DIMENSIONS of Early Childhood

Volume 44, Number 2, 2016

Using Video to Enhance Observational Assessment

What Preschool Children Like Best About School

American and Japanese Kindergartners' Meanings of Play Through the Use of Photo Elicitation: What Can We Learn From Them?

The 2016 SECA Exemplary Outdoor Classroom

Announcing the SECA 2016 Family Engagement Contest!

Families and Schools: Helping Children Feel Secure, Learn and Thrive

The Southern Early Childhood Association believes that children feel most secure, learn best, and thrive when their parents and school work together. This year, A **SECA Family Engagement Contest** has been designed to encourage early childhood programs to share their achievements in developing school-family partnerships. It is our hope that we can learn from one another and further develop this frequently under-resourced area of early education. All programs serving young children are invited to participate.

The purpose of the SECA Family Engagement Contest is to:

1. Highlight exemplary strategies which have proven effective and can be used as models for programs seeking to improve family engagement.
2. Promote intentional efforts to build relationships between program staff and families through the sharing of information and ideas throughout the SECA Affiliate states.

For more information and to access an application, go to www.southernearlychildhood.org You'll find a link to the contest application on the home page of the website.

Applications must be postmarked or submitted electronically on or before ***November 1, 2016***. Applications should be mailed or emailed to the SECA office at:

By Mail: Southern Early Childhood Association
2016 Family Engagement Contest
1123 S. University, Suite 255
Little Rock, AR 72204

By E-mail: info@southernearlychildhood.org
(Please put Family Engagement Contest Application in the subject line)

Awards:

Only one entry per state will be recognized and acknowledged in *Dimensions of Early Childhood*. Of these entries, one overall SECA Family Engagement Program will be selected. The winner will receive a plaque at the 2017 SECA Conference to be proudly displayed at their center or school!

Southern Early Childhood Association

Editor - Mari Cortez, Ph.D.
Cover photo courtesy of Little Miss Mag Early Learning Center, Chattanooga, TN

Dimensions of Early Childhood

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Authors are encouraged to download a copy of SECA's manuscript guidelines at http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/become_member_get_involved.php. Submit manuscripts that are typed and double spaced with references in APA style. E-mail manuscripts for review to the editor at editor@southernearlychildhood.org.

SECA serves the interests of early childhood educators concerned with child development, including university researchers and teacher educators; early childhood, kindergarten, and primary-grade teachers; and early childhood program administrators and proprietors. The association has affiliates in 13 Southern states. Non-affiliate memberships are available to anyone living outside the 13 affiliate states. For information about joining SECA, contact the executive offices at P.O. Box 55930, Little Rock, AR 72215-5930, (800) 305-7322. Members receive a one-year subscription to *Dimensions of Early Childhood* and discounts on SECA publications and conference registration fees.

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DIMENSIONS of Early Childhood

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Refereed Articles

Departments

President's Message

Carol Montealegre

"Putting the Vision into Action"

In the February 2016 issue of *Dimensions* my message, as incoming President, described my "**Vision of Possibilities**" for the Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA). Thanks to a highly committed Board of Directors, an exemplary staff consisting of Glenda Bean, Executive Director and her assistant, Maurena Farr, and for many longtime SECA leaders and members, much has been accomplished in turning our ***possibilities*** into ***realities***! Some important initiatives were taken to meet our present challenges and some key steps are yet to be taken to move our Association forward.

A **possibility**, turned **reality**, first occurred at SECA's 2016 Annual Conference **Leadership Summit** in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The Leadership Summit provided specific networking opportunities to all 14 affiliates. Leaders from each of the 14 affiliates met, discussed challenges, scrutinized suggestions, and offered recommendations for how they felt SECA could best support and assist state affiliate's endeavors to better serve current members and increase membership. Today, early childhood leaders are faced with meeting these challenges due to *structural changes of affiliation and/or societal and economic changes*.

To better understand the ***structural* challenges**; SECA is comprised of **14** Southern states, nine dual-affiliated and five single-affiliated states. **Dual-affiliation** refers to states that are affiliated with **both** SECA and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, (NAEYC). Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia have been dual-affiliated states. **Single-affiliation** refers to states that are affiliated **only** with SECA. Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina are single-affiliated states.

Currently NAEYC is going through a restructuring of their affiliates. Their new affiliation criteria have implications for the **dual-affiliated** Southern states. Some will meet NAEYC's criteria, others will not. **Dual-affiliated states** are faced with making decisions regarding transitions that affect both their "*state Boards*" and their "*local chapters/affiliates*."

At the **Leadership Summit**, leaders from **dual-affiliated states** expressed their concerns and networked with others to determine possible alternatives for dealing with the hurdles of this transition. At the same time, **single-affiliated states** worked together, discussing, and sorting through options on how to move forward in a climate riddled with societal and economic changes affecting how volunteer Boards work and how to attract and retain membership.

To assist leadership in dealing with these challenges, SECA presented a ***Charter agreement in draft form*** for their review and input. A **commitment to assist** each state, as needed, was also made by SECA Executive Director, Glenda Bean. She offered to travel to work with State Affiliate Boards, upon request, and provide guidance on how to move forward. As a result, Ms. Bean has traveled to several states, assisting their

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Words from the Editor

Dr. Mari Cortez

I just finished teaching a course that focuses on play. My students had the opportunity to observe in Head Start Centers and one of San Antonio's unique early childhood programs funded by the city called PreK4SA. In addition, we had the opportunity to have our class at the DoSeum (which is San Antonio's children's museum). Truly in this course my students were engaged in playful learning. When I think about all of the opportunities my students had to observe children playing I reflect on the articles that we have for you in this issue of *Dimensions*. The articles provide for you the opportunity to reflect on the benefits of play for children's development in different contexts. If we truly want to provide appropriate opportunities, we must be good "Kidwatchers." I hope that you have the opportunity to play this summer so that when the new school year begins you are inspired to learn about children and provide many playful learning opportunities.

We would like to make a correction in our Spring 2016 issue. The first author for the article titled "Myths and Facts Regarding Second Language Acquisition in Early Childhood: Recommendations for Policymakers, Administrators and Teachers" should be Raquel Plotka.

Notas del Editor:

Acabo de terminar la enseñanza de un curso que se centra en el juego. Mis alumnos han tenido la oportunidad de observar en los centros de Head Start y uno de los programas únicos para la primera infancia financiados por la ciudad de San Antonio que se llama PreK4SA. Además, tuvimos la oportunidad de tener nuestra clase en el DoSeum (que es un museo para los niños). En verdad en este curso mis estudiantes estaban comprometidos en el aprendizaje del juego. Cuando pienso en todas las oportunidades que mis estudiantes tuvieron para observar a los niños jugar reflexiono sobre los artículos que tenemos para ustedes en este número de *Dimensions*. Los artículos proveen la oportunidad de reflexionar sobre los beneficios del juego para el desarrollo de los niños en diferentes contextos. Si realmente queremos que ofrezcan oportunidades adecuadas, debemos ser buenos ""Observadores de Niños." Espero que ustedes tengan la oportunidad de jugar este verano, para que cuando el nuevo año escolar comienze estén inspirados para aprender acerca de los niños y proporcionar muchas oportunidades de aprendizaje por medio del juego.

Nos gustaría hacer una corrección en nuestro número de primavera de 2016. La primera autora del artículo titulado "Mitos y Hechos Relacionados con la Adquisición de Segundo Idioma en la Primera Infancia: Recomendaciones para los Legisladores, Administradores y Maestros" debe ser Raquel Plotka.

Best/Deseándoles lo mejor,

Mari Riojas-Cortez, Ph.D.

Editor

Using Video to Enhance Observational Assessment

Technology can support developmentally appropriate assessment practices for young children.

Debbie Vera & Michelle Castilleja Trejo

"What letter is this?" the teacher asks. The child responds, "C," looking at the teacher to see her response. When she does not draw a slash through the letter, the child knows he has missed it again. "G," the child corrects himself, but it is too late. Looking disheartened, he attempts the next letter but misses it also. A downward spiral of missed letters affects the child's focus during the testing session. As the teacher hurriedly documents the assessment, the child asks, "Can I go play now?" The teacher responds, "In a few minutes we will be done."

With the current emphasis on accountability, the manner in which teachers assess has involved scoring children on specific criteria as they attempt to satisfy the requirements of outside funding agencies, state mandated assessments, or local assessment decisions. One study showed that teachers face difficult challenges and no longer fit the role of "master observers" (Schultz, Kagan, & Shore, 2013). Research by Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin & Almon (2015) identified challenges related to how families of kindergartners have been questioned about their children's Pre-K being too play-based, and the children labeled as "behind" when school began. Carlsson-Paige et al. (2015) noted that the primary problem with assessment today is due to the implementation of the Core Curriculum and the subsequent increased emphasis on academics in the younger grades. According to this research, the influence of the Core Curriculum has increased the number of worksheets and whole group activities while also adding inappropriate methods of assessment.

Both Carlsson-Paige et al. (2015) and Schultz, Kagan, and Shore (2013) valued observation as an appropriate method for assessing young children, even though alternative forms of assessment are being implemented. In this article we present a case study of a teacher engaged in developmentally appropriate assessment practices through the use of technology, specifically video.

Technology Tools in Appropriate Assessment

The use of technology in assessment has provided many new tools to assist the teacher. One improvement in technology involves additional ways to store observations. For example, computer applications allow teachers to record observations digitally through anecdotal record software. According to Bates (2013), anecdotal records can be documented digitally using applications uploaded to laptops or notebooks for safekeeping. Bates identified Evernote, Notability, and Paper Desk as examples of applications for recording anecdotal records digitally. Moreover, recording information through an electronic pen provides teachers additional avenues to develop a more inclusive assessment method. Livescribe (2015) uses a ballpoint pen to preserve audio recordings for listening and reviewing later. Handwritten notes created with the pen can also be transferred to the computer for storage. Additionally, the application Pear Note (2013) provides areas to save video files and anecdotal notes, thereby allowing teachers to locate all the documents in one application.

Another method for storing observational audio and video files for assessments occurs in electronic portfolios or E- Portfolios. E-portfolios provide electronic storage of how a child progresses over time (Mindes & Jung, 2015). The child's portfolio includes teacher observations, child work (drawings, paintings, graphs, stories, writing), as well as video and audio recordings of the child playing, talking, and interacting. Using video as one form of documentation within the E-portfolio system allows for sharing with other professionals who also care for the child (Mindes & Jung).

The assessment program Teaching Strategies GOLD (2015) allows for integrating E-portfolios, using video

along with many other forms of documentation. This assessment system was analyzed by Kim, Lambert and Burts (2013) to determine its validity for English Language Learners and children with special needs. Kim et al. concluded that the program provides a valid method for teachers to assess culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse children equitably. This is one of many E-Portfolio systems available for teachers.

The innovations of Teaching Strategies GOLD (2015), Livescribe (2015) and Pear Note (2013) provide teachers with new options for including observational assessment. However, it is important to understand how using this technology assists teachers amid the many assessments they are called to administer. Ruble, McGrew, Toland, Dalrymple, and Jung (2013) studied how teachers used web- based technology to observe children with autism and improve their education. Using video-conferencing, teachers and consultants worked collaboratively to provide better services for the individual needs of young children. Consultants viewed the video of children with special needs then came together to develop individual plans for the children's success.

Suarez and Daniels (2009) similarly used digital video to document and store information regarding language delay. Employing the assessment philosophy of Reggio Emilio within a case-study format, Suarez and Daniels studied the language development of twin boys for three years using video/audio, digital images, and written observations all compiled into a DVD. Using technology and the systematic observations of the child's language, consultants and teachers discussed strategies to develop the language of the twins. Sammuelsson and Plerjert (2015) concurred with this study after using video to analyze children with language impairment. The study found that video allowed professionals to rewind and review children's communications. Repeated review revealed children's needs and gaps in skills development, and helped staff select appropriate methods to improve the children's language.

Therefore, the research confirms how video observation has assisted teachers in collaborating with others about the special needs of young children. Through reviewing these video recordings, teachers developed a more comprehensive evaluation of the child's strengths and challenges, thus developing better strategies to assist the child. However, as early childhood teachers are faced with more emphasis on standardized assessment in the early years (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Schultz et al., 2013) feelings of discontinuity occur as they implement assessments. Teachers value the significance of observational assessment or being a "Kidwatcher" (Owocki & Goodwin, 2002, p.20), but simultaneously know their responsibilities require less authentic assessments. Further, teachers realize the significance of incorporating technology. According to Blair (2012), a 21st century learning goal for teachers should be to imbed more technology in everyday planning to effectively reach the learners of today. The teacher in our study understood the importance of incorporating technology and wanted to explore how video might enhance the assessment practices in her classroom.

Photo by Nancy P. Alexander

Traditionally, observation of children involved taking notes.

Video Classroom Observation in One Preschool Classroom

The philosophies of Piaget (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), Dewey (1933), and Vygotsky (1962) are evident in this three and four-year-old preschool inclusion classroom, which incorporates the HighScope Curriculum. HighScope encourages children to actively engage in a process called Plan-Do-Review (HighScope Educational Foundation, 2014), a time that children choose an activity of interest to them, carry out that choice, and share their accomplish-

ments. This classroom is designated as "inclusion" with two teachers, two instructional aides, and 19 children (seven with special needs). This study, however, focused on only one teacher and 12 of her preschoolers who are typically developing.

The classroom arrangement includes multiple areas of interest for the children with numerous materials to engage the children and promote curiosity, communication, collaboration, and reflection. Interaction among adults and children occur frequently and reciprocally while control shifts from teacher to child. Assessment occurs authentically in natural conditions with progress monitored and reviewed daily using Key Development Indicators.

Evaluation of the Key Development Indicators occurs through the Child Observation Assessment (COR) (HighScope Educational Foundation, 2014). The teacher participating in this study incorporates the COR on a regular basis. This study documents her journey into understanding ways to implement technology within her assessment during the spring semester. Specifically, I collected video clips of the interactions during these assessments on three occasions. The teacher and I analyzed the interactions, as well as reflected on the assessment process.

During the spring semester of the academic year, the teacher planned to observe three Key Indicators: Listening, Comprehension, and Creative Arts after reading *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (Johnson, 1955). Once the book was completed, the teacher asked the child to draw what they remembered from the story. As the children recalled details about the story, the teacher asked the children how the story applied to their personal lives. Although the teacher normally would have documented the responses by hand, she now used an iPad to video record the observational data. The children were familiar with iPads, therefore its use during the observation was found not to be distracting. Once the iPad was recording the observation, each video took approximately 8-10 minutes per child. While utilizing the iPad, the teacher identified unexpected advantages.

Observation is an appropriate method of assessment.

Benefits of Video Observation

One benefit of using video emerged as the teacher interacted freely with the child. The relatively relaxed atmosphere of the video recording allowed more dialogue between the teacher and child, thus encouraging a stronger bond between both parties. As the teacher and child interacted, the teacher learned more of the child's interests and described the process as a "more natural conversation that helped me to get a deeper look at who they are and therefore enabled me to plan for them better." Through these natural conversations, the teacher could now differentiate the instruction using the child's interests and the process of making meaning (Tomlinson & Edison, 2003).

Along with being able to differentiate for the child, the teacher was less concerned about noting each Key Indicator as it occurred because having video available of the observations allowed for multiple viewings. The children felt comfortable communicating about various topics while drawing at the same time. The teacher communicated how she was more relaxed and the children even asked when they might do this again with the teacher. Both parties experienced reciprocal benefits from engaging in this manner.

Another advantage emerged after the observation, which was helpful because it was close to the end of the assessment period. The teacher had planned specific Key Indicators to assess, but when viewing the recording, realized more Key Indicators could be assessed than originally intended, taking approximately 15 minutes per video (including taking notes and scoring). In conjunction with the Key Indicators of Listening, Comprehension, and Creative Arts, the teacher observed indicators within the domains of Social Emotional Development, Physical Development, Social Studies, and Approaches to Learning. The teacher believed that reviewing the video allowed her time to identify more Key Indicators and confirm previously noted Key Indicators, thus providing a more comprehensive and valid assessment.

Challenges of Video Observation

Using video as a method of observation reveals three areas of challenge. The primary challenge for both teachers and children involved specific distractors that limited or could eliminate effective use of video. If videotaping occurs rarely in the classroom, the iPad could become a distraction to the children as they complete the task. Extraneous noise from the children who are not being observed could also inhibit the implementation of this mode of observation. Finally, managing behaviors or materials requires the teacher to divide his or her attention away

from the child being assessed. However, the teacher in this case study solved this distraction by having an instructional aide take the children outside to recess while she recorded the video in a separate room.

Many early childhood teachers may not have the luxury of another classroom or full-time instructional aide as this teacher did. In that case, the teacher may need to videotape an entire group of children. According to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), sound assessment involves observing children in groups as they play and work collaboratively. This method may also yield information regarding the scaffolding of skills among their peers as well as social, emotional, and linguistic goals being developed by individual children.

Along with the challenge of distraction while videotaping, the time to view each observation may discourage some teachers from implementing this format. However, if instructional aides assist with classroom management, the additional time for viewing the observations may not be a factor. Further, if more skills can be observed, the extra time taken to watch the video may prove to be an advantage. When asked if the teacher would implement video observation again the next school year, she replied,

Yes, I still think that I get more out of the kids because I did not interrupt the interaction to make notes for the assessment. Discussion with them felt so much more natural because I knew I didn't have to use a mental checklist to identify each skill; I would catch it in the recording.

The last challenge involves securing appropriate technology to initiate the observation and the related computer applications for producing the video. Appropriate technology could include using a tablet or video camera to record the observations. Another alternative for videotaping includes using a personal cell phone with video capability to record the observation for later analysis. As with using any technology, teachers must first have permission from parents to videotape the child, and the recording must be stored in a password-encrypted site (Mindes & Jung, 2015).

Photo by Elisabeth Nichols

Technology provides another tool to document and store observations

Assessing with a New Lens

As teachers attempt to appropriately assess young children amid the various pressures of accountability, adjustments in assessment methods are required. The teacher in this study realized the importance of implementing video. The following paragraphs will describe three lessons learned after employing the lens of videotaping observational assessments.

Lesson 1: Use Technology to Enhance Data Collection of Developmentally Appropriate Assessment

The first lesson learned from this research involved how technology provides an opportunity to assess children in a developmentally appropriate manner. According to Puerling and Fowler, (2015), using technology affords teachers the ability to employ more authentic methods for assessment. For example, the authors describe an app used at Columbia College, *Childfolio*, that stores multiple forms of assessment documents such as video clips, photographs, hand-written notes, children's work, and other authentic assessment examples into a database. The database provides a report for administration, family or consultants.

Even with database capability, the most significant advantage is for the teacher to have a more authentic view of the child using observational assessment. Video recordings comprise one component in this holistic view of the child. Puerling and

Fowler (2015) describe how teachers are required to implement more assessments that produce data. However, with new apps available, such as *Childfolio* (Puerling & Fowler), *Pear Note* (2013) and *Livescribe* (2015), technology has provided innovations to employ video observations as a form of data gathering while also assessing children in a developmentally appropriate manner.

Lesson 2: Watch the Story Unfold

The second lesson from this study evolved as the teacher employed the video technology while watching and interacting with the child rather than taking notes. As the teacher in this case study engaged in the assessment, she said she focused intently on the individual child and felt a renewed connection to each student after completing the assessment. The child looked more relaxed and seemed to enjoy his or her one on one time with the teacher. A few students asked if they could do it again: *"I like this, can we do this every week?"*

The teacher reported feeling less pressured to pause and stop the dialogue with the children to write in the assessment journal. She commented, *"It didn't feel like an assessment. The students hugged me and walked away; they enjoyed it."* Instead of being stressed about assessment, both parties were relaxed. Rather than the teacher being focused on taking notes, she was fully engaged with the child, becoming the listener and reflecting on thoughtful questions to ask.

According to Owocki and Goodman (2002), interactions such as the ones experienced by this teacher become "an artful blend of following and leading at the same time"(p. 6). Besides the blending of the roles of learner and teacher, more emphasis occurs on developing goals for each child. Nemeth (2015) described how using technology such as digital recordings provides opportunities for teachers to individualize scaffolding supports such as vocabulary, translations, or sentence structure for Dual Language Learners (DLL). As teachers spend one on one time with children they become more culturally competent, thus becoming more culturally responsive to both the child and the family (Gay, 2010).

Reflection is a key component in effective observations.

Culturally responsive educators "teach to and through the strengths of their students" (Gay, 2010, p.31). Identifying these talents occurs as teachers center their attention on watching for nuances of the child rather than concentrating on noting the goals attained during each assessment session. Through this time spent together, teachers develop relationships based on trust, thus developing an understanding of each child. Pang (2010) described this as a Caring Centered Reflective Approach. Within this approach, teachers value and build reciprocal relationships, consider and plan experiences to develop the whole child, and then reflect and make decisions based on principles of integrity and honesty.

Lesson 3: Use the Rewind Capability to Capture the Full Picture

The third lesson learned in this study involved the rewind capability of video recording. By replaying the video, the teacher watched how each observation unfolded and determined multiple goals accomplished by the child. The rewind capability allows teachers auxiliary data to accurately analyze the areas of growth and areas of challenge for each child. Teachers comprehend the unique story of each child's development when using this method for assessment. One teacher - researcher who valued the stories of her students was Vivian Paley (1991, 1998). Although Paley used audio instead of video, her documentation of the children's stories along with her continued reflection provided ample data about the children and their unique developmental stages. Similarly, the teacher in this case study explained that the video process provided data for assessing more skills than originally were intended to be assessed.

In our study, when asked about how many Key Indicators were observed compared to what was originally intended, the teacher responded that 75% more were observed when she rewound and reviewed the taped observation. Using the video to listen and watch the child carefully provided examples of verbal language that would have been missed when completing the task with a pencil and paper. The teacher explained that as she watched the video observation that originally targeted the Creative Arts, she now also saw Social Skills, *"Each Key Indicator has many more subsets that you can see when able to go back and view the video."* Owocki and Goodman (2002) explained how well planned observations permit teachers to "step aside and observe the child from the sidelines" (p. 8). Bredekamp (2014) identified how once any observation has occurred, teachers should allow

time to pause and reflect on what was observed. Rewinding the video provides the time for teachers to watch it again, reflect on the context, and document all areas of growth in the child.

Using Video as a Tool for Assessing

With the increased accountability of early childhood programs and the need to carefully document each assessment, teachers need to explore videotaping to enhance observational assessments. Observing children continues to be an effective method for understanding the uniqueness of each child's development. As "Kidwatchers" (Owocki & Goodman, 2002, p. 1) teachers intently observe children determining the story of their growth. However, Puerling and Fowler (2015) noted that because of the increased pressure for data driven decisions, there is less focus on using observations. Using video alongside other forms of authentic assessment and storing them in an E-Portfolio system provides a new avenue for connecting observation with technology. This partnership provides a lens for assessment that utilizes technology effectively in the classroom while also making available an assessment for young children that is developmentally appropriate.

When video was used in this study the teacher realized the value of watching the child rather than hurriedly documenting what was observed. The teacher saw things that she would have missed and realized how stress-free this experience was for the children and her. The children responded positively and desired more time with the teacher. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) identified the significance of building a relationship with a child as one of the principles of Developmentally Appropriate Practice. As teachers build these relationships, they foster the children's self esteem and also enhance their own understanding of the social and cultural contexts of the child and the family. This further encourages their cultural competence (Gay, 2010) and supports the development of a bridge between the home and school. Using video supplies the teacher with a lens to understand the whole child while enhancing her relationship with the child.

Lastly, video assessment captures the observation so that teachers can reflect on it, ensure they have made an informed decision, and plan appropriate future instruction. Reflection is a key component in effective observations of young children (Bredekamp, 2014), and can occur as teachers replay the video.

As technology continues to expand, more options will emerge for incorporating videos into authentic assessment. Accountability mandates require data-driven methods and videos can provide one strand of the data for an authentic assessment. Technology is here to stay. Let's use it to our advantage as we assess children!

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Photo by Elisabeth Nichols

Observing children is an effective method for understanding the unique development of each child.

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El Uso del Video para Mejorar la Evaluación Observacional

La tecnología puede apoyar las prácticas de evaluación apropiadas para el desarrollo de los niños pequeños.

Debbie Vera & Michelle Castilleja Trejo

"¿Cuál letra es ésta?"pregunta la maestra. El niño contesta, "C," mirando a la maestra para ver su reacción. Cuando la maestra tacha la letra, el niño se da cuenta de que ha fallado de nuevo."G," el niño se corrige, pero es demasiado tarde. Con una mirada de desanimo intenta la siguiente letra pero también la falla. Una espiral de letras perdidas afecta el enfoque del niño durante la sesión de evaluación. Mientras la maestra rápidamente documenta la evaluación, el niño pregunta, "¿Puedo ir a jugar ahora?" La maestra responde, "en cuanto terminemos en unos minutos."

Con el énfasis actual en la responsabilidad funcional, la forma en que los maestros evalúan a los niños ha involucrado el asesoramiento de criterios específicos ya que son parte de reglamentos de las agencias externas de financiación, las evaluaciones ordenadas por el estado o las decisiones de evaluación locales. Realmente los profesores afrontan retos difíciles y por lo cual ya no encajan en el papel de maestro como observador (Schultz, Kagan, y Shore, 2013). Como el reto identificado en una investigación por Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin y Almon (2015). Esta investigación descubrió como ciertos programas erróneamente cuestionan a las familias de los niños de kinder por mandarlos a programas preescolares basados en el juego. Luego esos programas etiquetan a los niños con "retardos académicos" malinterpretando la calidad de los programas preescolares basados en el juego.

Carlsson-Paige et al. (2015) notaron que el problema principal con la evaluación contemporánea se debe a la aplicación del Currículo Común y el aumento de enfoque subsiguiente en los estudios durante los cursos iniciales. Según esta investigación, la influencia del Currículo Común ha aumentado tanto el número de hojas de trabajo y actividades para la clase entera como los métodos inapropiados de la evaluación.

Tanto Carlsson-Paige et al. (2015) como Schultz, Kagan y Shore (2013) aprecian la observación como un metódo apropiado para la evaluación de los niños, aunque otros estilos de evaluación ahora están ejecutados. En este artículo presentamos un caso práctico de una maestra que aplica evaluaciones usando tecnología – especificamente el video – de acuerdo con el nivel de desarrollo del niño.

Herramientas Tecnológicas para la Evaluación Apropiada

El uso de la tecnología en la evaluación ha provisto muchas herramientas nuevas para ayudar al maestro. Una mejoría en la tecnología supone nuevos modos de guardar observaciones. Por ejemplo, los maestros pueden grabar las observaciones mediante aplicaciones con software anecdótico. Según Bates (2013), registros anecdóticos pueden documentarse digitalmente usando aplicaciones cargadas a los ordenadores portátiles o notebooks para que estén en un lugar seguro. Bates identificó a *Evernote*, *Notability y Paper Desk* como ejemplos de aplicaciones que graban digitalmente a las anotaciones anecdóticas. Además, la grabación mediante los bolígrafos electrónicos provee otros caminos para el desarrollo de un método de evaluación inclusivo. *Livescribe* (2015) utiliza un bolígrafo para conservar las grabaciones sonoras para la escucha y revisión en el futuro. Las anotaciones escritas a mano con este bolígrafo se pueden transladar a la computadora para guardarlas. Aún más, la aplicación Pear Note (2013) proporciona lugares donde guardar archivos visuales y anotaciones anecdóticas, dejando a los maestros ubicar todos los documentos en una sola aplicación.

Los portafolios electrónicos – o 'E-Portfolios' – sirven como otro modo de guardar los archivos sonoros y visuales de las evaluaciones observacionales. Los portafolios electrónicos proveen almacenamiento de las maneras

en que el niño se desarrolla con el tiempo (Mindes & Jung, 2015). El portafolio del niño incluye las observaciones del maestro, el trabajo del niño (los dibujos, las pinturas, los gráficos, los cuentos y la escritura), además de las grabaciones sonoras y visuales del niño jugando, hablando e interactuando. El uso del video como una forma de documentar en el sistema 'E-Portfolio' deja compartir información con otros profesionales que cuidan al niño (Mindes & Jung).

El programa evaluativo Teaching Strategies GOLD (2015) permite la integración del portafolio electrónico, utilizando el video con varios otros modos de documentación. Este sistema evaluativo fue analizado por Kim, Lambert y Burts (2013) a fin de determinar su validez para estudiantes de inglés como segundo idioma y estudiantes con necesidades especiales. Kim et al. concluyeron que el programa presenta un método válido para los maestros de evaluar equitativamente los niños culturalmente, lingüísticamente y étnicamente diversos. Este sistema de portafolio electrónico es uno de los que son disponibles a los maestros.

Las novedades de Teaching Strategies GOLD (2015), *Livescribe* (2015) *y Pear Note* (2013) proporcionan a los maestros nuevas opciones para la inclusion de la evaluación observacional. Sin embargo, es importante entender como el uso de esta tecnología ayuda a los maestros en medio de las muchas evaluaciones que dirigen. Ruble, McGrew, Toland, Dalrymple y Jung (2013) estudiaron como los maestros emplean la tecnología basada en la *web* or red de información para observar niños con autismo y mejorar su educación. Utilizando la videoconferencia, los maestros y los consultores trabajaron juntos para compartir mejores servicios para las necesidades individuales de los niños. Los consultores vieron primero los videos de los estudiantes con necesidades especiales; luego, éstos se juntaron con los maestros a fin de desarrollar planes individuales para el éxito de los niños.

De manera similar, Suarez y Daniels (2009) utilizaron el video digital para documentar y guardar información sobre el retraso lingüístico. Refiriéndose a la filosofía de evaluación de Reggio Emilio dentro de un formato de caso práctico, Suarez y Daniels estudiaron durante tres años el desarrollo lingüístico de gemelos. Esto hicieron con una compilación en DVD de comunicación audiovisual, imágenes digitales y observaciones escritas. Utilizando la tecnología y la observación sistemática del lenguaje del niño, los consultores y maestros discutieron estrategías en cuanto al desarrollo lingüístico de los gemelos. Sammuelsson and Plejert (2015) estuvieron de acuerdo con este estudio después de analizar mediante video los niños con impendimentos lingüísticos. Su estudio encontró que el video permitía a los profesionales regresar y repasar las comunicaciones de los niños. El repaso recurrente reveló las necesidades y espacios en el desarrollo de destrezas; tambien ayudó a los empleados elegir métodos apropiados para mejorar el lenguaje de los niños.

Foto #1 por Nancy P. Alexander

Tradicionalmente, la observación de los niños ha consistido en tomar notas.

Por lo tanto, la investigación confirma como la observación por video ha ayudado a los maestros a colaborar con otra gente sobre las necesidades especiales de los niños. En revisar estas grabaciones visuales, los maestros desarrollaron evaluaciones más completas de los retos y fortalezas de los estudiantes. De este modo, pudieron elaborar mejores estrategías para ayudar al niño. Pero como los maestros de educación temprana se enfrentan a un mayor enfoque en las evaluaciones estandarizadas en la primera infancia (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Schultz et al., 2013), la sensación de descontinuidad se expresa durante la ejecución de las evaluaciones. Los maestros aprecian el significado de la evaluación observacional o el ser un "Kidwatcher" o un "Observa Niños" (Owocki & Goodwin, 2002, p. 20), pero también reconocen simultáneamente que sus responsabilidades requieren evaluaciones menos auténticas. Además, los maestros se dan cuenta

del significado de incorporar la tecnología. Según Blair (2012), una meta del siglo XXI para los maestros debe ser la más amplia inclusión de tecnología en la planificación diaria; esto alcanza eficazmente a los estudiantes de hoy en día. La maestra en nuestro estudio entendió la importancia de incorporar la tecnología y quería explorar como el video podría mejorar las prácticas evaluativas en su salón.

La Observación por Video del Salón en un Salón Preescolar

Las filosofías de Piaget (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), Dewey (1933) y Vygotsky (1962) se vuelven evidentes en este salón inclusivo preescolar con niños de edad de tres y cuatro años, el cual incorpora el Currículo HighScope. HighScope anima a los niños a dedicarse activamente al proceso Plan-Do-Review, *Planear-Hacer-Revisar* (HighScope Educational Foundation, 2014), una situación en la cual los niños eligen una actividad que les interesa, cumplen con esa actividad y comparten los logros. Este salón está designado 'inclusivo' con dos maestras, dos ayudantes de maestra y 19 estudiantes (siete con necesidades especiales). Aun así, este estudio se centra solamente en una maestra y 12 de sus estudiantes preescolares que no muestran necesidades especiales.

La organización del salón incluye varias áreas de interés para los niños con abundantes materiales para cautivarlos y promover la curiosidad, la comunicación, la colaboración y la reflexión. La interacción entre los adultos y los niños ocurre mutuamente y con frecuencia mientras el control desplaza de la maestra al niño. La evaluación ocurre auténticamente en condiciones naturales con el progreso monitorizado y revisado diariamente según los Indicadores de Desarrollo Clave.

La observación es un método apropiado de evaluación.

La evaluación de los Indicadores de Desarrollo Clave ocurre a través de la Evaluación Observacional del Niño (abreviado COR en inglés por Child Observational Assessment) (High-Scope Educational Foundation, 2014). La maestra que participa en este estudio incorpora la COR de manera regular. Este estudio documenta su exploración de las varias maneras de implementar la tecnología en su evaluación durante el segundo semestre. Específicamente, como investigadora yo acumulé los videos de las interacciones durante estas evaluaciones en tres ocasiones. La maestra y yo analizamos las interacciones y reflexionamos en el proceso de evaluación.

Durante el segundo semestre del año escolar, la maestra tenía planeado observar tres Indicadores Claves – el Escuchar, la Comprensión y las Artes Creativas – después de leer *Harold y el Lápiz Color Morado* (Johnson, 1955). Una vez leído el libro, la maestra pidió que los niños dibujaran lo recordado del cuento. Mientras los niños recordaban detalles del cuento, la maestra les hizo preguntas sobre las maneras en que el cuento se aplicara a sus vidas personales. A pesar de que la maestra normalmente hubiera documentado a mano las respuestas, esta vez utilizó un iPad para videograbar los datos observacionales. Los niños ya estaban familiarizados con los iPads; por ende, el uso de uno durante la observación no los distrajo. La grabación de la observación tardó aproximadamente de 8 a10 minutos por niño cada video. En utilizar el iPad, la maestra identificó beneficios imprevistos.

Los Beneficios de la Observación por Video

Un beneficio del uso del video salió durante la interacción libre entre la maestra y el niño. El ambiente relativamente relajado de la videograbación permitió más diálogo entre maestra y estudiante, así alentando un lazo más fuerte entre los dos. Mientras interactuaban la maestra y el niño, la maestra aprendió más sobre los intereses del niño; ella describió el proceso como una "conversación más natural que me ayudó de conocerlos más a fondo y por eso permitió que planificara mejor para ellos." A través de estas conversaciones naturales, la maestra pudo diferenciar entre la instrucción mediante los intereses del niño y el proceso de crear significado (Tomlinson & Edison, 2003).

Junto con esta diferenciación en cuanto al niño, la maestra se preocupaba menos con la anotación de cada Indicador Clave cuando éste ocurría y más en la disponibilidad de los videos de las observaciones ya que los podia ver múltiples veces. Los niños se sentían cómodos comunicándose por varios temas mientras dibujaban. La maestra reconoció su calma y hasta los niños pedían saber cuando se repetiría el ejercicio. Las dos partes experimentaron beneficios mutuos al haber interactuado de esta manera.

Otro beneficio salió después de la observación, lo cual era muy valioso al final del período de evaluación. La

maestra había planeado evaluar ciertos Indicadores Claves. Pero al ver el video, se dio cuenta de que podía evaluar más Indicadores Claves de los que había planeado, tomando 15 minutos por video (con la anotación y la clasificación). En combinación con los Indicadores Claves del Escuchar, la Comprensión y las Artes Creativas, la maestra observó indicadores en los campos de Desarrollo Socioemocional, Desarrollo Físico, Estudios Sociales y Acercamientos Al Aprendizaje. La maestra creía que el repaso del video le dejó más tiempo para identificar nuevos Indicadores Claves y confirmar los Indicadores Claves ya notados; esto proveyó una evaluación más completa y válida.

La tecnología proporciona otra herramienta para documentar y guardar observaciones.

Foto #2 por Elisabeth Nichols

Los Retos de la Observación por Video

El uso del video como método de observación revela tres retos. El reto principal para los maestros y niños consistía en ciertas distracciones que limitaban o eliminaban el uso eficaz del video. Si la videograbación ocurre pocas veces en el salón, el iPad puede servir de distracción para los niños mientras cumplen con el ejercicio. El ruido superfluo de los estudiantes no observados puede inhibir la implementación de este modo de observación. Por fin, la maestra necesita dividir su enfoque entre el manejo de la conducta, el manejo de los materiales y el niño bajo evaluación. Sin embargo, la maestra en este caso práctico hizo uso de un ayudante; ella grabó el video en otro salón mientras el ayudante llevó a los niños al recreo.

Es posible que otros maestros de educación temprana no tenga la oportunidad de otro salón o un ayudante a tiempo completo, como tuvo esta maestra. En ese caso, quizá la maestra necesite videograbar un grupo de niños. Según Copple y Bredekamp (2009), la evaluación sólida supone la observación de niños en grupos, mientras juegan y trabajan en colaboración. Este método puede producir información sobre lo que ocurre entre los pares, notablemente los mecanismos de apoyo que facilitan el desarrollo de destrezas. También puede indicar las metas sociales, emocionales y lingüísticas que se están desarrollando en niños particulares.

Además de la posibilidad de distracción durante la videograbación, el tiempo requerido para cada observación puede disuadir a algunos maestros de la implementación de este formato. Pero si los ayudantes de maestro ayudan con el manejo de la conducta, es posible que el tiempo adicional para analizar estas observaciones no importe. Además, si se observan más destrezas en el video, este tiempo adicional puede servir de ventaja. Cuando pregunté a la maestra si implementaría la observación por video el próximo año escolar, respondió:

> *Sí, creo que puedo observar más de los comportamientos de los niños porque no interrumpí la interacción para apuntar para la evaluación. Me pareció más natural la discusión con ellos como que sabía que no me faltaba una lista mental para identificar cada destreza; la captaría en la grabación.*

El último reto consiste en el obtener tanto la tecnología apropiada para iniciar la observación como las aplicaciones relacionadas para producir el video. La tecnología apropiada puede incluir una tableta o una videocámara para grabar las observaciones. Otra alternativa para la videograbación es el teléfono celular personal con la capacidad de grabar observaciones para el análisis subsiguiente. Como con cualquier tecnología, el maestro necesita conseguir el permiso de los padres para videograbar el niño; debe también guardar estas grabaciones en una página encriptada con contraseña (Mindes & Jung, 2015).

Evaluando con Nuevo Lente

Al intentar evaluar a los niños apropiadamente entre las varias presiones de la responsibilidad funcional, es necesario ajustar los métodos de evaluación. La maestra en este estudio se dio cuenta de la importancia de implementar la videograbación. Los siguientes párrafos describirán tres lecciones aprendidas después de aplicar el lente de la videograbación de evaluaciones.

Lección 1: Utiliza la Tecnología para Mejorar la Colección de Datos de Evaluación Acorde con el Nivel de Desarrollo

La primera lección de esta investigación consiste en la oportunidad que provee la tecnología para evaluar a los niños deacuerdo con su nivel de desarrollo. Según Puerling y Fowler (2015), el uso de la tecnología ofrece al maestro la habilidad de incorporar métodos más auténticos de evaluación. Por ejemplo, los autores describen una aplicación utilizada en Columbia College llamado *Childfolio*, que guarda en una base de datos y múltiples formas de documentación evaluativa como los videos, las fotos, las notas escritas a mano, los trabajos de los niños y otros ejemplos auténticos de la evaluación. La base de datos provee una reseña para la administración, la familia o los consultadores.

Aun con las capacidades de la base de datos, el beneficio más significativo para el maestro es la visualización más auténtica que ofrece la evaluación observacional. Las videograbaciones de video comprenden un componente en la visión integral del niño. Puerling y Fowler (2015) describen como está requerido que los maestros implementen más evaluaciones que producen datos. No obstante, con la disponibilidad de nuevas aplicaciones como *Childfolio* (Puerling & Fowler), *Pear Note* (2013) *y Livescribe* (2015), la tecnología ha innovado el uso de la videograbación como forma de observar y evaluar al niño de una manera apropiada con el nivel de desarrollo.

La reflexión es un componente clave en las observaciones eficaces.

Lección 2: Observa la Historia Revelarse

Mientras la maestra observaba e interactuaba con el niño en vez de apuntar, la segunda lección de este estudio iba evolucionando. Al empeñarse la maestra del caso práctico en la evaluación, ésta decía enfocarse atentamente al niño particular, sintiendo a la vez una conexión renovada con cada estudiante al terminar su evaluación. El niño pareció relajarse más y disfrutar del tiempo privado con la maestra. Unos alumnos preguntaron si podrían evaluar así en el futuro: "Me gusta esto, ¿podemos hacerlo cada semana?"

La maestra reportó sentir menos presión a pausar y parar el diálogo con los niños para escribir en el diario de evaluación. Comentó, "No se sentía como una evaluación. Los alumnos me abrazaron y se marcharon; lo disfrutaron." En vez de sentir estrés sobre la evaluación, las dos partes se relajaban. Más que enfocarse en apuntar, la maestra interactuaba plenamente con el niño, convirtiéndose en oyente y reflejando en hacer preguntas pensativas.

Según Owocki y Goodman (2002), las interacciones como las experimentadas por la maestra se convierten en "una mezcla ingeniosa de seguir y guiar a la vez" (p. 6). Además de la mezcla de los papeles de maestra y aprendiz, hay más énfasis en el desarrollo de metas para cada niño. Nemeth (2015) compartió como las grabaciones digitales ofrecen mecanismos de apoyo personalizados como el vocabulario, las traducciones o la sintaxis para los niños que aprenden en dos idiomas (DLL). Al pasar tiempo privado con los niños, los maestros se vuelven más competentes culturalmente, convirtiéndose más receptivos culturalmente tanto con el niño como con su familia (Gay, 2010).

Los educadores que son receptivos culturalmente "enseñan a y a través de las fuerzas de sus alumnos" (Gay, 2010, p. 31). Cuando los maestros centran su atención en la observación de las matices del niño en vez de concentrar en apuntar las metas logradas en cada período de evaluación, identifican estos talentos. A través de este tiempo pasado juntos, los maestros desarrollan relaciones basadas en la confianza, así alimentado un entendimiento de cada niño. Pang (2010) describe esto como una Estrategía de Reflexión Centrada en el Cariño. Dentro de esta estrategia, los maestros valoran y construyen relaciones mutuas, consideran y planean experiences para el desarrollo integral del niño, y luego reflexionan y toman decisiones basadas en principios de honradez y honestidad.

Lección 3: Utiliza la Capacidad de Regresar para Ver el Cuadro Completo

La tercera lección de este estudio consiste en la capacidad de regresar la videograbación. Al repetir el video, la maestra vio como desarrolló cada

observación; también se dio cuenta de las múltiples metas logradas por el niño. La capacidad de regaresar el video deja a los maestros analizar con exactitud las áreas de desarrollo y desafío de cada niño. Al utilizar este método de evaluar, los maestros comprenden la historia única del desarrollo de cada niño. Una maestra-investigadora que valora las historias de sus alumnos es Vivian Paley (1991, 1998). Aunque Paley utilizó grabación sonora en vez de video, tanto su documentación de las historias de los niños como su reflexión continua proveyó datos copiosos sobre los niños y sus etapas de desarrollo únicas. De manera similar, la maestra en este caso práctico explicó que el proceso de videograbar ofreció datos para la evaluación de más destrezas de lo que había originalmente anticipado.

En nuestro estudio, cuando preguntamos cuantos Indicadores Claves fueron observados en comparación con lo planeado originalmente, la maestra respondió que 75% más fueron observados cuando regresó y repasó la observación grabada. Ejemplos del lenguaje verbal que se le hubiera escapado con solamente completar el ejercicio a mano con lápiz y papel sin embargo fueron captados con escuchar y ver los comportamientos del niño por video. La maestra explicó que mientras veía la videograbación que se dirigía a las Artes Creativas, también se dio cuenta de las Habilidades Sociales, y compartió, "Cada Indicador Clave tiene mucho más subcategorías a que te das cuenta cuando revisas el video." Owocki y Goodman (2002) explicaron como las observaciones bien planeadas permiten a los maestros "apartarse y observar al niño del margen" (p. 8). Según Bredekamp (2014), cuando una observación ha ocurrido, los maestros deben dejar tiempo para pausar y reflejar en lo observado. El regresar el video deja al maestro ver de nuevo el contenido, reflexionar en el contexto y documentar todas las áreas de desarrollo del niño.

Utilizando el Video como Herramienta de Evaluación

Con el aumento de la responsabilidad functional en programas de primera infancia y la necesidad de documentar cuidadosamente cada evaluación, los maestros necesitan contemplar la videograbación como manera de mejorar la evaluación observacional. La observación de los niños sigue siendo un método eficaz de entender la singularidad del desarrollo de cada niño. Como "Kidwatchers" (Owocki & Goodman, 2002, p. 1), los maestros observan atentamente a los niños, identificando las historias de sus desarrollos. Aun así, Puerling y Fowler (2015) anotaron que, debido al aumento de la presión a causa de las decisiones accionadas por los datos, hay menos concentración en el uso de observaciones. El uso y depósito del video junto a otras formas de evaluación auténtica en un sistema 'E-Portfolio' provee una nueva manera de conectar la observación con la tecnología. Esta colaboración ofrece una ventana a la evaluación que utiliza eficazmente la tecnología en el salón mientras también hace disponible para niños pequeños la evaluación deacuerdo con el nivel de desarrollo.

Con la videograbación, la maestra podía darse cuenta del valor de observar el niño en vez de documentar lo visto a toda prisa. La maestra así vio comportamientos que hubiera faltado de otra manera; también se dio cuenta de la falta de estrés de esta experiencia para sí misma y para los alumnos. Los niños respondieron favorablemente y querían pasar más tiempo con la maestra. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) identificó el significado de construir una relación con el niño como uno de los principios de la Práctica Apropiada con el Nivel de Desarrollo. Al construir estas relaciones, el maestro promueve el autoestima del niño y mejora su entendimiento de los contextos sociales y culturales del niño y su familia. Esto respalda su competencia

Foto #3 por Elisabeth Nichols

La observación de los niños es un método eficaz para entender del desarrollo único de cada niño.

cultural (Gay, 2010) y sostiene el desarrollo de un puente entre el hogar y la escuela. El uso del video suministra al maestro un lente para entender mejor al niño mientras también mejora su relación con el mismo.

Por último, la evaluación por video capta la observación a fin de que el maestro reflexione, asegure una decisión instruida y planee instrucción apropiada para el futuro. La reflexión es un componente clave de la observación eficaz de niños pequeños (Bredekamp, 2014), y puede ocurrir cuando el maestro revisa el video.

A como se va desarrollando la tecnología, surgirán más opciones para la incorporación del video en la evaluación auténtica. Los mandatos de responsabilidad funcional requieren métodos basados en los datos, y los videos pueden brindar una parte de la información necesaria para una evaluación auténtica. La tecnología llegó para echar raíces. ¡Úsemosla a nuestra ventaja cuando evaluamos los niños!

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What Preschool Children Like Best about School

Learn how teachers can gain a strong understanding of what engages and motivates young children to provide more meaningful, high quality learning experiences.

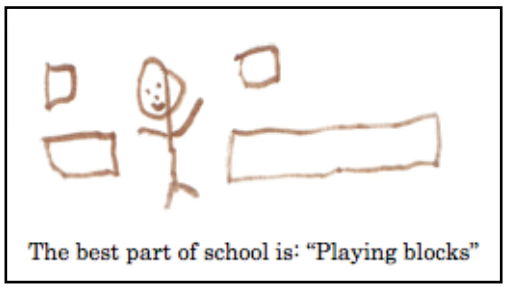
Susan Griebling, Jennifer Jacobs, Leslie Kochanowski, & Lisa M. Vaughn

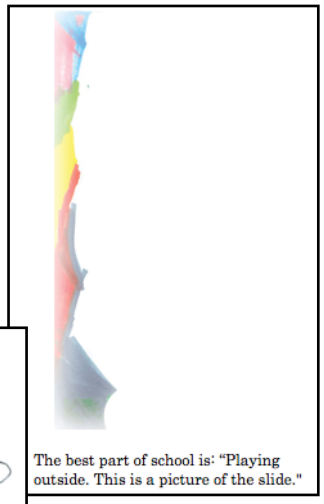
In recent years, early care professionals have begun to look to children's interests to plan the classroom environment and learning experiences. Research has shown that children are more deeply engaged in the learning process when the topic of study is meaningful, relevant, and personally significant (Helm, 2015). By closely observing young children, reflecting on practice, and building dynamic relationships, teachers gain a strong understanding of what engages and motivates young children, and can provide more meaningful, high quality learning experiences.

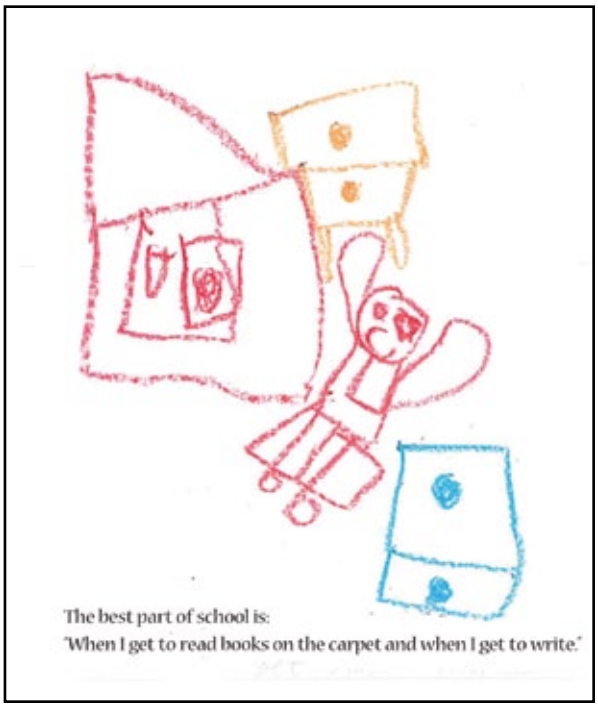
When asked to conduct a needs assessment for a large Midwestern social service organization that provides Head Start services for low-income children, we purposefully included the children's point of view. Typically, needs assessments evaluate issues and resources from an adult perspective; however, we felt it was critical to include the voices of the children as valuable sources of information on both the classroom environment and curriculum. We wanted to reveal how children perceived their school and what they liked best about school--more specifically, what were their favorite areas and activities at school. This information would be important, especially in decisions about the allocation of time and funds for classrooms and programming.

What Do You Like Best About School?

We asked 252 preschool children from six Head Start programs what they like best about school. The average age of this group was 3.75 years, and gender distribution was approximately 50-50. (Some teachers did not report gender.) The assessment was presented in an open-ended format to allow children to answer in a manner that reflected their personal experience at school. Children were asked to respond to the question "What







is the best part of school?" both verbally and through drawing. We felt drawing would help the children communicate their thoughts to the teachers more completely, especially when asked to talk about their drawing (Coates & Coates, 2006). The drawings themselves were not analyzed as they were meant only to support the children's discussions with the teachers.

The Children's Responses

The children's responses were tabulated for each activity/area of the classroom. Some of the children listed multiple activities or areas of the classroom that were "best", all of which were recorded in the results. The children identified 23 activities that were further analyzed and grouped into 10 areas

For example, drawing, painting, play dough and music were grouped into "arts" and writing and reading were grouped into "literacy" (Figure 2).

We were touched by the children's responses and felt these were significant areas to study and reflect on for our practice as educators. If children say these are the areas they like best, then we can assume that they spend a majority of their free time there. For the purposes of this article, we will focus on the six areas that received the greatest number of responses from the children and discuss recent research that advises how we can enrich those areas, thus enhancing the children's educational experiences.

Blocks and Manipulatives

Sixty-nine children mentioned blocks and manipulatives as the best part of school, of whom 30 chose

Figure 1: Areas children identifed as liking "best about school"

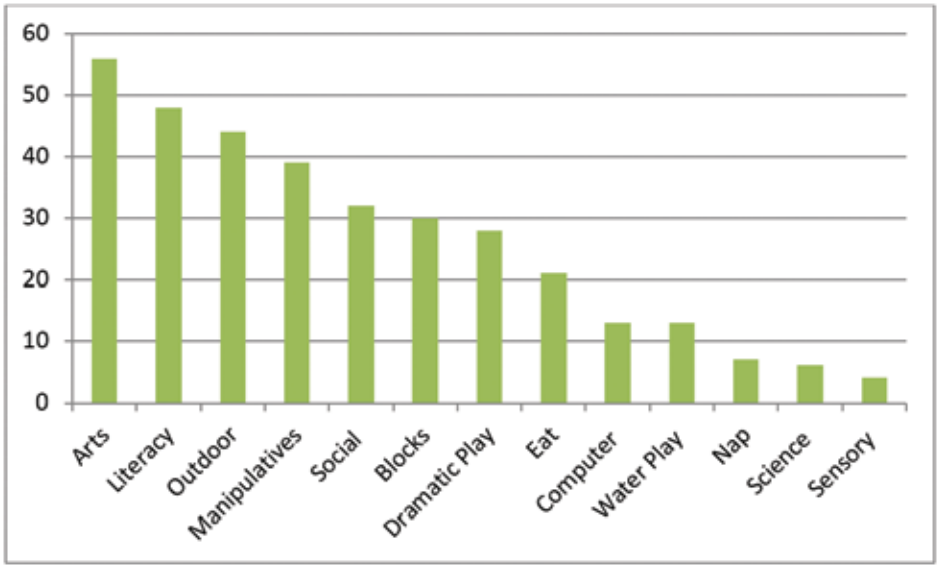


Figure 2: Activities included in "liked areas"

Area:	Includes:
Arts	drawing, paint, playdough, music
Literacy	writing, reading
Dramatic Play	dramatic play, puppets
Social	friends, teachers
Blocks and Manipulatives	blocks, cars, legos, magnets, dominoes animals, number bears, etc.
Science	science, live animals
Water play	water play indoors, water play outdoors

blocks and 39 specified manipulatives such as Legos, cars, magnet, dominoes, and plastic animals. We chose to combine these open-ended materials because they are all used in constructive play.

In sharp contrast to worksheets, hands-on materials such as blocks and manipulatives encourage experiential learning. Children who engage with hands-on open-ended materials demonstrate higher levels of creativity and problem-solving abilities (Drew & Rankin, 2004). Tunks (2009) provides practical suggestions for incorporating blocks into the early childhood classroom and discusses the implications for learning across social, language, and math domains. Blocks have specifically been linked to foundational skills related to STEM learning. Through block play, children experiment with mathematical concepts such as geometric thinking, measurement, and patterning (Ness & Farenga, 2007) which is shown to have positive long-term effects on math achievement (Petersen & Levine, 2014). Children also learn about science concepts such as gravity, balance and characteristics of objects through

Photos Courtesy of Jake Drost Head Start, Sulphur, LA

What I like best: Sand and water play

block and manipulative play (Chalufour & Worth, 2004). Engineering-related behavior in early childhood includes constructing, problem solving, evaluating design and explaining how things are built--opportunities readily available through hands-on play (Bairaktarova, Evangelou, Bagiati, & Brophy 2011). Block and manipulative play are shown to support language development and literacy (Cohen & Uhry, 2007), and provide opportunities to practice social, spatial, language, and math skills (Ramani, Zippert, Schweitzer, & Pan, 2014).

The concept of *loose parts* is gaining awareness in early childhood settings as a way to use unique and inexpensive materials for construction and in the block area. The term, coined by architect Simon Nicholson (1972), refers to open-ended materials that can be moved, built with, and designed in endless ways: "*In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it.*" (Nicholson, 1972, p 6). Blocks and manipulatives such as Magna-tiles and Legos, are examples of loose parts because there is no one right way to use them, which provides flexibility in children's play (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2015). It is important to support this innate desire to experiment with materials by encouraging children to draw on their creativity, rather than relying on manuals and pre-made designs (Drew & Rankin, 2004).

Hands-on materials encourage experiential learning.

Recommendations for Practice

Often props such as small animals or cars are provided in the block area; however, swatches of fabric, small rocks, or a basket of sticks can provide even greater opportunities for creative and flexible play. Recycled loose parts such as cardboard tubes, plastic bottle caps, or tin cans provide alternative building materials to use alone or with blocks. Their varied properties expose children to different textures, shapes, and forms—which build STEM awareness. Recycled and natural materials are not only inexpensive, they extend and enhance constructive play and invite sorting, counting, and patterning.

Related fiction and non-fiction books add language, while authentic art prints can increase art awareness and inspire new construction ideas in the block play area (Giles & Vitulli, 2013). Writing materials allow children to make signs for their structures and represent them through drawing (Wellhousen & Giles, 2005).

In addition, consider bringing blocks and manipulatives into different areas of the classroom. For example, children can use a basket of cubes in dramatic play to fit their play scenarios, such as making food for a pet. Not only will this provide more flexibility in children's play, it also prompts children who may not usually venture to the block and manipulative areas to experience the benefits of this play.

Arts

The arts were a top choice for 56 children as "the best part of school." Of the four subcategories--drawing, paint, play dough, and music--drawing comprised the greatest response.

While the arts are often referred to as "enrichment," engagement in the arts has been linked to higher academic achievement and positive emotional changes in children (Kinney & Forsythe, 2005) and increased self-esteem (Ruppert, 2006). Children who engage in open-ended art activities develop flexibility and

are more willing to take risks and experiment in their work (Ruppert, 2006).

Recommendations for Practice

Based on our findings about children's preferences and research suggesting the multiple benefits of engaging in arts activities, preschools can consider designing learning environments that support open-ended art exploration. It is important to have an art area in the classroom and to expand the variety of materials and opportunities for exploration. Experiences and materials can include clay, wire, recycled materials, printmaking, paint mixing, collage, as well as drawing. Focusing on process over producing a product is key if we want children to use art as a method of expression (Pelo, 2007). Providing high quality materials and protective coverings (smocks, floor covering) can reduce frustration and increase engagement and enjoyment. Provide books and prints with authentic and varied forms of artwork.

Talking with children about their art helps teachers learn about them (Vecchi, 2010). Look at children's work together, ask how children think about their work, take dictation, be respectful of their words, and use rich vocabulary such as "sculpture" and "forms." Funding for training and authentic art materials can be considered to increase teachers' understandings and to provide materials (Pelo, 2007).

What I like best: Reading books

Photos Courtesy of Jake Drost Head Start, Sulphur, LA

Literacy

Twenty-five children specified writing, primarily "writing my name," as their favorite part of school, and 23 referred to reading. Writing letters is linked with early literacy skills including alphabetic knowledge and phonemic awareness, and in supportive classrooms writing materials are linked to alphabet knowledge and name-writing ability (Drouin & Harmon, 2009; Guo, Justice, Kaderavek, & McGinty, 2012).

Recommendations for Practice

Writing experiences for young children should follow their interests and be infused into everyday experiences. Preschoolers can begin by learning to write their own name, such as signing into the classroom each morning, adding their own names to waiting lists for desired activities, and creating class-made books that mimic predictable read aloud books. Teachers can provide name cards for support. Writing tables or centers can include fun writing utensils, paper, supports such as the alphabet and a picture dictionary. Writing belongs throughout the classroom, with pencils and clipboards available in the block, dramatic play, art, and science areas for children to record messages and observations.

Preschool teachers should provide a range of reading experiences, including group read-alouds, reading with individual children, books

on audio, having children read to one another, and story extensions to retell a story. While reading aloud to young children is important, interactive shared book reading during the preschool years provides distinct advantages for young children, supporting achievement and enthusiasm (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2002).

Outdoor/Gross Motor

Of the children interviewed, 42 referred to outdoor play or indoor large motor play as the best part of school. Children specifically mentioned outside water play, bicycles, slides, "climbing up on the big climber all the way to the top," and kicking balls. Several responses indicated a connection to nature—for example, flowers or clouds. One boy provided this introspection, "*When I see the sun, it makes me calm down.*" This powerful statement should be strongly considered when allotting time for outdoor play which provides meaningful learning experiences and fosters an affinity for the natural world (Carr & Luken, 2014).

Exposure to nature deeply impacts psychological well-being (Kellert, 2005) and free play in natural areas is shown to foster skills and attitudes related to self-determination (Kochanowski & Carr, 2014). In addition, there is a growing body of literature exploring the link between physical activity, healthy brain development, and increased learning outcomes, which further supports the need to get children moving and outdoors (Hung, Chang, Tang, & Shih, 2008).

Recommendations for Practice

One way to promote free, active play is to simply increase the amount of time children spend outdoors. A decision to increase outdoor playtime is supported by play researchers, as well as the findings of this study about children's preferred activities. Outdoor learning environments can be enhanced with plants and natural loose parts such as tree stumps, logs, rocks, and a variety of topical materials such as grass, dirt and mulch. Simple changes such as these increase opportunities for gross motor development and provide direct access to nature. Kernan (2007) identified important characteristics of outdoor play from the perspective of children and found that movement, obtaining a different vantage point, finding and constructing small spaces (i.e. forts, caves, hiding spots), constructing, building, and designing with open-ended materials, direct contact with plants and animals, and social interaction are significant outdoor experiences for young children.

Outdoor play provides meaningful learning experiences.

Children can also enjoy indoor activities outside, such as reading, dramatic play, and building in outdoor environments. Clipboards, magnifying glasses, and measuring tapes encourage children to develop observation and inquiry skills that are important to scientific ways of thinking and add richness to outdoor play.

Social

School has a strong social component, evidenced by 32 children's responses that mentioned playing with their friends and teachers as the best thing about school. Friends are significant to a child's healthy social emotional development and provide a framework for developing social competence (Kostelnik,Whiren, Soderman, & Gregory, 2009; Ladd, Kochenderfer-Ladd, & Rydell, 2011). Social competence is generally defined as an individual's ability to initiate and maintain satisfying, reciprocal relationships with peers (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

Children who struggle with peer relationships may have fewer opportunities to practice social skills, and ultimately may experience more social and academic problems throughout school. They are also at risk for dropping out of school, experience high rates of absenteeism and suspension, and are often referred for special education services (Bukowski, Buhrmester, & Underwood, 2011). Further studies have found that peer relationships contribute to children's socio-emotional adjustment, academic performance, and self-concept (Kalb, Way, Warren-Khot, Rhoades, & Bassett, 2013). A child's peer relationships in kindergarten are accurate predictors of his/her later social competence (Guhn, Gadermann, Almas, Schonert-Reichl, & Hertzman, 2016). While many children may easily enter play situations and form friendships, other children need support to attain these social skills. With implications such as these, it is imperative for early childhood teachers to understand what social competence encompasses and how to facilitate its development.

Recommendations for Practice

Early childhood professionals can support children's social development through the physical environment of

the classroom when they consider it as the "third teacher" (Malaguzzi, 1998). Educators can examine the areas of group composition (how children are grouped within the classroom), classroom activities, and materials. Mixed age classrooms afford opportunities to interact with same- and different-age classmates and provide them with chances to offer nurturing, support, leadership, and cooperation. Educators can manipulate the ways children are grouped within the classroom, such as by limiting the number of centers that are available (Bovey & Strain, 2003). This will likely increase the number of children at each center, thereby enhancing the opportunity for social interaction. Using interesting or novel toys and equipment is likely to encourage conversation about the items, as well as promote cooperation and sharing (Bovey & Strain, 2003). The size of the space can also determine how much social interaction takes place, with small spaces encouraging less interaction and larger, more open spaces allowing children to work together.

Teachers may also consider using project work, which gives children the opportunity to investigate topics of interest. Projects, or group investigations that are meaningful to the children create opportunities for social interaction and help to improve social relationships (Helm & Katz, 2011). Children who are engaged in meaningful and satisfying activities are less prone to be discontented in other areas of life such as social relationships (Katz & McClellan, 1997). The investigation may also lend itself to building things together and supporting and challenging each other as children work to understand their world. The social interactions that take place when children share their discoveries form the basis of meaningful peer interaction (Griebling, Elgas, & Konerman, 2015) when children contribute ideas, discuss findings, problem solve, and compromise. Children's ideas and work are valued, encouraging them to continue on their quest.

Teachers can also promote social competence by building a sense of community in which children support and nurture each other. Teachers can begin to create a classroom community by practicing principles of inclusion in regards to staff, parents, and the community. Teachers can also help children to form relationships with each other by finding content that is interesting to both children.

What I like best: Playing with friends (and frogs!)

Photos Courtesy of Jake Drost Head Start, Sulphur, LA

Dramatic Play

Twenty-eight children in this study selected dramatic play as a favorite aspect of their school day, mentioning the dolls, puppets, and kitchen area. Early childhood professionals have long valued play, particularly pretend play, as important for children's development (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012). Research has specifically examined socio-dramatic play and its role in supporting children's development, both cognitive and social-emotional (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Elkind, 2007; Smith, 2010). Children who are participating in socio-dramatic play often function at a stage above their current developmental level (Cemore & Herwig, 2005; Vygotsky, 1966). They are able to involve themselves in a type of play that requires them to be someone they are not and follow social rules that they may not normally follow. Socio-dramatic play also supports children's language abilities.

Recommendations for Practice

Preschool aged children need opportunities to engage in extended dramatic play, including allowing a significant amount of time to plan and act out the play. Dramatic play areas can invite advanced play schemes by expanding what children already know, such as visiting a pet store, a fire station, a farmer's

market, or a pizza parlor. Allowing children to create the props and use items from other areas of the classroom will extend the play scenario and enhance their symbolic function skills. You need only to provide enough props to get the play started. Eliminate limits on how many children can play in the area, or increase the number of children allowed to play there to encourage complex role play or simply to adjust to changing demands when other children join the existing play scheme.

Conclusion

Why should we listen to children for input on how to enhance the classroom and experiences we provide for them each day? It makes sense that when children are interested and excited about materials and activities they will stay engaged longer, and engagement leads to learning (Helm, 2015). While this study focused on what children in one Midwestern preschool setting liked best about school, you might consider conducting your own mini-study. Think about asking the children you are with everyday what they like best about school. Choose one of those areas to study in more depth. Investigate current research and practice to enhance your program. Resources for these are provided at the end of this article.

Get involved in early childhood learning communities locally where you can study and share ideas. We want to inspire you to make a change in your life as a teacher, in the learning that occurs for the children and families you work with and connect with the children in our classroom in significant ways.

Additional Resources

Art

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Outdoor

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American and Japanese Kindergartners' Meanings of Play Through the Use of Photo Elicitation: What Can We Learn From Them?

View play through a child's perspective in culturally diverse early childhood programs.

Satomi Izumi-Taylor & Yoko Ito

We are familiar with adults' play perspectives, but what about children's perspectives of play? What constitutes play for children may differ from that of adults, thus when teachers understand children's perspectives of play, they can provide developmentally appropriate play environments (Rosenow, 2008). For instance, we can see this perspective in the following language sample of American and Japanese kindergartners as they explain the play captured in photos they have taken, the children explain:

"This is an obese chicken."

"I took this picture of chickens because I like them."

"They are jumping and talking to each other, and doing really cool stuff."

This article describes how American and Japanese kindergartners see play and what teachers can learn from them. The examples are based on our study of kindergartners' views when asked to both photograph and explain their meanings of play (Izumi-Taylor, Ito, & Krisell, 2014). We share our findings from analyzing photos and interviews from 44 American children in the southeastern United States and 55 Japanese children in the main island of Japan, all aged five to six years. All of the students attended school five days per week. We invited all children in one American school that prescribed individual instruction, as well as all Japanese kindergartners in one group-oriented school who participated in the study.

In the American classroom, the children engaged in more individual activities than their Japanese counterparts, and the American teachers encouraged students' individual opinions and feedback. In the Japanese classroom, group-oriented play activities and group instruction were valued, and the teachers encouraged students' cooperation by asking the whole class for its opinions and supported the students' participation during discussions. Although both schools were located in urban areas, the Japanese school had a more spacious natural playground than the American school, and included a small hill, trees, flowers, and bushes. The American school served children from low-to-middle-class families with 93% Caucasian and 7% African and Hispanic American populations, while the Japanese school's children were 100% Japanese from low-to-middle-class families.

All children used digital cameras provided by adult acquaintances, and none of them asked for help taking the photos. Both American and Japanese adult acquaintances gave the same instructions to the children by saying *"I would like for you to photograph what you think is play, and after photographing, I will show your photos to you so you can tell me why you think they are play to you."* After the pictures were taken, the adult acquaintances showed the children their photos and asked the following question, *"Can you tell me why these photos mean play to you?"* Children in both countries had ample opportunities to photograph both indoors and outdoors at their schools without adult presence.

Theoretical Background

Previous American research studies on children's perspectives of play are considered outdated and limited since children's play perspectives came from only interviews (Fein & Wiltz, 1998; King, 1979, 1986; Wing, 1995). Through interviewing, two studies found that

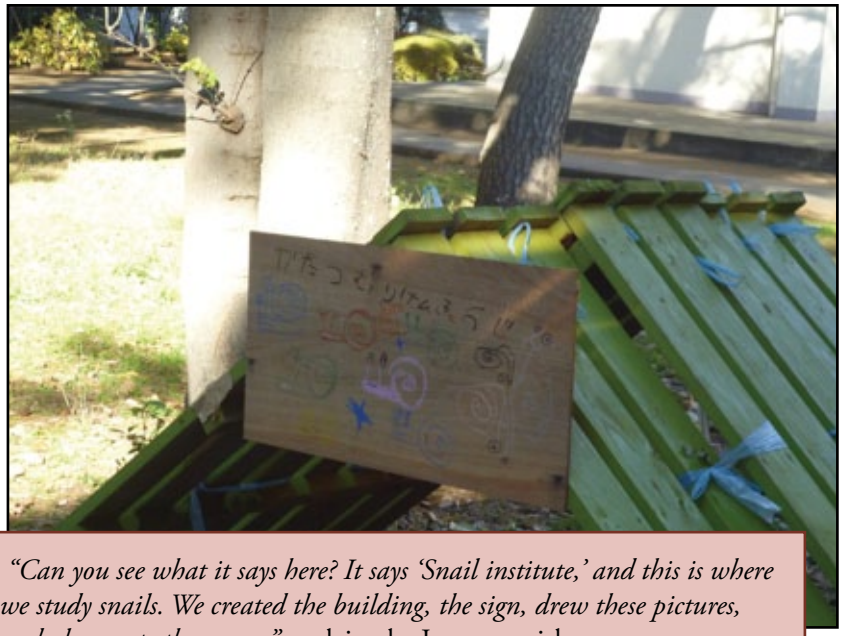

Photo courtesy of authors

"Can you see what it says here? It says 'Snail institute,' and this is where we study snails. We created the building, the sign, drew these pictures, and also wrote the name," explained a Japanese girl.

school play time is children's favorite activity and that children enjoy selecting their own play materials (Fein & Wiltz, 1998; Wiltz & Klein, 2001). Fivush (1984) found children's play was associated with games, mini-gyms, and playing with other children. When asked, American children said "school was for work" and recess was play (Dockett, 2002, p. 9). American kindergarten and first/second graders preferred play over work (Wing, 1995), and Cunningham and Weigel (1992) found that child-initiated play was considered play, whereas teacher-initiated activities were work.

However, oftentimes young children find it difficult to express their views (Pink, 2013; Thompson & Williams, 2009), and relying on only interviews to understand their perspectives might not be sufficient since their responses could be limited (Einarsdottir, 2005). To address such limitations, children may more freely reveal their meanings of play through their photos (Phelan & Kinsella, 2011; Thompson & Williams, 2009) and may be empowered by this (Prosser & Burke, 2008). Reviewing similarities and differences in American and Japanese kindergartners' views can help improve the design and implementation of early childhood education programs for all children, as well as contribute to cross-cultural studies of early childhood education. As many teachers perceive play as a cultural occurrence (Izumi-Taylor & Ito, 2015), understanding different cultural practices and beliefs broadens teachers' perspectives of play (Izumi-Taylor, 2013). Because there is a growing global focus on child-centered education and care (Roopnarine, 2015), examining children's views of play in the US and Japan might provide universal understanding of "global issues of meeting the culturally, developmentally appropriate needs of young children" (Roopnarine, 2015, p. 1).

Understanding Kindergarteners' Views of Play Through Their Photos

Photography can represent and be used as meaningful signs of communication as much as when we use words (Phelan & Kinsella, 2011; Thompson & Williams, 2009). Photography can amplify children's explanations of their activities (Ching, Wang, Shih, & Kedem, 2006; Clark-Ibanez, 2004; DeMarie, 2001; DeMarie & Ethridge, 2006; Einarsdottir, 2005; Good, 2005/2006; Kirova & Emme, 2009). Clark-Ibanez (2004) asked children to photograph people or things with "social attachments and meaning" (p. 1522) to explain their lives. Their photos revealed that their most meaningful events were related to playing with others.

Photography allows children to express their social and cultural experiences in various ways and provides them with opportunities to communicate their own opinions (Phelan & Kinsella, 2011). Children's photos can provide authentic understanding of their views of school activities (DeMarie & Ethridge, 2006). Although there are no known studies of Japanese children's views of play, there is one study utilizing children's photos that found photography was a valuable tool when children photographed their favorite items, current interests, and memorable events (Oishi, 2010).

When we asked both American and Japanese kindergartners to take pictures and explain their views of play, most children photographed outdoor play with other children. We found that both American and Japanese children's play perspectives were associated with social interactions, self-selected environments, and their favorite toys/props. Only Japanese children took photos of toys/props without people. When asked to explain their photos, many American and Japanese children described the contents of their photos, including objects, actions, and subjects, among others.

Play in Relation to Children's Social Interactions

Most American and Japanese children's photos captured active interactions with others, with smiling children in some pictures. This supports findings from other researchers that children's play perspectives are associated with social interactions (Clark-Ibanez, 2004: Dockett & Meckley, 2007). Children generally consider "peer interaction and interactive experiences" to be valuable and meaningful (DeMarie & Ethridge, 2006, p. 1030), and their pictures contained such when they were asked to photograph school images (Dockett & Perry, 2005). For example, a Japanese boy who took a picture of another boy making faces said, *"Isn't this a funny face? This child is good at showing funny faces."* Interestingly, some American and Japanese children included their teachers in their pictures with such descriptions as, "He is my teacher," and "My friend and teacher are talking."

However, only Japanese children explained that some subjects were friends, saying, *"I took this because they are my friends."* A Japanese boy who photographed two boys in yellow caps lazing on the grass said, *"They seem to enjoy each other's company."* Although American children did not describe their friends when they photographed others' interactions, some named children in their pictures to justify their reasons for taking photos: "Playing with Joshua; playing with a football," and "Sean is doing tricks and that is playing to me." Both American and Japanese children's play perspectives seem to be influenced by the fact that these children are encouraged to interact with others positively (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Izumi-Taylor & Ito, 2015; The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, & Technology, 2008). It appeared that both American and Japanese children captured joyful interactions with others. Likewise, when asked to photograph their images of school, children photographed their friends (DeMarie & Ethridge, 2006; Dockett & Perry, 2005, 2007).

Children's photographs and their comments revealed vital information about their perspectives of play. Through photographic experiences, children of both nations retained new information about their peers and recognized distinctive features of their friendships and classmates. They were attracted to groups of children interacting with each other. To these children, play meant being with their peers.

Educators recognize play as a cultural occurrence.

Play in Relation to Children's Self-Selected Environments

Children in both nations photographed more outdoor than indoor play. Their outdoor photos included school buildings, skies, trees over the school's fences, and buildings beyond the fences. Two American children's explanations for their photos included, "They are on top of the structure," or "They are playing on a tire swing." These American children's play preferences might be representing their culture regarding the importance of physical activities (Edwards, Bayless, & Ramsey, 2009; Izumi-Taylor, Morris, Meredith, & Hicks, 2012; Pica, 2010).

In contrast, only Japanese children captured photos of places and objects without people, including school buildings, playgrounds, tree tops, sunlight through trees, flowers, frosty playgrounds, gardens, play structures, forts, slides, Jungle Gyms, chickens, chicken coops, and trains. Their reasons for taking such photos were related to what they like at school. Typical descriptions from the children were: "We made these wind chimes to hang on trees, and the sun is shining on them," "I like trains and always watch them over the school fence," and "We have our own forest here where we always play. Birds come here also." These children's play choices might be partially related to one goal of Japanese early childhood education that aims to develop children's interests in nature and environmental relationships (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2008). It is noteworthy that environmental factors influence children's views of play (Dockett, 2002). Other studies also revealed that children perceived playing in natural environments with trees, flowers, and bushes to be enjoyable (Azlina & Zulkiflee, 2012; Gandini, 2012).

What some children observed, photographed, and said about play had little to do with what adults may consider as the real point of play. What they photographed was related to familiarity and preference. They captured other children's actions in their familiar and preferred environments. They appeared to consider open space, a large room, or spacious outdoors to be important. Such environments can promote cooperation, emphasizing that everyone is welcome to participate.

Play in Relation to Children's Favorite Toys/Props

Many American and Japanese children defined play according to their toys and props as evidenced by their numerous pictures of activities where others were engaged with toys/props. While both sets of children included such objects in their photographs, all of the American children's photos also included people, while some Japanese children's photos contained only the objects as subjects, and their remarks exhibited various emotional responses.

The following explanations from Japanese children about their photos of only toys/props demonstrated their joy. A Japanese boy who photographed many wagons lined up in the storage room boasted, *"I took this picture because we use them for play, and we place sand on these wagons and carry it around."* A girl explained her photo of a hand-made building, *"Can you see what it says here? It says 'Snail Institute,' and this is where we study snails. We created the building, the sign, drew these pictures, and also wrote the name."*

One Japanese boy who photographed the empty bathroom explained, *"This is our urinal, and this size is for children. Did you know that?"* We sensed a tone of pride in his explanation. It is interesting to note that of all the toys and props, he chose this as his subject. Dockett and Perry (2007) also found that some Australian children were fascinated with "out-of-bounds" areas such as the toilets and photographed them (p. 12).

The layout of the Japanese children's photos of only toys/props without people suggested their focus on individual items. A girl took a photo of an egg in someone's hand and explained, *"When we take care of these chickens, we get to keep their eggs. Did you know that?"* These examples of the play choices photographed by Japanese children represent how they are encouraged to create their own props and to take care of common toys/props (Kawabe, 2012; The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, & Technology, 2008).

Photo courtesy of authors

"I took this picture of chickens because I like them," said a Japanese girl.

In contrast, none of the American children took photos of only toys/props. This finding was in keeping with the results of a study in which children were asked to photograph their images of school, and many American children's photos were of "people rather than objects or places" (DeMarie & Etheridge, 2006, p. 103). Another study revealed that children tend to photograph social interactions when asked to photograph their lives (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Although American children did not mention their favorite toys/props, their photos included these objects with people (monkey bars, swings, slides, tire swings, and classroom toys). An American boy remarked about his picture of children on the swing, *"They are swinging."* These American children's play options reveal classroom experiences that focus on "community-building opportunities" where children play and work together in conjunction with individualized play activities (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 151).

Many children in the present study captured various familiar toys/props that were "photo-worthy" to them (DeMarie, 2001, p. 15). Children have a tendency to photograph things that matter to them when asked to capture their images of school (Dockett & Perry, 2005). These items are things they have experienced previously, and they need to explore their own surroundings to understand and discover for themselves (Berk, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2005). An abstract concept such as play is not easily defined by young children, but they were able to express their perspectives in relation to their favorite and familiar toys/props. Presenting authentic materials/toys enhances children's development and learning (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Observing their preferences of hands-on and minds-on learning materials and understanding how they utilize them

in play can also support children's problem-solving skills (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 2015).

Conclusion

In the study, children photographed what they perceived as meaningful and preferable as play. Children's notions of play are associated with interacting with others, being in self-selected environments, and engaging with favorite toys/props. Play is related to joyful interaction with friends where children are often outdoors, thus, educators need to pay closer attention to the importance of outdoor activities with others. Also, some children have a preference for play environments in nature; therefore, educators should offer nature-related environments. Favorite toys/props also enhance play, so by asking children about their preferences for these items, educators might be able to augment their play more meaningfully.

Some children's play perspectives appear to be influenced by their cultures (Dockett & Meckley, 2007) and educational environments (Dockett & Perry, 2005, 2007), and educators must understand these influences. Although both American and Japanese children's play preferences are related to interactions with others, more American children's photos reveal they consider social interactions as vital to play. A possible explanation for this finding might be related to the fact that some American children follow individualized instructions and have less play time with others than their Japanese counterparts; thus, their photos included more interactions with others. Conversely, Japanese children, who have ample opportunities to engage in group activities, photographed items without others present. Also, it could be associated with the fact that the Japanese children were taking photos when the classmates were not present (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Although all children can learn in various environments, their learning occurs best in playful, child-initiated activities with favorite props.

Photo courtesy of Westminster School for Young Children, Nashville, TN

Outdoor play with props can enhance learning experiences.

Play is integrated into social and political structures as well as the fundamental values of cultures (Kieff & Casbergue, 2000; Kuschner, 2015; Roopnarine, 2015; Roopnarine & Johnson, 1994). Educators need to understand how play influences cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and cultural development in children from different cultures. When educators recognize play as a cultural occurrence, they can appreciate the cultural features of play.

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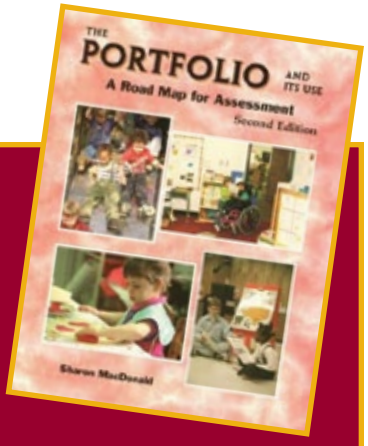

The 2016 SECA Exemplary Outdoor Classroom: Honorable Mentions

This article was prepared by Glenda Bean, SECA Executive Director

Highland Plaza United Methodist Preschool

In 2013 SECA began a series of contests to identify and highlight the wonderful outdoor classrooms that have appeared in our early childhood programs throughout the South.

Our **first year** focused on an **overall outdoor classroom** and **Highland Plaza United Methodist Preschool in Chattanooga, TN** was selected as the recipient of our overall award. This program, through innovation, vision and just plain hard work, created a magical and educational space for young children to explore and learn. (If you'd like more information on the classrooms that were recognized in 2013, access the three issues of *Dimensions of Early Childhood, Volume 41*. You'll need your member ID to enter the "members-only" section of the website where these issues are archived.)

Our **second contest** focused on **Creating a Nature Inspired Outdoor Learning Environment on a Shoestring Budget.** This contest recognized that many early childhood programs with limited financial resources create wonderful outdoor spaces for young children. Our winner that year was **Agapeland Play Space in Marion, South Carolina.** (If you'd like more information on the classrooms that were recognized in 2014, access the three issues of *Dimensions of Early Childhood, Volume 42*.)

Agapeland Play Space

Our **final contest** focused on **Creating a Nature-Inspired Outdoor Learning Environment for Urban Spaces.** The award recipient for 2016 is a program that's truly urban…it sits within the downtown heart of Nashville, Tennessee.

The ***McKendree United Methodist Church Day Care*** is housed on the first floor of McKendree United Methodist Church's Christian Life Center, a 4 story structure. The rooftop terrace was designed for an occasional visit from the day care children but was not originally intended for daily use. In 2011, a small committee from the church and daycare began to dream together. They prayed for a day when the children had a beautiful, stimulating, and nature-inspired space to play outdoors. You can find an article and photos about this program in *Dimensions of Early Childhood, Vol. 44, #1.*

McKendree United Methodist Church Day Care

Let's Explore!

Music

Although we had to select a "winner" of the contest, there were more programs that had outstanding outdoor spaces. We've selected these two programs for Honorable Mention and want to share the wonderful outdoor spaces they created in an urban environment.

Pre-K 4 SA/San Antonio, Texas

Article content excerpted from the contest application submitted by Denise Barrera-Tejeda, Denise.Barrera-Tejeda@sanantonio.gov www.sanantonio.gov/Pre-K4SA

Pre-K 4 SA North Education Center is located in the heart of San Antonio's medical center among countless hospitals and medical facilities. The main building was once the call center for a major airline company. The building has been remodeled to accommodate 25 pre-kindergarten classrooms. Originally, the playground was constructed with the standard, run-of-the-mill playground climbing structures. After an addition was added to the center, a playground without any equipment was also created. Teachers wanted to incorporate more natural elements to create a nature-inspired environment on this playground.

The playground committee directed the development of the space and transformed a dull, non-descript **concrete patio space** into an inviting outdoor classroom that included a variety of learning areas such as discovery, music, art, reading, sand and water table, dramatic play and construction.

Art

Outdoor Rugs= Outdoor Naps!

Sand & Water Tables

The **playground space** that was modified initially consisted of two wooden fences and a metal fence with a building serving as the fourth wall. It consisted of grass and natural trees but now features a mud pit, sand pit, natural rock arroyo with a cedar bridge, plant tunnel, tree stump and rock path with hanging bamboo wind chimes, loose parts area, dramatic play area, reflective area and a hop-scotch feature.

Hop Scotch Path

Mud Pit

Wind Chimes

Outdoor Kitchen

Fall leaves

Blossom Heights Child Development Center/ Houston, Texas

Article content excerpted from the contest application submitted by Linda Draper linda@blossomheights.com, www.blossomheights.com

In 2010, the process of creating a nature based preschool in an urban area of Houston was begun. A building was located and converted into three classrooms. An on-site office and a covered outdoor pavilion were constructed.

An outside consultant was utilized to design the outdoor space and an overall site plan was developed. During the last 5 years, the staff have planted, watered and nurtured the space to provide outdoor quality programming for the families served.

The program has many deciduous trees and, during the fall, children are offered rakes and opportunities for **jumping and rolling in the leaves**. When "enough" are gathered, the leaves are scooped up, placed in wheelbarrows and moved to the composting area.

The program grows its own fruits and vegetables. The children help with the cultivating, pruning,and reaping.

Gardening

Sand, rocks, water and other natural materials are used to create all kinds of potions & stews! Using sand, rocks, leaves, sticks, and other found natural materials, the children concoct mud pies in the sand and water area.

Mud pies

Art, music and dramatic play are incorporated into many different areas outdoors on a daily basis.

Scarf Dancing

Fallen flowers and leaves allow for **fine motor work and creativity.**

Music

Fine Motor

From Linda at Blossom Heights

Thank you SECA for allowing this opportunity for our program to share all the wonderfulness that is our outdoor school. This program was a dream of mine long before it became a reality. Now it is established and even more beautiful for children than I had imagined.

It is our pleasure and privilege to showcase those programs in the South that have established outdoor environments which provide optimal developmental and creative learning experiences for young children. In our final 2016 issue of *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, we'll share more snapshots from other programs from throughout the South that have committed themselves to providing quality, outdoor learning experiences.

Congratulations to Pre-K 4 SA & Blossom Heights Child Development Center!

President's Message, continued

Boards in the process of making the necessary changes.

SECA is **proud to report** that the state affiliates of Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia have signed the new charter agreement! Ms. Bean is scheduled this summer to visit Kentucky, Texas, and Virginia to assist the affiliates in the change process.

The vision of "**reaching out to our diverse Southern community and supporting grassroots efforts to grow and mentor leadership**" is becoming reality through the following endeavors:

- ***The SECA Reporter Blog*** is now up and running for members to share their thoughts and ideas on challenging topics, such as bullying.
- This edition of ***Dimensions*** contains one article translated into **Spanish** for our Spanish speaking teachers, assistants and Directors.
- Another article is focused on how early childhood programs can **best support our military families.**
- To increase family engagement in our Southern Early Care and Education programs, a **Family Engagement** initiative is in the planning process.
- The ***Leadership Newsletter*** has expanded its focus to include topics relevant to the diverse work of leaders in the field. The May edition supports "**coaches**" whose work is critical to the improvement of quality in programs for young children.

Looking back at these past months, I am amazed at the strides SECA has made to meet the challenges of the times and to move our association forward! "**Putting my vision into action**", has been possible due to the tireless efforts of the SECA Board of Directors, staff, leaders of the state affiliates, and membership. Please keep your ideas and suggestions coming as to how SECA can best serve membership and all who work in the field of Early Care and Education! I feel certain that, together, we can make SECA stronger and successfully fulfill our mission of improving the lives of our Southern young children and their families! "Thank You!"

Carol C. Montealegre, President

An Update from the SECA Office: We're pleased to announce that a charter agreement has been signed with the Kentucky Association for the Education of Young Children. The states of AR, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN & WV are now confirmed SECA affiliates.

These affiliates have announced their intention to dually affiliate with SECA and NAEYC: Florida Association for the Education of Young Children (FLAEYC), GAYC (Georgia Association for Young Children), ECAO (Early Childhood Association of Oklahoma, and VAECE (Virginia Association for Early Childhood Education.)

Affiliation discussions are underway with the leadership of AAYC (Alabama Association for Young Children) and TAEYC (Texas Association for the Education of Young Children).

From Our Presidential Candidates

Dr. Susan Barnes

Jo Carroll

We're approaching another election for SECA President-Elect and SECA members will select the president who will take SECA into the next phase of service to the early childhood profession in the South. After 68 years, SECA and its state affiliates will transition into a new structure, and the next SECA President will guide that transition.

We are fortunate to have two highly qualified candidates, ***Dr. Susan Barnes of Virginia*** and ***Jo Carroll of Louisiana***, who are vying to become the next President-Elect of SECA. The person elected will assume the office in January 2017 and become SECA President in January 2018.

During the next few months, we hope you will take advantage of the opportunities we're providing to get to know the candidates, their backgrounds, their views, and their hopes for SECA.

- Each candidate was filmed as they responded to a set of questions that were provided by the SECA Nominating Committee. To view the videos, go to the Leadership page/Become a Leader (http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/leadership/become-a-leader/).
- We published a **brief biographical sketch** of each candidate in *Dimensions of Early Childhood, Vol. 44, #1*. That PDF is posted with the videos.

We also asked that they provide responses to certain questions in writing and those responses follow.

Please describe your leadership style and the qualities you possess that will enable you to work effectively with such a diverse group of volunteers, staff and elected officers.

Susan Barnes: My style is inclusive. Two attributes that allow me to succeed using this approach are a deep-rooted respect for others' ideas and the courage to objectively consider opinions different from my own. Every SECA member is a wealth of experience and intelligence. It is essential to access that treasure!

Jo Carroll: My leadership style could best be described as collaborative. No one person has all the answers and therefore we need to be ready to serve all of the members and be able to draw on the expertise of members within each of our state affiliates. I have served in a variety of capacities within my state and currently serve on the SECA

board as my state representative where I have the privilege of serving with a very dedicated group of representatives from each of our affiliate states. This group works tirelessly to represent each of our states but also for the good of the overall organization. I would continue to work closely with the board to move our association forward.

What do you envision as your main objectives and goals for your term should you be elected SECA President?

Jo Carroll: As president I have three major goals for SECA: 1) We need to concentrate on activating and growing each of our state affiliates as well as districts/affiliates within each state. 2) We need to market SECA in all of our state affiliates to make our organization more visible to the field of Early Childhood. 3) We need to continue to grow new leaders focusing on people new to the field and students studying in the field of Early Childhood.

Susan Barnes: I can see my term as being a time of reflection and productivity. I foresee SECA acknowledging which policies, processes, and structures are working well and identifying some important modifications to effectively respond to the needs of members. Accessing the diverse perspectives of our members will optimize our decision-making process.

SECA is in the midst of change. How do you plan to lead SECA through the impending changes and into the future, while continuing to focus on SECA's vision of serving early childhood providers in the South?

Susan Barnes: The impending changes are opportunities for discovering new ways to respond to members and develop new collaborative relationships. It will be through working with other professional organizations and agencies that serve young children, their families, and educators that SECA can realize fresh approaches and gain relevance in the South.

Jo Carroll: Communication will be the key! Communication with our leadership, our state affiliates and our individual members will need to be continuous. We also need to continue communicating with other like organizations that have visions similar to our organization. We need to continue to focus on the children, families and childcare providers and the unique needs/concerns of our southern heritage.

What professional and personal resources do you have available to you that will help you to fulfill the commitment that it takes to be President of SECA?

Jo Carroll: I have served the Early Childhood profession for many years in a variety of settings and have served in many capacities within the SECA organization including all the way back to my undergraduate days as the president of our student organization. I have attended many SECA conferences over the years and enjoyed getting to know members and leaders from all of our states. It is beneficial to know people who have a variety of interests, skill sets, and knowledge about a wide variety of topics within the field of Early Childhood that can be called on for expertise as needs arise. I am at a point in my life where I can devote time, energy and resources to our organization to continue the current efforts and move us forward as an organization.

Susan Barnes: I am supported by colleagues and the administration at James Madison University where I have been teaching early childhood education for 14 years and by the Virginia Association for Early Childhood Education (VAECE). My husband, a retired professor, is committed to my professional development and to the mission of SECA.

Why do you want to serve as President of the Southern Early Childhood Association?

Susan Barnes: Serving on the SECA Board as the Virginia Representative, I provided leadership, especially helping Virginia to understand the importance of SECA. Being a teacher myself, I appreciate our diverse stakeholders' interests. As SECA President, I believe I can effectively help grow the association and make positive changes to ensure SECA's future.

Jo Carroll: SECA has been important to me for many years. I had the privilege of being a student under the direction of some of our former presidents where they instilled the importance of being involved in professional organizations. No matter what position/job I held, SECA has always provided information and support that assisted me. I am at a point in my life where I can give back to my professional organization and devote additional time to assist our state affiliates in continuing the growth of our organization. I look forward to being able to serve ALL of our members in growing and developing in the exciting field of early childhood education.

In Memory of Dr. Bettye Caldwell

By Glenda Bean, Executive Director

Photo Retrieved from the SECA History Archives

In April, we lost another of the giants in the field of early childhood education. ***Dr. Bettye Caldwell*** was one of the pioneer researchers who helped to frame a national experiment in early childhood education called Head Start. Over the years, Head Start became a critical support for ensuring the development of young children and helping their families to support that development. Head Start is now firmly entrenched in the early childhood system throughout the country.

Bettye began her research at Syracuse University along with Dr. Alice Honig and designed a program that integrated health and school readiness programs for low-income children….the precursor of the Head Start model.

When she moved from New York to Arkansas with her husband, Dr. Fred Caldwell, Bettye established the Center for Early Development and Education at the Kramer School, an innovative blending of early childhood education, child care and elementary education within the Little Rock School District. She continued her research at Arkansas Children's Hospital and the University of Arkansas at Little Rock until her retirement. During her long career, she also served as President of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

It was my pleasure and privilege to have the opportunity to work with Dr. Caldwell during my work in Arkansas to develop an early childhood program begun at the direction of Governor Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary. Bettye was named an honorary co-chairman, along with Helen Walton, for the first Arkansas Children's Week that was held in 1988 as a project of the Governor's Advisory Council on Child Care. It was our first statewide attempt to celebrate the early childhood profession and to honor the educators who worked so tirelessly to improve the lives of children and families in the state of Arkansas.

As we develop a new generation of activists and advocates, it's important that we remember those who led the way. In 2012, in recognition of her contributions to the field of early childhood education, SECA recognized Dr. Caldwell as the **SECA Friend of Children**. Click here (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1HxCf146QA) to view her acceptance of the award. I think you'll find Bettye's remarks and reflection on her life and work on behalf of children and families as moving as I did. You'll remember why you do what you do.

Meet our 2017 Conference Keynoters!

Friday/March 10, 2017

Dr. Susan B. Neuman

Word Wizardry: Creating an Environment that Promotes Language Development

Vocabulary is a strong predictor of children's achievement. Yet many of our children who come from economically disadvantaged communities have not had the opportunity to engage in rich language experiences which are essential to literacy development. This presentation will focus on the importance of oral language development in promoting children's social emotional development and school readiness skills

Susan B. Neuman is a Professor and Chair of Teaching and Learning at New York University in New York City specializing in education and early childhood policy. Previously, she has been a Professor at the University of Michigan and has served as the U.S. Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education under George W. Bush. Dr. Neuman has authored 11 books that focus on education and educational policies among them, *Changing the Odds for Children at Risk* and *Giving Children a Fighting Chance.*

Dr. Tammy Pawloski

Challenges and Opportunities: Why Poverty Matters and How Teachers Can Matter More

Life with limited key resources can impact development, but teachers can matter more! Learn how to reframe challenges faced in high-poverty schools as opportunities for uncovering often-hidden potential. Take away resources and strategies that engage the brain, empower the learner, and change the outcomes.

Tammy Pawloski is Professor of Education and Director of the Center of Excellence to Prepare Teachers of Children of Poverty at Francis Marion University, Florence, South Carolina. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina, and prior to joining the faculty of FMU in 2000, she served on the faculties of USC in South Carolina, and Ventura College and Pepperdine University in Southern California.

Saturday/March 11, 2017

Red Grammer and Carol McCloud

Bucketfilling: Grow Kindness, Respect, Courtesy and Cooperation in Your Classroom

Learn how to integrate the naturally compelling elements of story, visual art, melody, rhythm and rhyme in playful and interactive ways with content that encourages social/emotional/ character development. Red and Carol will employ content from Carol's bestselling books on Bucketfilling and Red's world-renowned music to show how to create a "bucketfilling" environment that increases kindness, respect and courtesy and decreases mean-spiritedness and negativity.

Red Grammer is an internationally known children's singer/songwriter whose music has been used in classrooms around the world to enhance their social/emotional/ character programs. His recordings have won numerous Parents Choice Awards and a Grammy nomination. His latest recording, Circle of Light: Songs for Bucket Fillers, is an exciting new addition to the Bucket Filling Program.

Carol McCloud has spent 20 years in education as teacher, counselor, youth mentor, and early education director. She is an award winning author, Talent Smart® Emotional Intelligence Certified Trainer and her book on Bucketfilling is used in classrooms around the world.

Join us in Biloxi, Mississippi, March 8-11, 2017, for the 68th Annual SECA Conference!
For more information, go to www.southernearlychildhood.org/conference

Possibilities, Policies and Practices for the Future: Early Childhood Education in the South

A SECA Research Symposium • March 8, 2017 • 9:00 am-4:30 pm

The Symposium will stimulate thought and discussion as national and regional experts share with participants the challenges facing the early childhood teaching profession today as well as in the future.

Keynote Speaker

Dr. Michael Nettles, Senior Vice President and the Edmund W. Gordon Chair of the ETS Policy Evaluation & Research Center (PERC)

A native of Nashville, Tennessee, Nettles earned his bachelor's degree in political science at the University of Tennessee. He achieved two Master's degrees, one in political science and the other in higher education at Iowa State University, and a Ph.D. in education at Iowa State University.

Nettles has a national reputation as a policy researcher on educational assessment, student performance and achievement, educational equity, and higher education finance policy. His publications reflect his broad interest in public policy, student and faculty access, opportunity, achievement and assessment at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels.

Featured Luncheon Speaker

Dr. Catherine Scott-Little, University of North Carolina

Catherine Scott-Little is a Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at UNC-Greensboro, where she teaches in the Birth Through Kindergarten teacher preparation program and is the Co-Director of the Masters of Education program. Catherine's research interests include early childhood teacher education programs and state-level early childhood policies, such as early learning standards and assessment systems implemented in state-level early childhood programs. Catherine completed her undergraduate degree in Child Development and Family Relations at UNC-Greensboro and earned a Doctorate degree in Human Development at the University of Maryland at College Park.

Panel Facilitators

Dr. Cathy Grace, University of Mississippi

Dr. Cathy Grace is currently the Co-Director of The Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning at the University of Mississippi. Dr. Grace has served as the Director of Early Childhood Policy at the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, DC and held many state and local positions during her 40+ years in the field. For 10 years she directed the Early Childhood Institute at Mississippi State University and has a publication record which reflects published books and peer-reviewed journal articles. A former first-grade teacher, she recently completed three years as a director of one of Mississippi's first state-funded pre-kindergarten collaboratives.

Panel Facilitators

Charles W. Fluharty, Rural Policy Research Institute

Chuck is the founder, President, and CEO of the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI), the only U.S. national policy institute solely dedicated to assessing the rural impacts of public policies. A Clinical Professor in the University of Iowa College of Public Health and a graduate of Yale Divinity School, he was also a German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Fellow from 2007 to 2011. Chuck is the author of numerous policy studies and journal articles, has presented dozens of Congressional testimonies and briefings.

Preliminary Agenda

- 9:00-9:30: Welcoming Coffee & Networking
- 9:30-10:30: Opening Address: *Growing and Recruiting Early Childhood Teachers: An Imperative*
  Dr. Michael Nettles
- 10:30-10:45 Break
- 10:45-11:45: *Policy, Practice and Possibilities: What's In Store for the Early Childhood Profession*
    - Dr. Cathy Grace, Facilitator
    - Dr. Michael Nettles, ETS Policy Evaluation and Research Center
    - Dr. Devon Brenner, assistant to the Vice President for Education Initiatives, Mississippi State University
    - Michelle Acardi, Public Policy Director, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
    - Tina Routh, Director of the Division of Early Childhood Education, MS Band of Choctaw Indians
    - Dr. Linda Southward, Research Fellow & Research Professor, Social Science Research Center, Mississippi State University
- 12:00-1:30: *The Future of Early Childhood Education Teacher Programs: What Could They Look Like?*
  Luncheon with Dr. Catherine Scott-Little
- 1:45-2:45: *Communities That Have Successfully Addressed the Challenges of Implementing High Quality Early Childhood Programs*Panel
    - Chuck Fluharty, CEO, Rural Policy Research Institute, Facilitator
    - Dr. Jeff Hawkins, Executive Director, Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative
    - Dr. Dessie Bowling, Associate Director, Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative
    - Morgana Freeman, Executive Director, Tallahatachie River Foundation
    - Eileen Beazley, Executive Director of Excel by 5
- 2:45-3:00: Break
- 3:00-4:30: *Building a Community of Early Childhood Teachers*
  Group Discussion Facilitated by Dr. Cathy Grace

SECA Conference 2017!

Beau Rivage Casino & Resort
Biloxi, Mississippi
March 8-11, 2017

Strategies for the New South:
Equipping Professionals
for the Realities
of Generational Poverty