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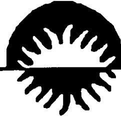

Simple Lessons from Multicultural Children

Joanne Cunard

After designing, initiating, and collecting observational data for two years from a program for a kindergarten class of children representing several different ethnic groups, we present you with some insights to be considered by teachers and faculty.

Teachers as researchers

Pam Ouellette and I met at a Greater Hartford Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL) Meeting. I was teaching college classes in reading, language arts and children's literature; and she was teaching kindergarten. As Connecticut's demographics changed to include children from Russia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, and Puerto Rico, I felt that my courses needed revision to help my college students teach this diverse population.

Pam was a kindergarten teacher with ten years experience teaching in an inner city school. Her students had moved to America within the last three years, and few of their parents spoke English. Their inner city neighborhood was rife with crime and drugs. Home visits from the police were common. The cultural minority groups in Pam's school as a whole were the majority of the population. No one knew their cultures from inside as they did.

Pam wanted to develop a holistic literature-based curriculum in her inner city classroom but was fearful of neglecting the requisite hierarchical skill-based reading instruction embraced by her colleagues. As we talked during our first meeting, we discovered the journals and reference books we read in common. We talked about empowerment, teachers as researchers, literature-based instruction, holistic curriculum, at-risk learners, and multicultural education. We wanted to try what we had read about. After further meetings, we agreed upon the following.

The preliminary program design

Theoretical underpinnings. Children are competent language users, learners, thinkers with cultural experiences. In school children use these strengths when reading, writing, listening, and speaking. They are encouraged to use these strategies in naturally occurring personal and social contexts; that is, in situations with real and authentic purposes, audiences and content (Teale, 1986; 1987). Advocates of a whole literacy philosophy agree that children will learn to read and write, as they learned to speak, when immersed in literate environments (Bridges, 1989). Recently, Flores (1991) cited eighteen research studies from multiple disciplines demonstrating the language and cultural strengths that language learners bring to school.

Pam and I wanted to use this language and cultural foundation for their knowledge construction. We had read much about the integration and use of multicultural literature and content into regular curricula to foster appreciation and understanding of the cultural diversity of our country (Rudman, 1976). But we wanted books that focused on the cultures and experiences of the children in the classroom.

The children. Of the 28 children (10 = male, 18 = female) in the a.m. kindergarten, 18 were African-American, 3 were Asian, and 7 were Hispanic. We used the p.m. kindergarten as a control group.

Data collection. We collected and analyzed data from: 1) observations; 2) verbatim quotes from the children; 3) field notes; 4) slides and 5) conversations with parents. From the data we could describe the culture, develop theory, and redesign our curriculum. In the a.m. kindergarten we created the schedule with multicultural literature for math, science, journals, shared reading, DEAR, writing, drama and story time. In the p.m. kindergarten we followed the school curriculum using the provided books and materials. We looked for behaviors that evinced emergent literacy characteristics such as an interest in books shown by going to the book corner, holding books, turning the pages, looking at the pictures, and talking while looking at and turning the pages. In general, we wanted to see the children interact with, and respond when appropriate through art, drama, talk, and writing.

Program philosophy

The preliminary program design was organized by three guidelines: 1) to teach emergent literacy concepts through an integrated language arts philosophy (Clay, 1991; Coody, 1983; Cullinan, 1987; Morrow, 1989; Schickedanz, 1986; Strickland and Morrow, 1989); 2) to use picture books with familiar social, cultural models that helped the children see that their own experiences are reflected in literature and that they are included in the culture of literacy; and 3) to share (Des Chenes, 1992; Diakiw, 1990; Harrington, 1993) responsibility for their own learning by freely initiating interactions with print materials.

We began using literature with repetition and refrain (Rhodes, 1981). The children were quick to hear the language patterns and respond to the literature. Soon *Chicken Soup With Rice* (Sendak, 1962) became *Fish Stew With Rice.* We selected books representing the cultures of the children in the class: *Honey, I Love and Other Poems* (Greenfield, 1978); *Baby-O* (Carlstrom, 1991); *Shimmey Shake, Earthquake* (Greenfield, 1992); *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (Steptoe, 1987); *Arroz con leche* (Delacre, 1989); and *Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs* (De Paola, 1989). Comments such as "that book's about my grandma" became common.

We infused literature in every lesson. For example, before reading aloud *Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs,* we taught book and print awareness concepts by demonstrating how to hold a book and by showing the beginning, the middle, and the end of the book. While reading aloud, we used echoic reading by having the children repeat phrases and assisted reading as we ran our finger under the print while we read, showing the correspondence between oral and written codes. During the reading we also modeled metacognition by sharing our thoughts: "The book didn't say that Nana was alone upstairs. I wonder if she is. Maybe it said so, but I don't remember reading that. I'll go back and read a few pages to look for the answer." We also elicited predictions from the children: "My grandmother never stays home alone because she is so sick. How about your grandmother?" After the reading, opportunities for response (Rosenblatt, 1983; Roser and Martinez, 1995) stressed all language functions (Halliday, 1973) through print and non-print modes; e.g., conferences, journals, scribble/letter writing, music, drama. The program intent was to empower the children as emergent readers.

Observations

During recess duty, we noticed that, like children's literature, the children's jump rope rhymes had cadences with repetition and refrains. We didn't make the connection to our classroom curriculum until we shared a song titled *Arroz con lech*, which is sung in school yards across Puerto Rico. The Hispanic children who knew this song were excited to sing their playground tune in the American school. Unselfconsciously, they began leading the other children. We realized our less structured environment was freeing the children not only to participate, but also to initiate. The children brought their playground jump rope rhymes to the classroom. Next, Kurtes, Dwight and Mike brought rap songs by Kriss Kross and Boyz II Men. A metamorphosis had begun. Taking texts from the children, their social and cultural language, we recorded each jump rope rhyme and rap verse on chart paper. We made classroom and individual books. These became the text for the emergent literacy activities: experience charts, assisted reading, rearranging sentences and words in sentences, using the lyricist's pattern to create new texts, and phoneme-grapheme tasks such as consonant substitution and ready-set-show (Cunningham, 1977).

In addition to recording their contributions, together we composed class rap songs using the rhythm cadence from their favorite rap. For example, "I be bee bop" was based on the book *Green Lion of Zion Street* and a current rap song:

I be bee bop
I be bee bop
Hip Hop
I be walkin'
I be walkin'
walkin' talkin'
I be walkin'
I be talkin'
I be walkin' talkin'
On = the way to school

Immediately, we saw the influence of dialects, literature, culture, and the playground jump rope rhymes. We saw the children as our curriculum informants. We followed the stages in the writing process (Calkins, 1986). The children called this a "freedom activity" because they were "freed up" to create their own composition. As a result, they experienced the feeling of authorship. One six-year-old from Malaysia did not speak in class (English, Spanish or Malaysian) until rap music became part of the curriculum. When we began to learn songs, she began to speak both English and Malaysian. With the songs as her impetus, she started writing in her journal in both English and Malaysian.

Each week more rap and rhymes were introduced by the children from their home cultures — hip hop, gospel, and reggae. Comin' On was created as a jump rope rhyme:

Comin' On
Comin' On
Comin' On
to yo' quick quick quick
Hoppin' Up
Hoppin' Up
Hoppin' Up
to yo' quick quick quick
Steppin' High
Steppin' High
Steppin' High
to yo' quick quick quick
QUICK JUMP THE ROPE
(Repeat from the beginning.)

Kim was the last to write in class. Again, the rap cadence was her impetus. Her first journal entry was a rap song restating in different rhymes "Writing about nothing."

For the first time, the children's families were asking questions about school and lingering when they brought the children to and from school. They asked us why their children needed paper and pens at home and what was happening in the classroom with all the rap. We invited the parents to come inside, and soon they became part of our curriculum. One parent, a musician, came regularly and helped us tape record with music the children's chants, rap and rhymes. Others came to share memories of their childhood; a Puerto Rican mother taught us multiple versions of "Arroz con leche" as it was sung in school years ago across Puerto Rico. Since the guests did not always speak English well, we recorded the stories in their native language, carefully preserving the original dialects. For all our Jamaican guests in particular, we took note of the large number of dialects. Later the children translated their relatives' stories as we recorded them on an experience chart. We were reading songs and stories in Spanish, Malaysian and English. We introduced personal journals by asking students to write down the stories told during the visits by the parents and relatives. Their recordings of the parents' and musicians' stories and songs were live models to the children that what they write in their journals should come from experiences and thinking.

The morning curriculum became infused with the children's and families' contributions. We counted every day 1-10, then 1-20 in English, then Malaysian and Spanish. We counted spiders from the parent-contributed songs. We made counting charts with the number words in different languages. The children made number correspondence pictures and words for items related to the children's culture. For example, one kente cloth, two goya juice cans. Seeing this, the parents donated supplies from home. Each learning center supported the cultural concepts from stories, rhymes and rap. In the housekeeping area we rotated items to create a Spanish,

an American, and a Malaysian home. The dramatic play area had clothes, props, and fabric supplied by the children and parents from countries other than America. The listening cubes had class-made tapes of the songs and poems from the different cultures represented in the class. We continued to use multicultural children's literature to plan and teach, but we now wove their cultural texts and learning experiences into the curriculum. For example, when researching whales, we included whales near Puerto Rico, whales near Malaysia, whales near the United States. We composed whale songs indicative of each culture. We made and counted using the Malaysian art form of Batik. We made the listening center with poetry and songs from the islands of Jamaica, Haiti and Puerto Rico. The library contained a large collection of the parents' and relatives' stories, charts, books, and audiotapes of memories, playground chants, rap and rhyme songs.

How the children changed

Through observation we documented three changes in children of the a.m. kindergarten program that did not occur in the p.m. kindergarten program. The first change was the increased spontaneity of the children in the classroom. They now moved about the room when they needed to use a journal, talk with another child, or use a center. At first they had to be prompted to self-select an activity, but soon choice became natural. Since the classroom inclusion of the playground rap, rhymes, and the stories of parents, the children became more self-directed (Hoskisson, 1975) and we became less directive.

The second observed and recorded change was an increase in expressive behavior. Our observation records showed an increase in both self-initiated communication and responsive language for all the children. They initiated and participated in the choral reading of rap and rhymes. They

conversed fully with each other about their reading and writing while working at different learning centers. Small and large group discussions were more spontaneous as each child participated with increased frequency and duration. We did not observe these changes in the p.m. kindergarten children.

The third and most dramatic change was the inclusion and acceptance of the children's social and cultural worlds into the classroom curriculum. When we introduced literature books that reflected the backgrounds of the children in our classroom, we had hoped to facilitate emergent literacy concepts. Instead what occurred was an awakening of ideas and coming together of people's social and cultural heritage which became the content and motivated the learning process for all the children and parents involved. Bosma (1991) points out how African-American children respond to the person voice African tales by feeling an immediate bond with the language of the story. The children brought the rhymes, rap and stories from the playground and their homes into the classroom. Thus, our original program design was extensively modified to build upon the stories, rhymes, jingles, and rap from their social and cultural worlds (Johnson, 1991).

New perspectives

Based on this preliminary program design and our observations, our plans for teaching and researching next are: 1) to create units with centers from the children's stories, music and rhyme contributions; 2) to schedule regular visits from parents and musicians, 3) to scaffold emergent literacy concepts into a scope and sequence plan that coordinates with the child-initiated content, 4) to expand the program to use both the a.m. and p.m. kindergarten. For Pam and me, we plan to observe, respond to, and use the cultural, linguistic, and social contributions of the children and their relatives and to make

regular home visits to support the parents' interest in school and in their children's literacy development.

The families of immigrant and minority students are deeply interested in the education of their children (Cummins, 1989; Trueba and Delgado-Gaitan, 1989; Heath, 1983). Recent works (Morrow, 1995; Unwin, 1995) document this interest as indicated by surveys of family literacy in the U.S.

By accepting the children's as well as their families' knowledge about their language and culture, we acknowledged their self-worth. Children tell stories and use rap and colloquial language. Cultural diversity in curriculum planning mandates that the canon of literature must make room for the rhymes and chants that come from multicultural traditions. For us, the children defined what was culturally authentic (Harrington, 1993). The children are now part of the larger culture of literacy.

Our school system, once public, has recently been purchased by a private company, EAI (Education Alternatives, Inc.). We hope our curriculum plans won't be changed.

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