenge you to invite older adults into your classroom on a regular basis to establish intergenerational connections. Provide opportunities for these two cultural groups to spend time together by sharing stories, cooking, telling jokes, painting, going fishing, talking on the phone and reading to each other.

When the world of a young child and an older adult merge, activities and experiences become mutually beneficial and life changing. Consider enriching your curriculum by presenting these opportunities in your classroom.



Words from the Editor

Dr. Mari Cortez

When you think of early childhood education, what do you think about? I often think about the diversity of children, the classroom environment, and the well-being of teachers. In this issue of *Dimensions* we are not only highlighting the work that happens every day in early childhood classrooms but how to ensure that teachers remain healthy. Two articles focus on English Language Learners (ELLs). The first article by Kinard and Gainer tells us the story of a PK-ESL classroom where science is taught through realia. English as a Second Language or ESL classrooms are utilized when

many languages are represented in one classroom. In contrast, the second article by Gonzalez, Arreguin-Anderson and Alanís describes ways to enhance vocabulary development in a dual language classroom (a dual language classroom is one where two languages are used for instruction). Appropriate environments are crucial for all areas of development but in particular for social and cognitive development like DeMeulenaere and Andrews highlight in their respective articles. Finally, Csaszar and Buchanan describe the importance of helping teachers to reduce stress so that they can remain motivated and healthy. These are a lot of ideas to think about regarding early childhood education! I hope that the articles presented in this issue will help you think of possibilities in your own setting.

Mari Riojas-Cortez, Ph.D.

Editor

Notas del Editor:

Cuando piensas en la educación temprana, ¿en qué piensas? A menudo pienso en la diversidad de los niños, el ambiente del aula, y la importancia de mantener el bienestar de los maestros. En este número de *Dimensions* no sólo se destaca la labor que sucede todos los días en el aula de la primera infancia, sino también a los maestros que ayudan a que las cosas sucedan. Dos artículos se centran en estudiantes que tienen inglés como segundo idioma. El primer artículo de Kinard y Gainer nos cuentan la historia de una aula de PK-ESL en donde la ciencia se enseña a través de “realia” u objetos reales. En una aula de ESL o Inglés como Segundo Idioma se utilizan cuando varios idiomas están representados. En contraste, el segundo artículo por González, Arreguín-Anderson y Alanís describe las formas de mejorar el desarrollo del vocabulario en un salón de clases de doble lenguaje (una aula de doble lenguaje se utilizan dos idiomas para la enseñanza y aprendizaje). Ambientes apropiados del aula son importantes para todas las áreas de desarrollo, pero en particular para el desarrollo social y cognitivo como describen DeMeulenaere y Andrews en sus artículos respectivos. Por último, Csaszar y Buchanan describen la importancia de ayudar a los maestros a reducir el estrés de manera que puedan permanecer motivados y sanos. ¡Son muchas ideas para pensar acerca de la educación temprana! Espero que los artículos presentados en este número les ayuden a pensar las posibilidades que existen en su propio establecimiento.

Best/Deseándoles lo mejor,

Mari Riojas-Cortez, Ph.D.

Editor

Meditation and Teacher Stress

Learn how meditation can mitigate stress and promote emotional well-being for early childhood teachers.

**Imre Emeric Csaszar
& Teresa Buchanan**

Early childhood teachers can be relaxed and peaceful as they create playful and harmonious classrooms, even if they work in stressful contexts. Effective teachers sustain respectful and caring relationships with children and adults (Cooper, 2003; Essa, Taylor, Pratt, & Roberts, 2012; Ray, Lambie & Curry, 2007). However, the stressors faced by teachers may lead to negative consequences that can undermine their ability to sustain personal health and positive interactions. Meditation is a tool that can mitigate teacher stress, promote emotional well-being, and contribute to affirming exchanges between teachers and students.

Stress is the relationship between the person and environment.

Stress is an ordinary part of everyday life for all individuals. Selye in his epic book *The Stress of Life* (1984) explains that stress is a condition that forces physiological and or psychological burden(s) on a person. Similarly, Lazarus and Folkman, defined stress as: “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (1984, p. 19). Although these definitions are over 30 years old, they still hold true today, particularly as it relates to teachers. Teachers are prone to enormous stress as they face the demands and expectations of students, parents, administrators, local communities and society. Some stressors from a typical day include facilitating appropriate individual student conduct, developing effective individualized curriculum and learning activities that meet

the learning needs of children, and amplified workloads associated with increased demands for accountability including high stakes testing. In the absence of positive coping strategies, stress may lead to increasingly negative outcomes; specifically, stress experienced by teachers may lead to emotional exhaustion, a precursor to burnout.

The Practice of Meditation

One approach teachers can use to mitigate stress is the holistic wellness practice of meditation. The practice of meditation offers a promising approach to promoting teacher wellness while developing empathy and compassion. Walsh and Shapiro (2006) define meditation as “a family of self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control and thereby foster general mental well-being and development and/or specific capacities such as calm, clarity, and concentration” (pp. 228-229). The practice of meditation may be traced back to ancient times as an active element of spiritual practice by many religious groups, including Christianity (Shear, 2006). Meditation is a personal and internal activity with the aim of facilitating mental clarity.

In the last several decades the practice of meditation has become prevalent in Western culture and many contemporary health providers include meditation as part of their alternative strategy to combat a multitude of health related difficulties their patients may face (i.e., neurological issues, digestive and metabolic concerns, pain, insomnia, depression, stress) (Ospina, Bond, Karkhaneh, Tjosvold, Vandermeer, Liang, Bialy, Hooton, Buscemi, Dryden, Klassen, 2007). According to the National Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) *National Health Statistics Report #12*, in 2007 there were more than 20 million adults in the U.S. practicing meditation, which translated to closely 9.4 % of the adult population at that time (National Institutes of Health, 2010).

One of the benefits of meditation is that it promotes holistic wellness, particularly in the area of emotional and spiritual wellness. An overwhelming body of evidence from research shows that meditation can reduce and alleviate stress, fatigue, and physical illnesses (Carlson, Ursuliak, Goodey, Angen, & Specca, 2001; Goleman & Bennett-Goleman, 2001; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004; Ospina et al., 2007). While many practical forms of meditation exist (e.g., tai chi, yoga, structured and guided meditations), a potentially useful form that can be used to help alleviate educator stress is a simple practice called “mindfulness” (Curry & O’Brien, 2012).

Meditation can mitigate teacher stress.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness as a concept has received increasing attention in recent years as providing an alternative technique to address negative thoughts and emotions and to assist people who experience physiological and/or emotional challenges (Stewart, 2004). In the United States, Jon Kabat-Zinn was the forerunner of the mindfulness movement, establishing the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program in 1979. He has defined mindfulness as a “moment to moment non-judgmental awareness” (p. 626). The main goals of practicing mindfulness are 1) to be in and accept the present moment as well as 2) to engage in nonjudgmental observation of self and others (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

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Table 1. Meditation Resources

Websites

- Free Guided Meditations (audio). (2013). *University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) Regents*. Retrieved July 10, 2014 from <http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=22>
- Guided Meditations (audio). (2014). *Tara Brach*. Retrieved July 10, 2014, from <http://www.tarabrach.com/audioarchives-guided-meditations.html>
- Mindful Self Compassion (audio). (2014). *Christopher Germer*. Retrieved July 10, 2014 from http://www.mindfulnesscompassion.org/meditations_downloads.php
- Loving Kindness (metta) Meditation (audio). *Lisa Dale Miller*. Retrieved July 10, 2014 from <http://www.lisadalemiller.com/Lovingkindness-Meditation1.xml>

Books

- Hanh, Thich Nhat. (2008). *Mindful Movements: Ten Exercises for Well-Being*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat (2012). *Work: How to Find Joy and Meaning in Each Hour of the Day*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.

There are numerous ways to practice mindfulness that include deep breath work and various forms of yoga. The goal of mindfulness is to clear the mind of thought, judgments about self and others, and to enter a state of advanced relaxation that allows the body to decompress. Meditation can be done while listening to music or no music, with or without structure and guidance. Meditation should be done in a quiet, clean space. Noteworthy, new practitioners don't have to purchase books or expensive programs, clothes or gear of any type to get started. There are many places for beginners to find free, structured, guided meditations including the health site run by University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). (see Table 1) These guided meditations provide instructions and take varying amounts of time (3 minutes to 19 minutes).

One specific type of meditation that has been useful to teachers and other helping professionals is called “loving kindness meditation” (Csaszar, 2013; Leppma, 2012).

Loving-Kindness Meditation

Loving-kindness meditation is a type of mindfulness meditation with roots that can be traced back to the positive psychology movement. However, loving-kindness meditation advances mindfulness by cultivating positive emotions and by introducing the practice of compassion and empathy toward self and others (Fredrickson, 2002). This is particularly important for teachers who may suffer from emotional exhaustion which can lead to decreases in empathy and compassion and can impact teachers' relationships with their colleagues and students (Crippen, 2010).

The steps of loving-kindness are very simple. First, the practitioner finds a comfortable place to sit in a relaxing position. (It is important to not lie down.) After closing her eyes, the meditator begins by deep breathing and thinking, *“May I be healthy and strong. May I be happy. May I be filled with ease.”* Some find it helpful to draw an imaginary circle on the ground around oneself. After doing this for at least three repetitions, the next step is to think of someone the meditator loves deeply (e.g., spouse, children, parent, pet) and to focus on that person while repeating at least three times, *“May you be healthy and strong. May you be happy. May you be filled with ease.”* Again, some people find it helpful to imagine that loved one joining the meditator in the circle. Third, this process is repeated for a person the meditator feels neutral about, a person she neither likes nor dislikes (e.g., cashier at the grocery, postal worker), and imagining that person joining the meditator and loved-one in the circle. Fourth, the meditator considers a person she dislikes, focusing on the person, possibly imagining that person in the circle with the meditator, and repeating at least three times, *“May you be healthy and strong. May you be happy. May you be filled with ease.”* This is generally the most difficult step for beginners. Finally, the meditator imagines everyone in the universe while repeating the same phrases. There are many free audio resources available that can be a great help when beginning a practice like this. Evidence suggests that teachers who do this every day show significant increases in empathy and decreased stress after only six weeks (Csaszar, 2013). It is a simple thing to do in the morning before school or in the evenings before



Photos courtesy of the authors

Meditation can be a useful tool to practice in an early childhood classroom.

bedtime and can have a positive effect on teaching in the classroom.

Teachers face extreme stress and may feel overwhelmed by assessment demands, accountability, teaching loads and classroom management. Some educators may not have positive coping mechanisms and adaptation strategies to handle these stressors appropriately. Over time the stress may build, exacerbate the level of emotional exhaustion one may experience and lead to burnout and eventual impairment. Teachers inadequately dealing with their stress levels may also be less effective professionally (e.g., student outcomes, professional relationships). Some may choose to leave the profession due to their inability to cope with the difficulties they may face.

Meditation can contribute to affirming exchanges between teachers and students.

Conclusion

Although there are many things individuals can do to improve wellness (e.g., eating nutritious food, getting adequate sleep and rest, balancing work and social time, exercising), one potential wellness practice that can promote empathy and compassion is meditation. Further, this approach may help teachers mitigate stress and prevent burnout and promote emotional wellness. This approach may be implicated in assisting teachers to establish and gain the emotional resources they need in

order to meet the developmental and social concerns of children.

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About the Authors

Imre Emeric Csaszar earned his doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration at LSU. Dr. Csaszar is a licensed professional counselor and counselor supervisor in the state of Louisiana and also holds a certification as nationally certified counselor. He is an instructor of counseling, teaching and educational administration at Louisiana State University. His research interests are in stress reduction, holistic wellness and meditation, particularly loving-kindness meditation.

Teresa Buchanan is an Associate Professor at Louisiana State University in the College of Education, where she has been teaching early childhood courses for 19 years. She earned her PhD at Purdue University in Child Development and Family Studies. Her research interests are teacher education and early childhood teaching practices, specifically in finding ways to model developmentally appropriate practices in teacher-education programs, including mediators of stress for early childhood teachers.

Promoting Social and Emotional Learning in Preschool

Early childhood teachers can have a strong impact on children's social and emotional development.

Michelle DeMeulenaere

Social/emotional learning (SEL) focuses on helping children gain knowledge about feelings and getting along with others (Marion, 2011). SEL is the process in which children are able to acknowledge and recognize the emotions of others, develop empathy, make good decisions, establish friendships, and handle challenges and situations effectively. Children with social and emotional challenges may exhibit difficulty connecting with teachers and classmates, develop internalizing behavior problems, or use of physical aggression to convey their needs (Campos, Mumme, & Saarni, 1998). Early childhood teachers have a strong impact on guiding children's social and emotional development by creating a safe and supportive environment, focusing on the child's feelings, helping children develop language, and discussing the topics of how children develop SEL.

Creating a Safe and Supportive Early Childhood Environment

Preschool children flourish in a positive, trusting building environment (Day & Kunz, 2009). A positive, trusting environment includes:

- a daily schedule
- an orderly classroom arrangement
- respect between both teacher and students, and
- clear open communication between the student, parent, and teacher.

It is a safe place where children are protected from the elements and easily supervised, and it's where important activities of the day take place such as eating, sleeping, washing hands, and going to the bathroom. It is an environment for young children to learn and explore through developmentally appropriate hands-on activities.

A suitable daily schedule for an early childhood classroom should include a balance between active and quiet activities, as well as a balance between teacher initiated and child-initiated activities. There should be expanded periods of the day for interacting with their peers. It is through this balance of scheduled activities that a child will begin to correlate the concept of continuity, time, and clear expectations of the teacher.

Include a balance of active and quiet activities in the daily schedule.

The physical aspect of an early childhood classroom allows for active learning where children interact with each other and make choices. Classrooms for young children are clean, in good repair, and provide child-size equipment for comfort and safety. Adequate lighting and/or natural lighting are important components as well. Early childhood classrooms ideally are arranged with clear paths, labeled centers, a management system, and areas for both quiet and active play. Such classrooms allow children to move freely throughout the space without interrupting another child's play.

The stability and security of the teacher student relationship directly influences social and emotional learning. Effective teachers encourage children to participate in classroom activities, listen to what children say and expand upon their language, building vocabulary and knowledge. Since children think concretely rather than in abstract terms, they understand and learn when



Photo courtesy of Fannie Battle Day Home for Children, Inc., Nashville, TN

Activities that require collaboration help support social/emotional learning.

they take part in hands-on learning experiences and can actively participate in the lessons (Cople & Bredekamp, 2009). Teachers who provide stability and security plan activities that have a purpose and challenge the children. Teachers also encourage children to respect each other and their surroundings.

Student-teacher relationships foster a sense of well being in children, and a belief that they are safe and worthy (Hyson, 2004). Daily positive and caring communication about and with the child helps build the child's sense of self-worth. Open communication should also occur daily be-

tween the parents and the teachers. Communication with a parent may consist of a daily conversation, phone call, or a note home. An open dialogue with parents provides the child the consistency and support needed for the transition from home to school.

Keep an open dialogue with parents.

Focus on Feelings

Early childhood is an important period in the social and emotional development of young children. At this age, children are learning about feelings and emotions and how to express and recognize those feelings. As children learn to distinguish between positive and negative feelings, they are also learning to regulate those feelings (Izard, King, Mostow, & Trentacosta, 2004).

It is through repeated experiences and exposure to SEL that children can learn techniques to manage their emotions and get along better with their peers. SEL helps children recognize emotions first in themselves and then in others so that they can develop empathy. An early childhood environment in which the children express healthy emotions, regulate them, and understand the emotion of self and others, creates a successful school experience (Bassett, Denham, & Zinsler, 2012).

The Development of Social and Emotional Learning

Children observe and model the emotions of other people in their environment. Adult emotions give children information about which situations evoke certain emotions. Children learn from observing the adult behavior that accompanies the emotion (Bassett et al., 2012). Peer groups also teach children how to express feelings. Children learn how to use language and express their feelings by interacting with adults and peers. Children have a much easier time learning to talk about emotions if they have good language development (Marion, 2011). Young children often do not understand their feelings so they look to the adult and



Adults can promote social/emotional learning by helping children to respect each other.

A quality early childhood classroom should be designed for both active and quiet activities.



Photos by Elisabeth Nichols

others to help them understand and express their emotions.

Caregivers focus on the language and skills of emotions by demonstrating to children the knowledge and the words behind the emotion. Emotions are complex and often require a strong vocabulary. Caregivers can help children express their feelings when they are not sure of the exact words. It is important as adults that we help children understand that they have feelings and that feelings are important. Young children use their emotions to facilitate learning.

Brain development, memory, and language are developmental fac-

tors contributing to a young child's inability to understand and control their emotions (Marion, 2011). As caregivers, we guide children in managing their emotions and feelings. Interactions with adults and peers provide children opportunities for brain development that affect self-regulation, analysis, and management of emotions.

Conclusion

Early childhood providers influence children's social and emotional development by providing a safe environment in which the children feel comfortable expressing their feelings. Early childhood environments with

a developmentally appropriate physical environment foster the development of a child's feelings by helping the children develop language. Social emotional learning occurs in classrooms where teachers provide ample opportunities for play and interactions. The quality of interactions with adults and peers in the early childhood classroom allows children to develop self-regulation, empathy, and friendship. Early childhood teachers should be encouraged to create safe and comfortable environments to increase social emotional learning.

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About the Author

Michelle DeMeulenaere is an Instruction Specialist with the Diocese of Baton Rouge Catholic Schools. She is currently working on her PhD in curriculum and instruction at Louisiana State University.

Building Curriculum during Block Play

Blocks are not just for play! Learn how they can help support critical thinking skills, physics exploration and the development of language and social skills.

Nicole Andrews

Intensely involved in the kindergarten block center, Adam, Colton and Connor were conversing enthusiastically as they changed the structure they were building. I overheard phrases such as “Try this,” “Wait, too low,” and “That won’t be strong enough.” When I sat down close to the boys, Connor invited me to observe what they were attempting. He said, “Look at the car ramp we’re building.” The other boys (who were playing nearby) chimed in to explain that they were having trouble getting the ramp tall enough without collapsing so their car could run down it and reach a place about three feet away. They told me that when they put the car on top of the ramp, the structure kept toppling down as shown in the following excerpt.

“The car is too heavy,” said Adam.

“And we don’t have blocks with curves,” continued Colton.

Connor added, “The ramp has to be tall to get the car running fast enough to go where we want it to go. We’ve been trying to build this ramp for days without any luck.”

What I realized was that kindergarten boys were problem solving, using critical thinking skills, exploring and experimenting with physics, and using language as well as social skills during their play. This block play episode combined elements of math, science, social skills, and language and contained learning far beyond the kindergarten standards.

Block play can include math, science, social skills and language activities.

Problem Solving and Critical Thinking

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) includes problem solving as one of the five process standards necessary in which all children from prekindergarten to grade 12 should be involved. Problem solving involves children attempting to obtain a goal not readily within reach (NCTM, 2000). Children should regularly be supported to solve problems as they arise whether in mathematics or a different context (NCTM). Clements and Sarama (2009) state that children benefit from many opportunities to solve problems and explain their thinking while discussing solutions.

The three boys had the goals of building a car ramp that would not collapse and that would be fast enough for the car to reach an end point. They used a variety of strategies, trying to reach this goal. The critical thinking was evident in talking to the boys. They understood that their failed attempts showed them what to change. For example, Adam said, “Using too many small blocks makes the ramp fall apart. That’s why I decided to use larger blocks that are the same amount as those little ones.” In this example, Adam shared his experiences and explained his thoughts and ultimately, the solution. Adam was critically considering what went wrong and also demonstrating geometric understanding that the larger blocks have the same measurement as multiple smaller blocks. The boys were demonstrating critical thinking skills when they concluded that previous attempts at building the ramp produced a ramp that was “too low” and would not allow the car to reach their destination.

Exploring and Experimenting with Physics

Could kindergartners actually experiment with physics? Adam, Colton, and Conner proved to me that they could on a basic level. The boys were experiencing difficulty with the ramp collapsing when they placed one of the larger cars on the top of the ramp. Colton

explained, “We need a ramp as heavy as the car so it won’t let the car break it up.” Through this play episode, Colton was beginning to understand the basics of force between objects. He was describing the need for an equal force from the ramp pushing against the car (force). Additionally, the boys desired their car to have greater velocity when they realized that the ramp was too low to allow it to reach the end destination (motion). The boys concluded that raising the inclination of the ramp achieved this goal. The concepts of motion and force these students naturally experienced are taught later in physical science (National Research Council, 1996).

Language

Oral language skills were strongly present during Adam, Colton and Connor’s block building. The boys were not only communicating their ideas and thoughts, but they were also listening, an important component of language skills and a part of the Common Core Standards for Literacy (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.K.1a) developed by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (n.d.). The boys demonstrated the ability to express their opinions, explaining their thinking clearly such as when Colton suggested, “Make the bottom part taller so it will go faster” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.K.6). Additionally, the boys demonstrated language skills when they elaborated on one another’s ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.K.3).

Social Skills

At the age where egocentric behavior and perspectives have diminished for the most part, these boys showed

the ability to fully cooperate and share during block play. Researchers have varied in the number of categories defining prosocial behaviors, but one behavior, cooperation, is consistently listed as an important action (Kostelnik, Gregory, Soderman, Stein & Whiren, 2012; Marion, 2003). The boys were sharing ideas and attempting or discussing all options. At one point, Adam stated, “Let’s at least try it,” demonstrating the ability to negotiate with the other boys.

Social Play

Using Parten’s (1933) epic work on social play, I noticed that these three boys were clearly demonstrating cooperative play as revealed in their agreeing on tasks for each other while reaching for the common goal of building a car ramp. Colton busied himself with retrieving the car they used in the demonstration, while Adam and Connor attempted to straighten their collapsed ramp. Previously, I noted that the block center afforded itself a variety of social play opportunities, generally associative or cooperative play with the occasional student at the beginning of the year having solitary or parallel play. After reflecting on Adam, Colton and Connor’s play episode, I recognized opportunities to provide activities to students leading toward more cooperative play.

Learning that is not planned can be significant.



Photo by Elisabeth Nichols

Blocks come in all forms and shapes. Building can promote critical thinking skills.

Learning without a Plan

Looking back at the boys’ play episode, I realized that the learning that took place was not something planned for that week. A physics lesson was not planned. Was this learning worthwhile? After thinking about the learning that had taken place, I would answer, “Yes”. These boys taught ME that following developmentally appropriate practice, such as giving time for exploration and play, allows for rich learning in multiple content areas.

Could I have planned learning experiences for **all students** in the class and still have developmentally appropriate practice in the classroom? A common misconception with early childhood teachers is that developmentally appropriate practice, especially during center time, requires the teacher to take on the role of passive observer, allowing the students to construct meaning on their own. While free exploration does produce opportunities for children to construct some meaning (Piaget, 1983), as demonstrated by

the play episode of Adam, Connor and Colton, it does not allow children to construct meaning about all learning objectives. Teachers should intentionally plan activities and organize the classroom environment in such a way that all learning objectives are met while remaining developmentally appropriate and giving children time to explore alone, with a group or with teacher involvement. This supports Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 2009) of "scaffolding" which provides the teacher opportunities to further support learning observed during free exploration.

Building Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) suggests guidelines that teachers should consider while constructing appropriate curriculum (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Integration between subjects is one guideline a teacher would attempt to

incorporate while planning appropriate curriculum. From our block episode example, math, language and science were all involved during the boys' play.

Furthermore, block play for young children considers multiple areas of child development. As noted, the three boys were using social skills by cooperating on a goal, using linguistic skills to effectively communicate and using physical skills to build their ramp. The goal of their building was relevant and personally meaningful to the boys, which accounts for another guideline. Without purposeful planning, the curriculum guidelines were already met through block play.

So, how can a teacher then purposefully plan, while incorporating the appropriate curriculum guidelines and content standards needed to develop appropriate curriculum? Let your students be the guide! Let's take a look again at the block play episode.

Before I introduced the "building" activity, I decided on learning objectives (intellectual integrity)

in various areas (mathematics and literacy) that I wanted to integrate into a learning experience. My objectives for mathematics were for the students to recognize the shapes needed to draw their buildings. I also considered having students use a specific number of blocks or having students build a building as tall as something in the classroom, such as the height of the block shelf. Students were encouraged to work in teams (social skills) to complete their project. I called them "architect firms." Also, clipboards with paper were included for students to draw their "blueprints" and describe with labels the shapes in their final buildings (literacy and mathematics).

We also had a brainstorming session that allowed children to design something of their choice based on structures they remembered from their community such as playgrounds, amusement parks, a new McDonald's to replace the one that caught on fire (personally relevant to community), a house and a ramp.

Finally, I incorporated the use of a digital camera for photographs from all perspectives of the buildings (technology integration). These pictures were downloaded onto a computer into students' electronic portfolio and developed into a classroom book of "blueprints." This activity concluded with the various "architecture firms" presenting their developments. The excitement in the room resembled that of the three boys building their car ramp!

Whole Class or Individual Activity

Building tasks can be given to the class as a whole or to individuals. In planning building activities for the whole class, the teacher decides the types of tasks that should be given



Photo courtesy of Heritage Montessori, Red Bank, TN

Block play can be an indoor or outdoor activity.

to the children. The tasks can be related to specific math skills such as numeracy and geometry. A math lesson could challenge students to build a structure with only 7 rectangular prisms or be connected to a community lesson on the local rodeo such as building a structure to house two stuffed horses side-by-side with a roof to protect them from rain and including a gate that can be opened.

Students can also be given different tasks based on observations made by the teacher while observing previous building. If a teacher notices that a specific group of students all continue to build structures that are tall, but without enclosed spaces, a lower level block stage (Johnson, Christie & Wardle, 2004), the teacher can provide support to increase their thinking by giving a building challenge similar to the one suggested previously with the horses. By having the teacher provide an actual object such as a horse during their building, the students can visually understand the need to provide an enclosure instead of possibly considering that the thickness of the block provided an “interior” for an object such as a horse. Instead, the student would begin treating the block as an outer structure such as a wall and use additional blocks to provide an enclosed space for the given object.

Assessing Playful Learning

As with any activity, teachers can assess the learning occurring during block building activities, spontaneous or planned. When a teacher plans a specific learning activity or challenge, the teacher first develops a set of learning objectives. From these objectives, assessments are planned. Assessments can take the form of checklists listing all objec-

tives, thus allowing the teacher to quickly check each learning objective a student demonstrates. Anecdotal records can also be kept on the learning activity to document and support learning taking place. Recording children’s words provides support of learning and also provides a helpful way to explain to parents the learning that takes place in the building (block) center.

Time for exploration and play allows for rich learning in multiple content areas.

When first introducing this activity, I decided that I would assess via anecdotal records using a form I created for groups titled, “What Learning I Saw Today.” This allowed me to capture various types of learning from social behaviors to language and mathematics. When we repeated this activity, I decided on learning

objectives as mentioned. For specific objectives such as students recognizing the shapes needed to draw their buildings, I developed a checklist, which listed the shapes covered in class lessons, a space to check if the shape was used in their structures and another space to check if the child could correctly identify by name the shapes used. I used these assessments to determine if some of the students needed further help with shape identification and for planning individualized lessons for these students.

Reluctant Builders

If students are reluctant to participate in block building, the teacher can suggest other lessons while still exercising their problem solving. One such way is to provide other materials. For example, observing in a classroom, I noticed a teacher providing a crate of various boxes (cereal, macaroni, rice, etc.) and cans. She also provided several colors of construction paper the students used to cover these objects. In my mind, these objects were similar



Photo by Nancy R. Alexander

Math areas in a developmentally appropriate classroom can contain a variety of building materials and blocks.

to blocks, but students were able to decorate them and creatively manipulate them into new items. With these items, the teacher challenged students to create cities or new inventions. Additionally, students who are not interested in the block building process could also take the same challenge and write or draw a solution to a specific posed problem. Luckily during our building project, reluctant builders did not appear. It could've been the chance to wear a hardhat or opportunity to "play" architect.

This one activity is just an example of how a child-centered curriculum allows students to help their teachers build the curriculum. While planning remains the main ingredient, children directing the curriculum allows for more incidental cooperative learning experiences. Amazing how observing our students during block

Building Curriculum during Block Play

play can spark a plethora of ideas!

Note: Pseudonyms were used in this article to protect the children's privacy.

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About the Author

Nicole Andrews, Ed.D. is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Houston, Texas.

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Talking Science in an ESL Pre-K: Theory-building with Realia

What is realia and theory-building? Read on to find both a definition and strategies to employ in your classroom.

**Tim Kinard
& Jesse Gainer**

On a sunny Texas morning a prekindergarten class serving a diverse group of students, including those who are learning English as a second language (a pre-K ESL class), has left the glossy floors and artificial light of its classroom to explore in the dappled sunlight beneath a leafy tree. This public elementary school class has just finished listening to their teacher read a colorfully illustrated book titled *Leaves*. Following the directions of their teacher, they leave the circle and dart about the grassy space in groups of two, collecting specimens in plastic baggies, eyeing them with magnifying glasses, describing the features of each to one another. One student holds up an interesting leaf to show his teacher. The teacher says, “Hey, look at this! This one has tiny hairs on it. It’s a furry leaf!” He turns back to the 4-year-old who found it. “You make sure you tell us about this when we’re talking about them together, OK?” The boy nods vigorously, and they all turn simultaneously to see what other leafy marvels grow beyond the confines of the school’s walls.

Conversations and Realia

Ongoing research focuses on integrated instruction to promote science and literacy learning that also includes a focus on multicultural perspectives for ESL early childhood classrooms (Cervetti, Pearson, Bravo, & Barber, 2006). This type of instruction allows students to build on the knowledge that they already have about the world by combining non-fiction books and other texts to explore vocabulary that is specific to science content and processes. But it also includes language support through hands-on activities where students are able to carry on conversations about the real world in their home language with peers and teachers (Bruna & Gomez, 2008; Fathman & Crowther, 2006; González, Moll & Amanti,

2005; Rosebery & Warren, 2008). Integral to these linguistically rich experiences is the use of “realia,” another word for objects found in the real world (Spycher, 2009, p. 366). When a student explores using realia, she is not just being exposed to abstract concepts or text on a page, she is using real-life objects to build understandings of the natural world **while** she builds vocabulary about it. This can be both a multicultural **and** scientific event.

**Realia:
Objects found in
the real world.**

As students learn vocabulary words by handling real-life objects, they build theories about how the realia work in the world based on their previous experiences and the deep understandings forged in their home language such as when they wonder:

- why honeycombs might be hexagonal
- what happens to water in the sun
- about the patterns of clouds and erosion (Ballenger, 2008; Cummins & Schecter, 2003)

In inquiry and exploration like this, students are using their emerging cultural and linguistic expertise (learned within their families and out-of-school communities) in combination with the new language and academic knowledge that is being introduced at school (González, et al., 2005; Rosebery & Warren, 2008).

Imagine a pre-K classroom where acorns, pinecones, cicada exoskeletons, flowers, bones, antlers, dirt and all

sorts of other objects are handled and discussed in both the first language of the students as well as a second language. In such a setting vocabulary builds quickly, because teachers provide opportunities for students to engage in meaningful communication with scaffolds bridging first and second languages (Goldenberg, Hick & Lit, 2013).

Researchers focused on the learning of those acquiring a second language have long stated that “English language learners are in stronger positions to learn when they are able to use their first language to support their meaning making in science” (Ballenger, 2008, p. 122), while concurrently being provided support and practice in the “academic register” (Cummins & Schecter, 2003) of a language used in their formal education. Studies focusing specifically on preschool support the conclusion that language instruction in one’s first language contributes to growth in both home language and English skills (see Barnett, Yarosz, Thomas, Jung, & Blanco, 2007; Escamilla & Hopewell, 2010) which is the reason bilingual education is offered.

However, bilingual education is not always an option. In many classrooms there are numerous home languages represented among students, and the teacher may not have knowledge of any of them. In such cases, as is the case in the classroom highlighted for this article, teachers employ ESL strategies to scaffold students’ comprehension and to develop English language proficiency. The use of realia and other visuals are one way to provide ESL students opportunities for meaningful communication in English (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010). Some researchers highlight the importance of providing engaging and motivating

opportunities for students to practice English in relatively low-stress environments (García & Jensen, 2007). Interactive reading and engaging the whole body in learning are two examples of instructional methods that have shown benefits for ELLs’ development of academic vocabulary in English (Goldenberg, Hick, & Lit, 2013). Creating strategic partnerships that pair ELLs with native English speakers is another effective strategy that provides both groups the opportunity to interact and learn from one another (Goldenberg, Hick, & Lit, 2013). When these types of actions and conversations, supported by realia, also include a purposeful “theory-building,” then the academic depth of the activities can be greatly enhanced and the benefits grow, especially in terms of creating a space for both multicultural community-building and deep scientific thinking (Tan & Calabrese Barton, 2007; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). “Theory-building,” in this sense, takes its cues from early childhood pedagogy not specifically designed for ELLs.

Theory-Building

ECE researchers overwhelmingly purport that pedagogical approaches in which students develop lines of questioning and then test for answers to those questions using real-world materials in all of the content areas are optimal for developmentally appropriate practice (Bodrova & Leong, 2004; Drew, Christie, Johnson, Meckley & Nell, 2008; Helm, 2008; Kelman, 1990; Leong & Bodrova, 2012; Nimmo & Hallett, 2008). And there is equal support in the literature that informs learning theory for the very young which focuses on experiential exploration (Barnett & Frede; 2001; Gelman & Brenneman,

2004; Konzal, 2001; Mantzicoplous, Partrick, & Samarapungavan, 2008; Peterson & French, 2008; Sackes, Flevares, & Trundle, 2010). This type of experiential or inquiry-based learning is often described as “constructivist” (Katz, 1999). In this approach, the students learn through explorations, not by directly being told about or shown the concepts (Fosnot, 1996; Gunstone, 2000). “Constructivist theories of learning stress the importance of learners being engaged in constructing their own knowledge” (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, & Chinn, 2007).

Theory-building: Developing theories in a group setting.

The act of jointly constructing, critiquing and reconstructing theories in a group setting with real-world, everyday materials and ideas is called “theory-building” (Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, & Smith, 1992, p. 38). And increasingly the very young have been found to build sophisticated theories when they are able to build them through real-world, experiential knowledge and conversation, without direct corrective guidance by adults or teachers (Gopnik, 2012). Gopnik affirms that even the youngest among us engage in theory-building:

The new research shows that even very young children are deeply engaged in such profoundly cognitive work as hypothesis testing and causal inference. This work is more cognitively challenging, in fact, than much schoolwork. (Gopnik, 2012, p. 1627)



Photo courtesy of Jake Drost Head Start, Sulphur, LA

Exploring the world outside can lead to science and literacy learning.

In fact, Gopnik calls pedagogy --the very act of teaching-- a “mixed blessing” (p. 1627). She states that even the youngest children are aware that teachers will often “correct” a student’s theory. In order to save themselves from the embarrassment of being wrong, students will be reluctant to theorize about natural phenomena, thereby limiting the amount of practice they get in theory-building in a group setting. Gopnik (2012) wonders if, out of respect for the knowledge of their teachers, young students abandon viable hypotheses, narrowing theories that they build for themselves in favor of the “truth” that their beloved teacher “knows.”

Given this unintended consequence of “teacher expertise,” a teacher in a multilingual, multicultural classroom, where varying languages, beliefs and worldviews come together, can take heart. The idea that theory-building among peers in their first languages can create deep understandings about science, math, society, literature and other topics can be a very hopeful idea. The

teacher can be less concerned with the “right” scientific concept, and more concerned with promoting rich discussions and providing hands-on opportunities. Consider the musings of astrophysicist, Neil DeGrasse Tyson:

“Children are born inquisitors of their natural world. They turn over rocks. They jump in puddles. They pour water down your back. They do things that you can look at as wreaking havoc in the house, or you can look at as a long series of science experiments. ... I think the real problem in the world is the adults. ... As a kid, something’s in your hand you let go of it. It falls. You tip a glass. Water spills. You are assembling a rulebook for how nature works in the macroscopic world.” (Tyson & Dawkins, 2010)

For the purposes of this article, we wonder whether younger children should be practicing this very valuable skill in the earliest grades. We also wonder if simply being in a classroom might limit the depth of

the theories that can be built. Imagine the hypothetical classroom we mentioned earlier – the one with the acorns, pinecones, cicada exoskeletons, flowers, bones, antlers, dirt and all sorts of other objects. Now imagine the theory-building, constructivist, integrated, multicultural, linguistically-rich possibilities involved in leaving that classroom, finding those same objects outside, in the natural environment, where one might come across them “naturally.” In this low-stress, learning environment “non-mainstream” students have access to powerful theory-building opportunities, scaffolded by teacher-support in academic English.

Conversations in the Outdoors

The movement to get students out of the classroom and into the natural environment is growing fast (Danks, 2010; Louv, 2008). Going outside to learn fits with the ideas above, because the realia that is most “real” is that which is in its natural environment. (Louv, 2008; Lowell, 2008). The physical phenomena that creates the natural environment is a complicated and enmeshed network, which one can see in the sky, the seasons, growing plants, the movement of animals...outside. There is an increasing interest in the “no child left inside” movement (Danks, 2010; Louv, 2008; Lowell, 2008; Parker-Pope, 2009). The call to create green spaces of learning at public schools with students is a compelling one in which integrated learning moves outdoors, and theories about the world are constantly honed through academically supported exploration of realia (Danks, 2010; Nimmo & Hallet, 2008). “Interdisciplinary outdoor lessons lend themselves to blending topics that had previously

been taught separately” (Danks, 2010, p. 3). Weise (2012) and others purport that quality science instruction needs, at least at times, to be led outside in green spaces and in the context of natural habitats and the physical phenomena of the natural world (Nimmo & Hallett, 2008; Weise, 2012). However, “Often in our modern world, it’s not as easy as simply sending children outside to play” (Diamond, 2009). For many, green outdoor spaces are hard to find.

A Green Gap

Lee and Buxton (2010) note that neither science, nor science instruction, is independent of cultural, linguistic and societal factors (Lee & Fradd, 1998; Moje, Collazo, Carillo, & Marx, 2001). Lee and Buxton note that “Access to rigorous and engaging science teaching that promotes scientific reasoning and argumentation has emerged as a key factor in promoting science learning of all students” (2010, p. 43). However, access to hands-on, green-space instruction demands access

to green spaces. “Non-mainstream students tend to have less access to such instruction than their mainstream peers” (p. 43). In this case these “non-mainstream” students are represented in part by students learning English as a second language, a linguistic identity that is tied to race, ethnicity, culture and place (Gruenewald, 2003). A great deal of research surveyed by Lee and Buxton (2010) supports the notion that the scarcity of access to such instruction falls along race and socioeconomic lines, as does the frequency of English being spoken as a first language by students in schools.

Integrated ESL Science Instruction in an ECE Setting

Return to the teacher and the ESL pre-K class in the opening vignette of this article. This busy group of young learners and their teacher are doing their work in an urban elementary school in a large Texas city serving 86% Latino, 10% African

American, and 5% White and Asian American students. This is a population that is 79% limited in English proficiency (LEP) and nearly all receive free lunch benefits.

Integrated instruction promotes science and literacy learning.

In Texas, as in other parts of the US, the overwhelming majority of residents speak Spanish or English as their first languages (Modern Language Association, 2010). Texas allows for bilingual education, even dual language in many districts (Gómez, Freeman, & Freeman, 2005). The school in the opening vignette has many bilingual pre-K classrooms where the students are expected to be able to converse, explore and interact in their first language with modest (and increasing over time) efforts toward “adding on” a second language (May, 2008). This second language is usually English, but in a growing number of districts Spanish is the added language. In 2010 English was spoken by 65.8% of people over 5 years of age in Texas, and this number has been dropping over the last decade (MLA, 2010). Of the remaining speakers in 2010 (the latest available data), 85.41% spoke Spanish (MLA, 2010). This means there are over 1.1 million speakers who do not speak Spanish or English. This classroom is one of many ESL pre-K classrooms in areas with many Spanish and English first language speakers where the classroom is a “catch all,” containing the students who have higher levels of proficiency



Photo courtesy of Phoenix Magnet Elementary School, Alexandria, LA

Early childhood classrooms can use outdoor exploration to promote second language acquisition.

in English but speak Spanish at home. This classroom also contains students who speak languages other than English or Spanish at a wide range of proficiencies. As is often the case, this “catch-all” ESL classroom is taught by a white, monolingual, English-speaking teacher, certified in ESL (Samson & Collins, 2012).

We wish to be overt about our stance on bilingual and dual language education: We believe that, when available, all students, as well as society, benefit from multilingualism. And in a state like ours, Texas, where one’s language is an indicator of one’s access to education and financial security (Macedo, Gounari, & Dendrinos, 2003), we see dual language education as hopeful toward interrupting this linguistic hierarchy. We are proponents of multilingualism and multiculturalism through dual language education and policy. However, author Tim Kinard is a former teacher in one of these “catch all” ESL classrooms where the LEP of the students is widely varied, and the linguistic resources of the teacher are severely limited. Both Tim Kinard and Jesse Gainer (second author who taught in Spanish/English bilingual classrooms) are interested in pedagogy that opens the curriculum in meaningful ways to the students in “catch-all” ESL classrooms like the one described above.

The STELLAR Project

Informed by this interest, Jesse Gainer has been leading professional development events for the past several years in which ESL teachers are introduced to interdisciplinary approaches to teaching science. The workshops are focused on rich, engaging dialogue, using students’ first languages, academic English, and

scientific concepts, while engaging in student-centered, hands-on scientific learning episodes with a specific attention to leaving the classroom and investigating the sciences out-of-doors (Weise, 2012). These efforts have been part of a grant-funded endeavor called the “Science and Technology for English Language Learners Achieving Results” (or STELLAR) Project at Texas University where the grants’ investigators designed outdoor pedagogical development for ESL teachers in Texas. The research that led to this article was begun after a teacher who had attended a STELLAR Project professional development workshop made statements that led the team to be interested in investigating the way he has integrated science and language arts instruction in his pre-kindergarten ESL classroom. After one workshop, the pre-K teacher from the opening vignette told our investigators:

“I teach pre-K, so everything we do is integrated, but what I really like the most of what they did with the integration [of science] is the language arts and the group writing. Because we do group writing every day, but we usually do it with language arts, so now, I saw how they did it, and I can bring in [scientific] diagramming, which I never did with pre-K. But now that I saw how they were able to do it, I can show [them], and I can have the kids do it on their own....”

Inspired by his comments, Jesse Gainer travelled to the teacher’s school to film him leading an integrated science lesson with his ESL students. After visiting the teacher’s classroom and witnessing the integrated science instruction, we reflected on the ways in which he has

skillfully addressed some of the issues central to teaching science to English language learners.

Return to His Lesson

This pre-K teacher leads a group of students out into a green space adjacent to their classroom and teeming with botanical specimens. There is a covered porch in a fenced area. The plants that grow in this area range from short, leafy hedge-rows to a verdant line of trees. The teacher gathers his students on the concrete slab shaded by a leafy, 15-foot tree. The plant is smallish for a tree, but it towers over the four-year-olds. The sun’s light from its morning angle illuminates the tree’s leaves like a stain-glassed window. Beneath the trees’ glowing leaves, the pre-K teacher opens a book.

“I’ve got this book, and it’s called Leaves. What do you think it’s going to be about?” A chorus erupts: “LEAVES!” “And “What do you think we’re going look at outside?” “LEAVES!” The teacher grins, “Very perceptive.”

“As we read it I want you to listen to the words in this book, because in a few minutes I’m going to have you go look for some leaves, and I want you to describe them using some of the words in this book.”

He guides his students through the shared reading. He then establishes guidelines for successfully engaging in their scientific exploration. He assigns each a partner. Each duo is given a hand lens and a plastic baggie for observing and collecting leaves. He dismisses his students, trusting them to accomplish the task before them, driven by their curiosity. The teacher then follows his students into the botanical diversity available to them beyond the walled borders of

their classroom. The students dash about the space, chattering to one another as they go. Different dialects are shared. Different languages are used. Exuberance is the timbre of the movements.

“Look! Look!” a student shouts. “This one is HUGE.” “Great word!” her teacher responds.

One student clips a leaf from its stem and shows his teacher a small hole – a perfect tiny circle in the leaf. “How’d that get there?” the teacher asks. The student thinks, head tilted, then says, “Rain?” His teacher responds, with curiosity and without condescension: “You think maybe rain put that hole in the leaf.” The teacher’s tone is very slightly questioning, but at the same time even more affirming. Another student chimes in, “No! A caterpillar!” The teacher restates the second idea, “You think maybe a caterpillar ate it!” he says.

Afterward, the students gather again on the concrete slab, in the light of the leafy cathedral and engage in a shared writing on a dry-erase board, listing words that describe the diverse collection of leaves they’ve harvested, contemplating a wide range of possibilities that encompass what “a leaf can be.” Indeed, at the top of a large pad of paper, their teacher has written, “A Leaf can be....” The teacher takes dictation, “Green, bumpy, big, skinny, hairy, soft, spikey, brownish-red, huge...” “Huge?” He responds, “What does that mean?” “BIG!” responds the chorus. “REALLY big”, adds one voice. He nods, continuing. He adds the descriptive words to the page, reading over them often and being explicit about the inclusiveness of the words. Leaves can be many things.

“They can be eaten!” the boy who

found the leaf with the hole asserts. “Indeed.” The list is developmentally appropriate vocabulary for his students. It is also developmentally appropriate to the academic register of English in science for pre-K. Vocabulary is strengthened and grows in this verdant space. As Lee and Buxton (2010) point out, students like the ones in this urban pre-K are less likely to have access to this type of hands-on learning than their more affluent counterparts. This is why we highlight one amazing aspect of this outdoor exploration and shared writing: the green space into which these 4-year-olds tumble is the only green space within city blocks, and it is the tiny green swath of grass and bushes that house the air-conditioning condenser units for this large public school.

Going Even Further: Possibilities for Theory-building

We are drawn to this teacher’s creative ability to seek out this seemingly uninviting green space for the exploration of its realia. We are also drawn to the moment where students hypothesize about the hole in the leaf. During the shared writing the boy asserted that leaves could be “eaten.” But, earlier, when he found the holey leaf he told his teacher that “rain” might have made the hole. His teacher responded: “You think maybe rain put that hole in the leaf.” But, another student exclaims, “No! A caterpillar!” Then the teacher states, “You think maybe a caterpillar ate it!”

In this exchange, there is not the slightest hint of condescension in the teacher’s response to the “rain hypothesis.” And when he restates the girl’s position that a caterpillar made the hole, he does not deem



Photo courtesy of Phoenix Magnet Elementary School, Alexandria, LA

Scientific measurement? How many theories could be developed?

one hypothesis “correct” and another “incorrect.” However, when the students reconvene to share their ideas, it is the boy who had previously put forth the rain hypothesis who now offers the descriptive word “eaten.” He has learned. But what has he learned? Did he hear the other student’s idea, and weigh it against his own, deciding that hers works better for him? Or was there a hidden message in the response of his teacher that told him one hypothesis was right, and the other was wrong?

Given our multiple viewings of this short exchange on video, we hear the slightest inflections leaning the student toward the second proposed hypothesis. And upon reflection, we realize that, in our shared decades of leading the learning of the young, we have often created a moment where one hypothesis was deemed “correct” which means that all others are now “incorrect.” But, could there be a new space available in the curriculum where there is room for a celebration of many complex theories?

The teacher did not tell one student she was right and another he was wrong, nor did he have the two debate their positions. He simply restated what they had said. But in analyzing this moment, we realize

that a decision was quietly made. We have wondered a great deal about the decision the boy made to share another's hypothesis with the group. We further realize that in our future endeavors, we can create spaces, in moments like these, where we call attention to the fact that two ideas have been put forth. Two theories have been built. We can then help the class support the theories, not proving one wrong, or one right, but proving how deeply everyone is thinking about both ideas.

For instance, the student who thought about rain falling from the sky can be lauded for his understanding:

- of the relative size of rain drops (for the hole was, indeed, about the size of a drop of rain)
- of the relative delicacy of this particular leaf
- that falling from a great height generates velocity, and
- that velocity is a powerful force.

And in terms of the student who posited the "caterpillar hypothesis," she could be celebrated for her understanding:

- that caterpillars eat leaves
- that a caterpillar wouldn't necessarily eat the whole thing
- that animals we cannot see are at work when we are not around.

When we first saw the lesson, we assumed a caterpillar ate the leaf, too. But who can say which hypothesis is true? Even if the hole was eaten, it wasn't necessarily a caterpillar. (Indeed, weeks after watching this video, Jesse Gainer texted Tim Kinard after a heavy rain, stating "*It rained last night and made holes in the leaves at my house! I'm ... totally serious! [forget] the caterpillar theory!*")

If these viable, testable and debatable elements of the students' competing hypotheses were lauded in a carefully equal way, then science would be directed away from being a collection of vocabulary words and a collection of facts or "right answers," toward a complex pursuit of investigation, in which all possible realities are explored and theories are built. We celebrate this teacher for allowing both hypotheses to stand, unchallenged, because we assert that he didn't intentionally lead students to reject one theory for another, nor did he intentionally stifle the critical thinking of students who were constructing theories based on their observations of nature. However, we recognize that, unintentionally, teachers are always at risk of squelching lines of thought in the pursuit of leading students toward sanctioned forms of knowledge.

Using realia to build vocabulary can be both a multicultural and scientific event.

Conclusion

We feel it is important to recognize innovative, quality teaching where we have found it. Therefore, we recognize that the pre-K teacher in the opening vignette is providing his students with many of the keys to success in schooling by hands-on practice in the out-of-doors that builds on prior knowledge and exercises home languages. He also practices scientific talk and writing

with his students in a green space that these authors would never have thought to utilize.

Further, we believe that by allowing competing hypotheses to stand, this teacher is contributing to a theory-building process that can lead to a creation of vibrant, lauded, nurtured and internally constructed theories about phenomena. We do not feel it is an overstatement to assert that moments like this subtle exchange can contribute to the construction of one's school identity (Chen, 2009). If we start a student's academic life by assigning "correct" or "incorrect" to their ideas, we are not contributing to their ability to build theory. Remember, "Children grow into the intellectual life around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88). If we celebrate theory-building, and offer ample opportunities for practicing this skill, we create the opportunity for students to create a school identity of "thinker." If we stop teaching correct answers and, instead, teach ECE/ ESL students to learn to value the viability of the theories they build, based on their own experiences, then Tyson's condemnation of adults as being "the real problem in the world" and Gopnik's fear that pedagogy is "a mixed blessing" are chased away like thieves -- replaced by a pedagogy that fosters school identities of "success" -- a success in critical thinking dialogues.

We do not intend to be overly critical of an example from the practice of an exemplary teacher. In fact, we intentionally highlight a re-thinkable moment in an example of excellent teaching to serve as a caution, a red flag of sorts, to signal to all of us that we must continually reflect upon our educative choices and especially the language we choose when guiding students in

learning—a way of teaching language and dialogue that moves an ESL science ECE curriculum away from disconnected vocabulary words, concepts, skills and knowledge and moves toward a celebration of creativity and theory, a dialogue about thought, where inquiry-based learning is theory-building, even in schools with limited resources and limited access to verdant realia.

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About the Authors

Dr. Tim Kinard is an assistant professor of early childhood education at Texas State University. His research interests are focused on the reconceptualization of early childhood education, especially in terms of unexpected narratives and interruptive practices.

Dr. Jesse Gainer is an associate professor of literacy education at Texas State University. His primary research interests relate to critical media literacy and intersections of language, culture and literacy.

In Memoriam

Dr. Ann Levy SECA President, 1991-1993

Ann Levy, Ph.D., was an admired educator, an advocate for children and families, and a mentor to many leaders in Florida AEYC (FLAEYC).



After serving as a classroom teacher in Georgia and Florida, she returned to Florida State University to pursue a Masters in Early Childhood Education. Upon completion of her Master's degree, she was recruited by an innovative U.S. Department of Education program called "New Adventures in Learning". As part of this new nationwide educational initiative, Ann traveled throughout the United States as top staff for the National Diffusion Network, providing technical assistance to large and small, rich and poor, rural and inner-city teachers and administrators.

In 1985 Ann earned her Doctoral degree in Early Childhood Education and continued her education policy leadership while serving as Staff Director of the Education Committee of the Florida House of Representatives. She also served as Adjunct Professor and Project Director for the Florida Center for Prevention and Early Intervention Policy.

She served on many local, state and national professional boards, advisory groups and task forces throughout her life and was a dedicated and valued volunteer in Leon County, serving as President of the Leon County Association for the Education of Young Children and President of Kids Incorporated of the Big Bend for many years. Her additional service included:

- President of the Florida Association for the Education of Young Children (FLAEYC)
- President of the Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA)
- Elected Representative on the Governing Board of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
- Chair of the State Coordinating Council for Early Childhood Services established by the Florida Legislature
- Chair of the Florida Children's Forum Board

In 1995, she received FLAEYC's Barbara Finck Outstanding Member Award and was named a Children's Champion for her many years of advocacy work in 2003. Ann felt that the childcare workforce had come a long way in her lifetime but much was still needed to improve the field so that every young child could obtain a high-quality education. "Every child deserves to have the best care and education. Every parent deserves to know their children are safe, happy and well cared for and every caregiver deserves to have the best training and education." Ann was a true "Voice for Children in the South".

In Memory of

Dr. Ann Levy

Dr. Pam Schiller
Dr. Janie Humphries
Beverly Oglesby

Robert Carrigan (husband of Susan Carrigan)

Dr. Janie Humphries

Lester LeJeune (father-in-law of Chris LeJeune)

Dr. Janie Humphries

Oliver "Butch" Carroll (husband of Jo Carroll)

Dr. Janie Humphries
Nancy Cheshire

Classroom Labels that Young Children Can Use: Enhancing Biliteracy Development in a Dual Language Classroom

Learn how to support biliteracy development through print-rich classrooms.

**Irasema Salinas-Gonzalez,
Maria G. Arreguin-Anderson,
& Iliana Alanís**

Biliteracy is defined as literacy development including reading, writing, and speaking in two languages (Escamilla et al., 2014). Print-rich classrooms can enhance literacy development for all students, but can be particularly helpful for dual language learners for biliteracy development. This article focuses on biliteracy development of English and Spanish through the practical strategy of systematically labeling the classroom within the context of daily classroom activities and providing children with various opportunities to use the words throughout the day. Initially, a theoretical rationale for the use of labels with dual language learners is provided followed by practical ideas related to the use of labels in the context of teacher's daily work. Using the foundational work related to classroom labels from Pinnell and Fountas (1998, 2010), we adopt a definition indicating that "a label consists of one or a few words on a card placed on or below an object or a spot in the classroom" (p.36).

Why Are Classroom Labels Critical for Dual Language Learners?

Providing young dual language learners opportunities to use language in both the spoken and written form contributes to their understanding of the words they hear and the connections between those words and the labels found around the classroom. In other words, the classroom walls, the bulletin boards, the alphabet, and the labels should reflect two languages. Both their home language and their new language have a special function in the classroom to support language and biliteracy development (Eliason & Jenkins, 2012). Labels, in

particular, help create an understanding about the functions of print and how print conveys meaning (Fountas & Pinell, 2010). Classroom labels serve as visual models of print that contribute to the development of sound-symbol awareness, grammatical knowledge, and vocabulary knowledge in both English and Spanish. These basic skills combined with children's sociocultural variables may contribute to the biliteracy development of dual language learners (Castro, Paez, Dickinson, & Frede, 2011).

**Print-rich
classrooms can
enhance literacy
development.**

Children who are learning a second language while developing their native language competencies are considered dual language learners (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & McLaughlin, 2008; Espinosa, 2010; Gomez & Gomez, 2012). Although, at first, young dual language learners might not actually read classroom labels in their second language, their native language serves as a bridge to success in English. There is familiarity in the "decoding, sound blending, and generic comprehension strategies ... between languages that use phonetic orthographies, such as Spanish, French, and English" (Espinosa, 2010, pp. 82-83). Many language and literacy skills in a child's first language will transfer effectively to English and can assist them in developing the necessary literacy skills

to successfully read their classroom environment (August & Shanahan, 2006; Paez & Rinaldi, 2006). For the young dual language learner, infusion of meaningful and functional print creates a supportive classroom environment that influences language and literacy development in and through two languages.

According to transfer theory, what children learn in their native language will be transferred to their second language (August & Shanahan, 2008; Gutierrez, Zepeda, & Castro, 2010). From this perspective, we can imply that environmental print found in their second language also builds support for their native language competencies. Encouraging children to explore a biliterate classroom environment with labels and other print materials enhances their linguistic and cognitive development in two languages. It is important to note however, that the classroom environment should be equally labeled in both languages so children understand that both languages are validated and that English acquisition is not at the expense of their native language development (Collier & Thomas, 2009; Espinosa & Burns, 2002, 2003). Thus, being surrounded by labels in two languages may not only contribute to children's biliteracy development, it may also enhance their social and emotional development. As dual language learners see their language reflected in their classroom they become risk takers. They start exploring the labels that are known to them and then eventually start reading their new language.

Designing Your “Labeled” Classroom Environment

Effective classroom labels support the biliteracy development of

young dual language learners. These labels serve as visual references and also help keep the classroom structured by assisting young children in identifying where to find materials, where to put them away, and how to keep the environment organized. In essence, the labels around the classroom assist young dual language learners to get things done.

Displaying an abundance of print however, is not sufficient to make print meaningful (Love, Burns, & Buell, 2007). Labeled references are only helpful to young children if they are allowed to use the classroom labels in interactive activities throughout the day. Otherwise, labels may become part of the classroom space and act merely as wallpaper.

Developing biliteracy also requires that the classroom environment be established to be a predominantly social setting where children are provided with many opportunities to interact with each other and the labels in their environment (Levine & McCloskey, 2009). Labels are strategically placed so that children are allowed to touch the labels, remove the labels, work with the labels, or add more labels, as they negotiate language with their peers and their teachers. Teachers of young dual language learners want children to notice that print is all around their classroom and that it symbolizes language. In addition, they want them to interact with the print. Literacy becomes an essential part of the early childhood classroom as children create and use labels and learn that those labels hold information (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). Exposure to the classroom labels will help them think about print and understand how it works. Social interactions purposefully infused with academic and complex language

allow children to internalize and subsequently apply learned labels in a variety of contexts.

Labeling the Classroom: Where Should You Start?

Providing young dual language learners with many opportunities to “encounter and explore at least two to four new words each day” can enhance their oral language development and thus their early biliteracy development (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2009, p. 1). For the early childhood teacher working with dual language learners, this means creating a print-rich bilingual classroom environment that has been purposefully labeled in two languages. Teacher starts the process by labeling common objects that children use on a daily basis. This includes labeling a variety of objects and the walls of the early childhood classroom in English and Spanish as seen in *Figure 1*. Young children understand and appreciate writing found in their classroom when it is meaningful to them and part of their social context. Providing a container with blank index cards, markers, and adhesive tape encourages children to contribute to the display of print throughout the classroom. Typically, early childhood teachers use 5x7 cards or cut sentence strips to a developmentally appropriate size for children to see. In addition, it is important to use conventional print on the labels so that young children start getting accustomed to the print they see on a daily basis in books and other contexts (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). To make labels accessible they should be placed at children's eye level. This should also encourage them to use these words in their daily learning and daily writing.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



As seen in *Figure 2*, the accessibility of the labels will encourage young dual language learners to remove them and take the label to wherever they are writing (Pinnell & Fountas, 2010; Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). Some teachers use clothespins, plastic sandwich bags, or Velcro to facilitate this interactive process for children. In other classrooms, children walk around with clipboards or spiral notebooks as they use the print around the classroom.

In addition, color-coding the print on the cards assists young dual language learners to distinguish between languages and to be able to read them accordingly (Gomez & Gomez, 2012). For example, some dual language teachers choose red for the Spanish word labels and blue for the English word labels (*Figure 1*). Other dual language teachers choose black for English because most teaching resources are already printed in black and then use another color for the native language (*Figure 3*). Because most young children are bound by perception, using different colors for each language is a practical way to remind young children of the language being used. It is also a practical approach to remind teachers to focus on the language of the day as children read the classroom labels. Moreover, it motivates young children to read because they see their language reflected in their environment. As seen in *Figure 4*, labels also facilitate the structure of the language used because the print on the labels is easily connected with the things found in their classroom (Nettles, 2006). These cues are particularly helpful for dual language learners because they help them visualize the variety of words found in the classroom. As children start making connections between word

labels and items, they will soon be “reading” words in their classroom independently. This encourages confidence and competence as they negotiate the classroom environment in the language of their choice (Santos, Cheatham, & Ostrosky, 2006). When these labels are used daily, young dual language learners will be learning to read and write this familiar text long before they recognize the words in a book (Beaty, 2013).

Labeling can also contribute to biliteracy development when the teacher walks around the room pointing to different labels and involves the children in reading the room. As this is done, early childhood teachers model reading from left to right and correct language usage. While labeling the classroom provides a better understanding of words for the young dual language learner, it also helps illustrate relationships to many items found within the classroom (Gunning, 2013). There are many items in the classroom such as computers, plants, or fish tanks that lend themselves to labeling their individual components. For example, *Figure 5* demonstrates a child placing English word labels on a Spanish poster indicating the parts of the human body. The teacher can discuss each part of the body and their function while children take turns playing “I Spy” or “Veó, Veó” while labeling additional sections.

Labels become more meaningful when based on the interests, lessons, or language needs of the students. When children are involved in the labeling of their classroom, it helps them establish literacy connections (Espinosa & Burns, 2003; Soderman, Gregory, & McCarty, 2005). Teachers can ask which five objects in the classroom should be labeled

Figure 4



Figure 5



for the week in English and in Spanish. They can also label their classroom environment based on the content-area being addressed. One teacher we observed used the following strategy after a science lesson on buoyancy. Ms. Flores took the opportunity to label the materials that her students used during the Spanish science lesson. They used

“baño de plástico”(plastic bathtub), “agua”(water), “aceite comestible”(oil), “canasta con objetos”(basket with objects), and two baskets, one labeled “flota”(floats) and the other “no flota”(doesn’t float). These visual prompts assisted students when they worked with the materials in the science-learning center as seen in *Figure 6*. The teacher then had

the children write the words on the labels. Through this interaction, the teacher modeled how to write and read the created labels. Children then walked around and placed the word labels on the objects or agreed upon resources.

Once the words on the labels have been mastered, the teacher and her students may take a classroom label walk to determine what other things can be labeled. As children's interests and skills increase, so will the classroom labels and signs. Many teachers begin by placing simple labels such as door, window, or shelf in their classroom. Gradually as students master those labels, these can be replaced with synonyms or more specific parts of the door (such as hinge). Consider how many times children make reference to the labels found in the classroom. Do they talk about the labels and use them in their daily writing activities? Furthermore, classroom labels will need to be changed as new materials are introduced to the classroom, new concepts are studied, or new projects are developed. It is important to assess the needs of the children so that they maintain interest in the print found around the classroom.

Labels: What Should I Label?

Labels may be placed in different places and on resources throughout the classroom to create a print-rich environment that stimulates reading and writing. While some labels such as "line starts here" or "Exit" may remain constant in the classroom, other labels may need to change in order to challenge dual language learners with new vocabulary. Some recommendations include the following: labels on learning centers and materials, labels on furniture, objects, supplies, work areas and

labels on bulletin boards, displayed student work, classroom job charts, calendar, journals, and other notebooks. Some teachers sort books in baskets and label them by genre or language: others label key areas or spaces in their room. By providing a print-rich classroom that includes labels, young dual language learners will understand that print carries meaning. In addition, it will encourage them to become more observant of their classroom environment. Moreover, it will establish a well-organized classroom that assists young

dual language learners to become independent learners.

Practical Activities Using Classroom Labels

Just like children's native language is a natural component that aides in developing biliteracy, so is learning through play. As children play in their label-enriched classroom, their understanding of language is enhanced as they use and practice their literacy skills. Teachers can integrate the use of bilingual classroom labels into their daily tasks through

Figure 6

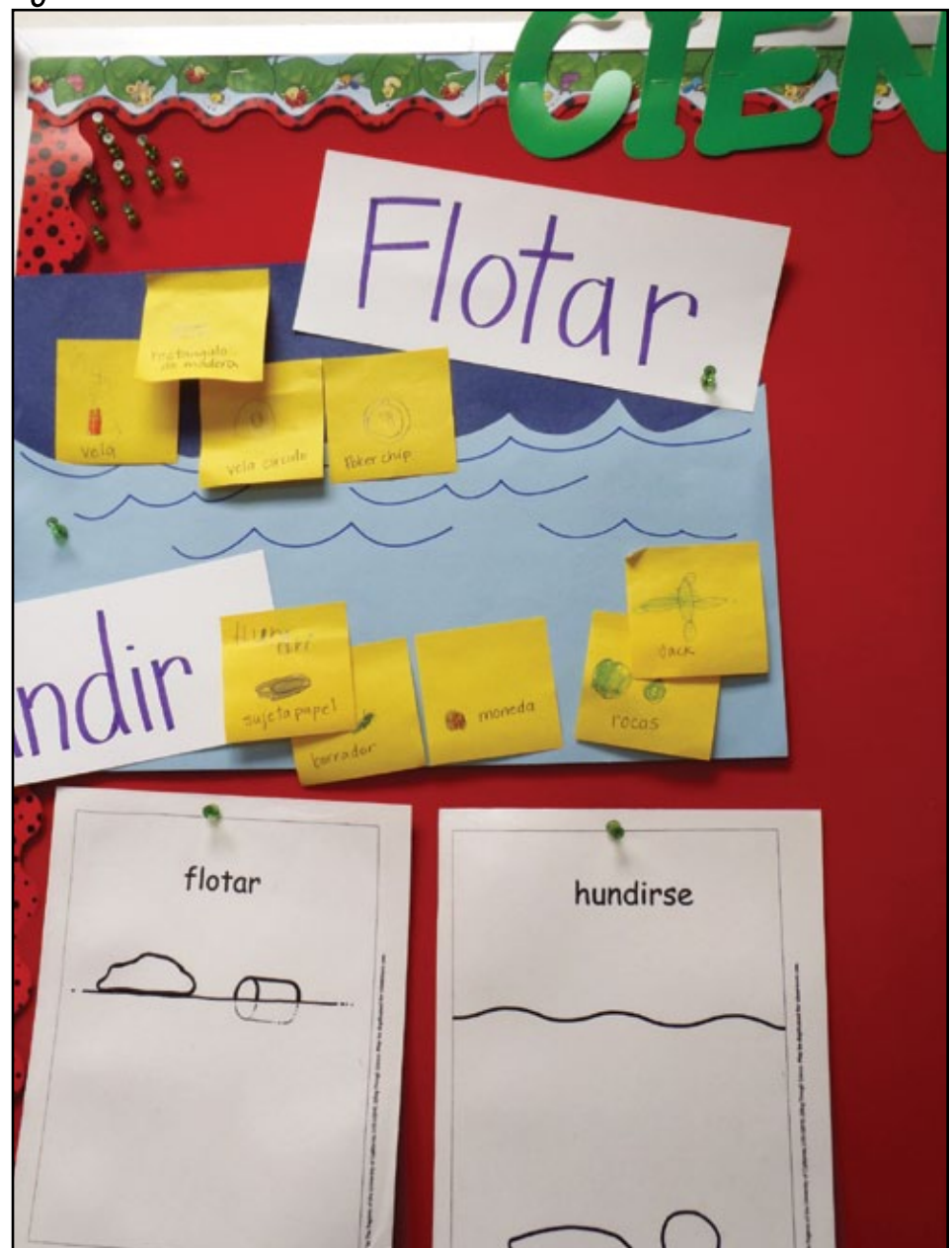


Table 1

Suggested Ideas for Using Labels that Surround the Classroom

Letter search through labels

- Find all the different types of letters; such as lower and upper case letters; find all the words that begin with the same letter; end with the same letter.

Hunt for labels

- Read all the words that rhyme with sock (children might say “clock”); words with the same initial sound as their name; words that are synonyms or antonyms of a called out word, words that have two vowels; labels that have _____ number of syllables; labels that have _____ number of consonants; etc.

Guessing games with labels

- Encourage children to guess a word found in the classroom that has the same amount of letters as their name or more letters than their name. For example: “I’m thinking of a word that has the same amount of letters as in María”. The responses could be “pluma”, “silla”, or “lápiz” depending on the labeled resources found in the classroom.

Label literacy walk in language of the day

- Provide children with a pointer (We like using a fly swatter.) and involve them in walking around the classroom and reading all the English labels on one day and Spanish labels on another day.

Alphabetizing the labels

- Allow children to get five words/labels from their classroom environment and take them to an area of their choice where they can manipulate the cards as they try to place them in alphabetical order.
- Give children a clipboard with paper and ask them to choose 5 words found in their classroom and write them in alphabetical order.

Graphing the labels

- Give children a paper with three columns that include the numbers two, four, and six. They will walk around the classroom and identify words with two, four, and six syllables. They will then graph their labels according to the size of the word.

“I Spy” word labels or “*Veo, Veo*”

- Give children magnifying glasses and encourage them to be detectives as they find word labels around the classroom environment that are described by the teacher or another student. For example: “I spy a three-dimensional model of the earth”; what is it? Children may respond, “Globe” (“*Veo, veo, un modelo tridimensional de la tierra*”; ¿*Qué es?* Children may respond “*Es un globo terráqueo*”).

“Using words you know”

- Challenge children to make new words from the words they already know from their classroom environment, such as “*Río*” in “*escritorio*” or “able” in “table”.

Adding adjectives to labels

- Encourage students to describe what has been labeled and to add adjectives to their label. For example, “the *squeaky* door”.

Placing Articles on labels

- Give children a collection of index cards with the Spanish articles “*el, la, los, las*” and some tape. Ask children to place the appropriate article before the Spanish nouns in order to indicate the gender, the number and its grammatical function. For example, “*el globo terráqueo*”

“Classroom of Silly Stories” or “*Salón de Cuentos Chistosos*”

- Ask half of the children to walk around their classroom and randomly choose five words. They will sit with a partner and create a silly story using the words chosen. For example, “Once upon a clock, there was a talking pencil, a walking chair and an enormous shelf in search of a classroom broom...”
- Keep in mind the diverse needs of your students when considering the number of words to play with as they create their silly stories.
- The stories can be shared orally or written on a paper.
- Children always have a good time as they start hearing each other’s stories!

a variety of interactive activities. This includes focusing on labels as students find and use materials, as they transition between lessons, as they help with classroom procedures, and/or during their morning routines (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). As young dual language learners are given more opportunities to engage with the materials in their classroom, they start to feel more secure in the classroom environment and socially integrated. This type of environment that empowers young second language learners to see themselves as competent learners also facilitates the acquisition of their second language (Castro, Espinosa, et al., 2011; Tabor, 2008).

Playing with the variety of word labels found around the classroom should be a natural process for young dual language learners and is evident when they begin to invent games. For example, children emulate their teachers as they point to the labels around the room and ask each other to “find a word label that rhymes with bear”. As children explore their environment, you may hear them reading various word labels “bear, desk”, “bear, table” until they further explore their understanding of print and its functions and finally you hear them say “bear, chair; these words rhyme!” Providing children with opportunities to engage in playful activities allows them to understand how language works. Effective early childhood teachers set up and model playful activities that allow young dual language learners to explore and play with new words that contribute to their cognitive and linguistic development. Teachers should encourage young children to explore the labels found in the classroom. Although disguised as play, teachers will have a set of predeter-

mined objectives such as alphabet instruction, phonetic awareness, or decoding practice that young dual language learners will acquire as they are actively engaged with the classroom labels. These interactive label activities encourage academic exploration while enhancing young dual language learners’ vocabularies and concepts about print and writing.

Emergent literacy in any language involves the daily use of words (Beatty, 2013). Young dual language learners need to hear words, write words, and use words daily, to become literate. Some suggestions for helping young dual language learners capitalize on the word labels found in their print-rich environment are found in *Table 1*. These playful learning experiences, facilitate the understanding and usage of the words found in their classroom. At the same time, these activities offer play-based interactive alternatives to the increasing developmentally inappropriate expectations placed on young children’s literacy development (Klenk, 2001).

Conclusion

By using the wealth of labels found in their classroom environment, teachers can support biliteracy development through engaging, purposeful, and meaningful activities for young dual language learners. Labeling the classroom environment in two languages is not for decorative purposes but serves as a strategic tool for the acquisition of biliteracy. Thus, the classroom environment becomes an additional instructional resource that enriches language and biliteracy development for young dual language learners.

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About the Author

Dr. Irasema Salinas-Gonzalez is an Assistant Professor at The University of Texas-Pan American. Her work focuses on language and literacy development of dual language learners through play, the development of cognitive skills of dual language learners through play-based learning and creating engaging classroom environments for young dual language learners.

Dr. Maria G. Arreguin-Anderson is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood and Elementary Education at The University of Texas at San Antonio. She has over 20 years of experience working in both public school settings and higher education. Her publications focus on issues of social justice in linguistically diverse environments.

Dr. Iliana Alanís is an Associate Professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching for the University of Texas at San Antonio. Her work focuses on the teaching practices in early elementary grades with an emphasis on the effect of schooling for language minority children in bilingual programs. Dr. Alanís is a former President of the Texas Association for Bilingual Education.

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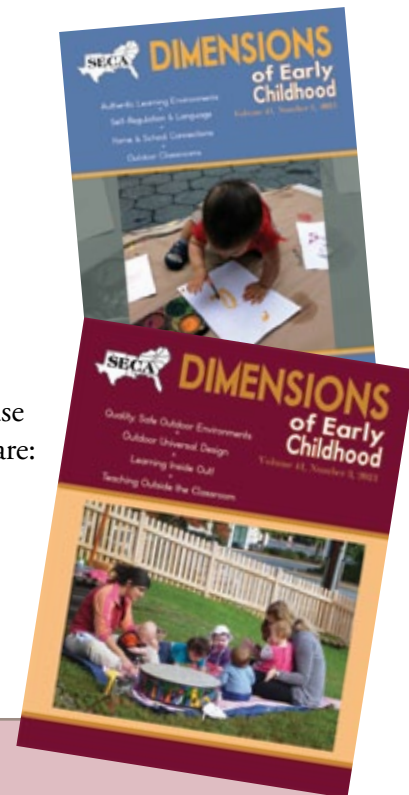
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Accessible Family Involvement in Early Childhood Programs

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What strategies enable families to be full and active participants in their young children's educations? This practical framework can be implemented in classrooms serving today's diverse families.

**Johnetta W. Morrison,
Pamela Storey, and
Chenyi Zhang**

Denise Hampton works an 8 to 5 job that leaves almost no time to spend in her daughter's early childhood classroom. The teacher, Ms. Pam, sends home a weekly newsletter describing the group's accomplishments. Ms. Pam also occasionally distributes information about the class via e-mail. She feels she is doing a better than average job in communicating with families about their children's education.

Denise appreciates this information, but would like to genuinely participate in her child's learning, so she expresses her wishes to Ms. Pam. Their discussion alerts Ms. Pam to the fact that she could provide a range of opportunities for working families to become more fully engaged in their children's learning experiences.

Family involvement in early childhood classrooms benefits children, school staff, and families (Bradley & Kibera, 2006; Epstein, 2001). The development of a strong relationship between early childhood programs and families is a critical component of developmentally appropriate practices (Coppole & Bredekamp, 2009).

The work of Epstein (2001), Swap (1993), and The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, 2004) serve as a foundation for the description of family involvement in early education upon which this article is based. Family involvement encompasses the participation of the parent (or any family member or fictive kin) in the child's education. This participation occurs in and outside the school, including two-way communication that involves child learning. The activities family members are involved in

- support the child's learning process (at home, in the classroom, and within the community),
- exchange information about the child's learning process (child's progress, early childhood curriculum,

developmental and cultural activities in the community),

- offer opportunities to participate in school decision-making leadership regarding the child's education, and
- enable families to support children as learners in their homes.

In developing a plan for partnering with families, there is no one blueprint or single set of practices that define a family-school partnership (Decker, Decker, & Brown (2007).

Benefits and Challenges of Family Involvement

Several researchers pinpoint a positive correlation between family involvement in their children's education and children's achievement (see Epstein, 2001; Fan, 2001; Kim, 2002; Redding, 2006). Positive family involvement leads to better

- social,
- behavioral, and
- academic outcomes

for children from all ethnic and economic backgrounds (Ball, 2006; Marcon 1999).

Family participation in their children's educations can be critical because it nurtures cognitive and emotional resilience, especially in the face of life stressors such as poverty and neighborhoods with few resources (Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). Low-income families' ongoing participation in preschool and kindergarten activities has been associated with children's higher reading achievement, lower rates of grade retention,

and fewer years in special education when children were in eighth grade (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999).

Families who are involved in their children's early learning classrooms have a better understanding of their children's education (DiNatale, 2002). Families and teachers who regularly learn about one another's interests and cultures can develop a richer and more varied early childhood curriculum.

When teachers establish a liaison with children's families, they feel more rewarded in their roles as teachers (Tozer, Senese, & Violas (2006). The most experienced teachers, working in high-quality early childhood classrooms, had more family volunteers (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004). Family participation is certainly an excellent way to improve the quality of early childhood programs.



Photo courtesy of the authors

Positive family involvement leads to better social, behavioral, and academic outcomes for children from all ethnic and economic backgrounds. Family involvement in their children's education and children's achievement are closely linked.

Family participation improves early childhood program quality.

A number of factors affect families' abilities to be actively involved in their children's education. In the past, parents were encouraged to be little more than passive participants in children's educations (Ranson, Martin, & Vincent, 2004). This is no longer true in high-quality programs.

Awareness of cultural differences and expectations can also improve levels of participation. Asian and Latino families, for example, may feel excluded from participating in schools because some professionals may have been trained to believe that they knew what was best for children (Tozer, et al., 2006).

Respect for family traditions and cultures is essential to assure that they feel welcome and honored by all program staff.

Time also impinges on families' abilities to be involved (Becker & Epstein, 1982). The typical 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. workday does not easily give some family members much flexible time to participate in classrooms.

Fortunately, family involvement in education is much broader than being present during the school day. Teachers and schools can encourage and support family participation with a variety of strategies such as those recommended here.

Framework for Accessible Family Involvement

One comprehensive perspective on family involvement evolved from a review of studies from preschool through high school that included educators and families (Epstein, 2001). Epstein's framework includes six types of involvement:

1. *Parenting*—home environments that support achievement
2. *Communicating*—two-way information sharing between school and home
3. *Volunteering*—helping with planned activities in and outside the classroom
4. *Learning at home*—parents assisting children in the learning process at home
5. *Decision making*—parent involvement in school decisions
6. *Collaborating with the community*—use of local services and resources to help children learn

The early childhood family involvement model presented here has at its heart Epstein's research-based work, grouped into four components:

- Staff and Family Communication [*Epstein types 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5*]

Accessible for Family Involvement

- Family-Child Collaborations [Epstein type 4]
- Teacher-Family Relationship Building [Epstein types 2, 6]
- Community Connections [Epstein type 6]

Effective teachers will use features from all four components of this model, selecting strategies that enable family members and any other person interested in supporting the child to decide how they wish to be involved.

Components of Accessible Family Involvement

- Staff and Family Communication
- Family-Child Collaborations
- Teacher-Family Relationship Building
- Community Connections

Staff and Family Communication

Teachers can implement a number of initiatives such as the following to support

- school and family communication exchanges,
- family decision making roles,
- meaningful volunteer opportunities, and a
- positive parenting process.

Family center. If space is available, create a homey space with comfortable furniture that invites families to talk informally with each other and their children's teachers. Place a Family Notebook in a convenient spot where families can write comments and questions for teachers. Set up a computer with Internet access for families to use. Offer take-home

activities such as bags with children's books and games to explore together, articles on child development and parenting issues, and other information of interest to families.

Family bulletin board. In a visible area in the Family Center, classroom, or hallway, post daily information about children, their learning experiences, and school events. The board might include volunteer request sign-up lists for activities such as playground cleanup day and extended family visits. Ask for recommendations about what families would most like to see and encourage them to contribute resources as well.

Family-teacher conferences. Flexibility is essential when scheduling

conferences with families. Factors to keep in mind include transportation needs, child care arrangements, availability of interpreters (Cellitti, 2010), and scheduling convenient times.

At the beginning of the school year, families can be encouraged to share information with teachers about their children, such as food allergies, family traditions, and their expectations for children's learning. A packet of information for families is generally given upon enrollment in the program, so questions can be discussed early.

Teachers are encouraged to hold at least two more family conferences each year, plus being available at any time to communicate with families



Photo courtesy of the authors

When teachers establish a liaison with children's families, they feel more rewarded in their roles as teachers. The most experienced teachers, working in high-quality early childhood classrooms, had more family volunteers.

in person, by phone, or through e-mail. Face-to-face conferences, conducted in the family's home language, are by far the most effective. Teachers can share children's portfolios, ask for family insights about children's experiences, and encourage families to become more familiar with and involved in classroom learning opportunities.

Newsletters. Either on paper, DVDs, or electronically, provide weekly information about children's learning, community resources, and school events such as parent advisory meetings (Sanchez, Walsh, & Rose, 2011). Offer newsletters in multiple languages as needed. Find creative ways to involve families in writing, photography, and producing the newsletters.

Communicate detailed information on a school Web site.

Web site. A school Web site is ideal to communicate detailed information about the classroom and school. Upload photos of children's learning experiences (obtain releases first) to more fully share daily events with families. Offer parenting/child development informational videos and other resources. Provide links to community resources and events. Families may be eager to assist with photography, sharing event information, and even designing and updating the site.

Program events. Early childhood programs often encourage family members to take an active role in classroom activities such as breakfasts with featured guests, field trip planning and travel, community-worker visits, and traditional holiday

celebrations. Ask families for ideas about events that appeal to them, and encourage them to take leadership roles in their planning and implementation.

Time and Technology Issues

When teachers offer a variety of ways for families to actively communicate with them, including electronically, family time constraints on participation become less of a factor. Communicating electronically on blogs and social networking sites must be done in a professional manner and confidentiality is essential (Harte, 2011).

A limited-access class Web site is suggested because user-friendly layouts make it easier for family members to browse and search for information. The site must be password secured to assure there is no public access to it. Even so, specific information about students, their families, and/or teachers is not appropriate on a class Web site.

Whenever possible for meetings, conferences, and school events, arrange for child care to help assure that families who wish to participate may do so.

Family-Child Collaborations

Early childhood teachers are in an ideal position to encourage families to nurture their children's academic growth and value learning. Children benefit from their family's emotional and social development support. Families believe their efforts help their children and that they are expected to do so by the educational system (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., (2001).

These are some at-home learning experiences from which families and their children can benefit. Be sure to share information about these activities, and their importance, in the

family's first language. Ask families for ideas about other ways they enjoy learning together.

- *Family learning opportunities* that build on classroom learning experiences such as observing nature together, children interviewing family members, or joint art explorations
- Hands-on *take-home kits* selected by the child to complete with a family member at home. Activities elaborate on the curriculum
- Early reading, math, writing, and other *academic explorations* that children do with family members
- Assignments in which *children present information* researched with their families to their classmates

Teacher-Family Relationship Building

Communication is at the heart of the third component of this family involvement framework as well. Solid collaborative relationships are built during these and other direct interactions among families and teachers.

- Home visits
- Parent-teacher conferences
- E-mail list serve from teacher to families
- Daily updates for families at drop-off and pick-up times

Regular opportunities for direct communication with family members are essential for accurate and timely exchanges of information. Licensed and certified interpreters are preferred when working with families who speak languages other than English (Cellitti, 2010). Interpreters are essential, particularly when



Liz Nichols

Early childhood teachers are in an ideal position to encourage families to nurture their children's academic growth and value learning. Children benefit from their family's emotional and social support. Families believe their efforts help their children and that they are expected to do so by educators.

dealing with sensitive issues. Be sure to consider factors such as the level of information to be presented, the interpreter's relationship to the family, and cultural issues.

Families' perceptions of the school staff, and any barriers they experience in trying to establish contact with their children's schools, can influence families' decisions to get involved in their children's school experience (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). Faculty and administrative commitment—and a welcoming school climate—are imperative to a successful family involvement process (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009).

Community Connections

Links to community resources and activities that enhance children's learning are readily available to families in high-quality early childhood programs. Disseminate the information in various formats to assure that all families have access, and can add to it.

Community involvement by children and their families can strengthen children's learning, while positively influencing the family and the school. Teachers who tie community-based participation into the curriculum extend children's learning far beyond the classroom. These are some types of community activities that may appeal to families as volunteers and/or participants:

- Education and information fairs
- Health and fitness resources
- Sports events that appeal to or engage young children
- Cultural events such as children's concerts and plays
- Public library services
- Community center events
- Organizations that provide activities and services for children and their families

Summary

The family involvement strategies that Ms. Pam implemented resulted in a more comprehensive effort to increase access of families to her classroom. Families, teachers, and children can expect to experience different positive results from each type of involvement (Epstein, 2001).

Early childhood teachers are urged to implement strategies from all four components of this framework during the course of the school year. Selecting more than half of the suggested strategies from each of the four components would likely ensure a stronger partnership between teachers and families. Implementing all identified strategies is far more likely to lead to genuine family involvement.

Family participation in children's early care and education enhances children's cognitive, social, and emotional development while augmenting teacher/family relationships that reinforce mutual beliefs and practices. Family involvement can be a positive experience for everyone involved.

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About the Authors

Johnetta W. Morrison, Ed.D., is Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, Mississippi. She has conducted research on family involvement in early childhood classrooms.

Pamela Storey, M.A., is a Child Development Laboratory Instructor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Missouri, Columbia. She has taught preschool children for more than 25 years and has conducted research on family involvement in early childhood classrooms.

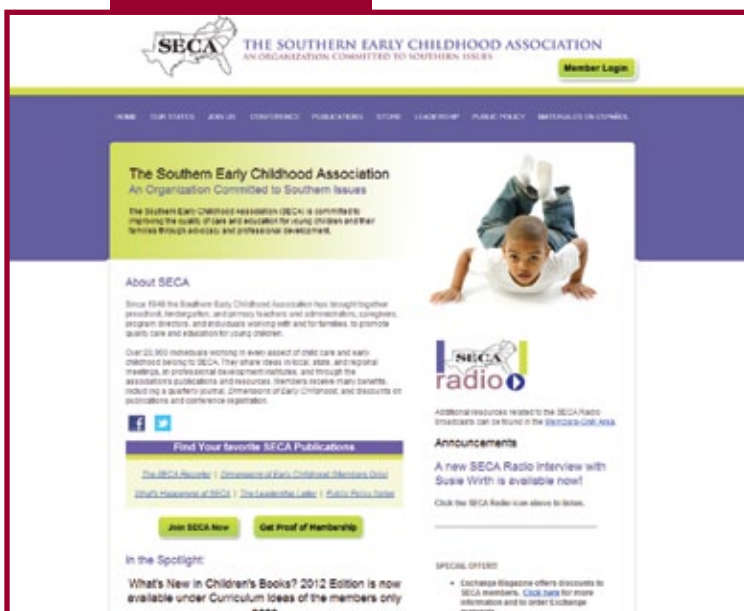
Chenyi Zhang, M.S., is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Child Development and Family Studies, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana. He has conducted research on family involvement in early childhood classrooms.

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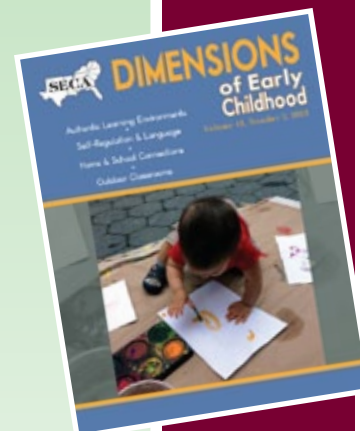
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