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Constructing a Sense of Story: One Block at a Time

Joanne Robertson-Eletto
Touro College, Joanne.robertson12@touro.edu

Smita Guha
St. John's University, guhas@stjohns.edu

Marina Marinelli

Introduction

Young children enjoy sorting, arranging, and building with blocks, and naturally gravitate towards play with them. Through construction and deconstruction, they develop fine and gross motor skills (Ferrara, et. al. 2011), perceptual and cognitive awareness (Cristenson & James, 2015), as well as visual/spatial concepts necessary for exhibiting the power of literacy and numeracy. Early learners also practice abstract thinking through block play, demonstrate their knowledge of systems and structures, and build foundations for mathematical thinking through exploration with blocks (Piccolo & Test, 2010). Preschoolers symbolically represent their ideas

by manipulating and arranging blocks, permitting educators to view their evolving "theories of the world" (Smith, 1975). Wynn and Harris (2013) assert that a thoughtfully planned and stocked preschool block center can support planned intentional learning experiences, specifically in the area of engineering. Christenson and James (2015) have demonstrated how preschool block play can be integrated with STEM instruction to promote authentic learning.

In high-quality preschools and kindergartens academic learning is playful, and at the same time exploratory. Exemplary primary teachers weave in academic goals and objectives as they build on what children can do, while challenging them to try new things (Grolund, 2001). Oral language development and literacy learning are supported through the integration of block play. Snow, Eslami, Park, & Young (2015) explored the writing behaviors of kindergarten children. They established that literacy-enriched block centers can benefit early childhood classrooms serving culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse students. Wellhousen & Giles (2005) explain the ways block play provides the context for reading and writing with a purpose, along with an excellent opportunity to integrate literature to enhance children's literacy development. They describe the ways block play fosters visual discrimination, use of abstract symbols and oral language development necessary for learning to read and write.

A Delicate Balancing Act

However, contrary to this research, academic versus play-based models of learning continue to dominate the early childhood landscape. Increased attention from policy makers, stakeholders, and even parents, have caused primary teachers to reconsider what they believe about developmentally appropriate practice in the formative years of learning, and its fit with the

curricular materials they have been asked to use with their preschoolers. It is a delicate balancing act.

The preschool teachers we worked with understand that children's perceptions as learners are influenced by the classroom environment. Espousing a "growth mindset" (Dweck, 2006), they realize that their students are in the "process of becoming" (Owocki & Goodman, 2002), and enter their classrooms equipped with abundant social, cultural, and cognitive resources. They acknowledge the ways dramatic play enhances oral language development and vocabulary (Roskos & Christie, 2001). They appreciate the fact that their students are eager learners and "meaning makers" (Wells, 2009). That is to say, they strive to create ways to promote interactive, meaningful, and integrated learning experiences that meet the needs of the whole child.

The following photo essay describes one such teacher's comprehensive plan to modify literacy instruction, while staying true to her beliefs about developmentally appropriate learning experiences during the preschool years. She accomplished this by engaging her students in a Reggio inspired, long-term "Castle" project that led to greater opportunities for development through play, conversation, and active exploration in the block, art, reading, and writing centers.

As the mentors for this project, we highlight the ways the teacher documented the "visible learning" (Hattie, 2016) she observed through anecdotal records and the photodocumentation she correlated to state standards. We analyze the relationship between preschooler's evolving block creations and the complexity of the stories they generated over time, suggesting a reciprocity of thinking between the construction and storytelling processes. Patterns are identified and connections made between the structure of dictated stories and

students' block play constructions. The seminal research of Arthur Applebee (1978) about concept of story in the early years, is used for analysis and comparison, to determine the understandings of 21st century preschoolers. Photographic documentation, teacher's anecdotal records, and transcriptions bring to life the children's ideas about family and community life during medieval times.

The lens through which we analyze the data is theoretically grounded in philosophies of emergent literacy (Clay, 2000; Owocki & Goodman, 2002); language and cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978); "developmentally appropriate" teaching practices (Bredekamp, 1987); social and dialogic contexts of language development (Morrow, 2007; Britton, 1993; & Wells, 2009); cultural and familial understandings preschoolers bring to the classroom (Dyson, 1997); and conceptual understandings necessary for learning to read and write. Preschoolers' comments and literacy artifacts are analyzed for concepts of print**,** vocabulary knowledge, transfer of learning from the "Castle Project," and ability to dictate detailed and cohesive stories. The apprenticeship role (Schikendanz & Casberge (2009), and the influence of the "more capable other" (Vygotsky, 1978) in learning to write are emphasized.

Project Background

As part of a year-long university-school partnership, we were invited to mentor preschool teachers from an urban, private school district in New York. During the 2012-2013 school year, teachers participated in monthly professional learning sessions that focused upon developmentally appropriate teaching practices, assessment of early literacy behaviors, inquiry based approaches, and the use of "provocations" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993) or questions, ideas, theories, or discussion that peak children's interest and foster engagement in the

preschool years. Participants reviewed and drafted checklists and protocols for evaluating literacy development from prekindergarten to grade two. They collaborated to interpret and review preschoolers' writing development.

During seminars, teachers explored ways to develop inquiry projects, to enable children to share what they already know, and to extend learning experiences through multiple forms of expression and symbolic representation. A focus on "I wonder" questions was stressed, as well as a shared sense of curiosity, so the projects would reflect students' own interests. In addition, we visited classrooms regularly to model literacy lessons, to enrich learning experiences through sociodramatic play, to offer resources, and to document the teachers' and students' progress.

The focus of this photo essay is the work of Ms. Marinelli's preschool children and their "Castle Project." The student population was culturally and linguistically diverse: Black (1.9%), White (71.9%), Latino (14.7%), Asian (8.8%), Pacific Island, American Indian/Other (2.6%). Most of the preschoolers spoke more than one language.

The "Castle Project" -Phase One

The preschoolers were excited about the project, perhaps because knights, princesses, dragons, and castles were something familiar from fairy tales and pop culture. In order to determine children's shared understandings and to generate inquiry questions, Ms. Marinelli used graphic organizers, art projects, and literature to build schema for concepts and unfamiliar vocabulary. Students helped to generate charts, suggesting things they wanted to know about. Their topics of interest were: food, clothes, games, and parties in medieval times, as well as "parts of a castle," specifically the kitchen. Ms. Marinelli's strategy of generating student ideas exemplifies the "provocation" approach to teaching and learning (Edwards, C., Gandini, L. &

Forman, G., 1993). That is, using an idea or subject that invites the young child to actively participate in the discussion and decision making. The areas of inquiry the children selected were similar to topics that Ms. Marinelli had generated beforehand.

Figure 1

Throughout the project, Ms. Marinelli actively listened, asked open ended questions to extend her children's thoughts, modeled rich language by reading aloud daily, used interactive Smart Board activities to supplement schema, sketched and annotated diagrams of the preschoolers' block creations, transcribed their stories to record oral language development, and

continually reflected upon her students' learning. The "Castle Project" emerged as a shared combination of teacher and student goals and interests.

Children's early writing samples, as expected, took the form of pictures (Figure 1). Ms. Marinelli meticulously transcribed what they said about their drawings. Through the transcriptions of their words, the preschoolers were learning that what they say can be written down for someone else to read (Clay, 2000). Preschoolers liked comparing and contrasting life in medieval times to modern day. Ms. Marinelli correlated project goals with the preschool curriculum, that is, how each person contributes to the well-being and productivity of his/her community.

Preschoolers decided that the contemporary counterpart to a knight would be a police officer. For the most part, boys were interested in hunting and weapons, and girls wrote about princesses and cooking. The three- and four-year-olds drew pictures of cooking, and liked the idea of roasting a chicken "using a pole" over a fire. The children asked and generated questions, such as:

- How do you get food in the castle?
- Who cooks your food?
- Who keeps the neighborhood safe?
- Who puts out a fire?
- Who delivers a letter?

Figure 2

Children's language development was facilitated by their collaborative efforts and the rich learning contexts of the inquiry project. We observed preschoolers use a combination of drawing, dictating, and speaking to express themselves. They began to refine their conversational competencies through play and construction. The following problem-solving interchange was transcribed during block play depicted in Figure 2. In this interchange, the three- and four-year-olds demonstrate an ability to listen, contribute ideas, extend each other's thoughts, and pursue a project collaboratively. They had developed sophisticated word knowledge ("moat, "turret," "drawbridge" and "foe") through the "hands-on and minds on" activities of the "Castle Project."

Lorenzo: The castle has to be on a hill so the king can see strangers coming.

Sergio: Friend and foe!

Jonathan: The turrets are on top.

Jose: What about the moat?

Sergio: We will need a drawbridge.

Lorenzo: We can use paper.

Jonathan: No, we need flat bricks so people can walk in here.

Jose: And we need the cream to make them strong. [He is referring to mortar from a documentary they watched on the Smart Board]

Sergio: People can walk here to get inside.

Jose: (Takes a curved block) This is a fountain.

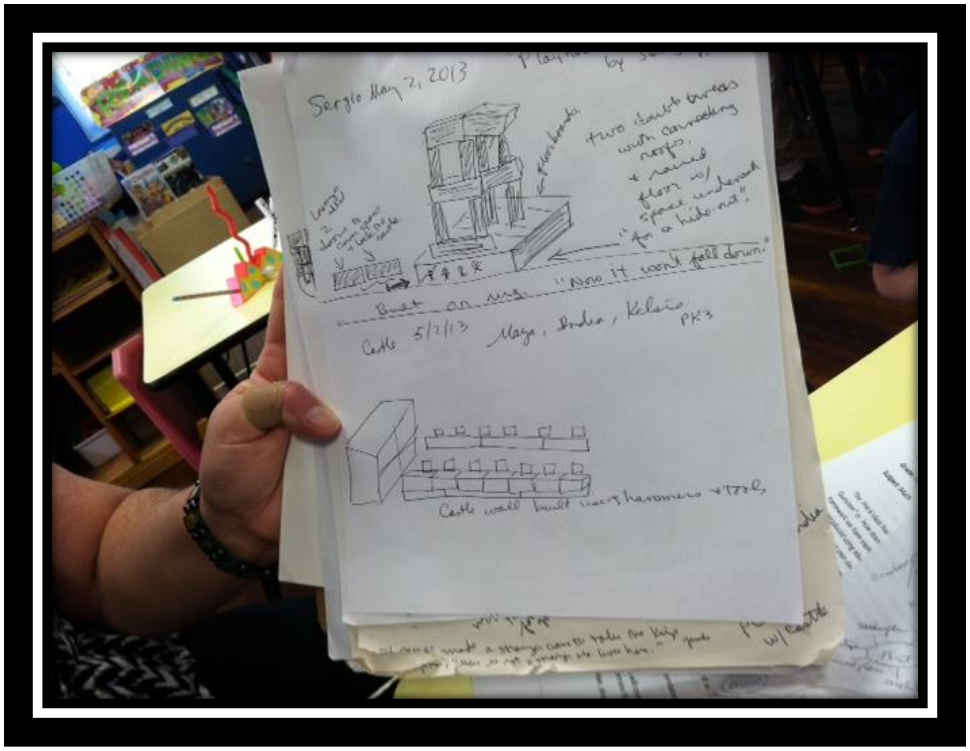
Sergio: (Takes the blocks with holes in the center) These are here for the bows and arrows.

Jose: People live here.

Lorenzo: No one can get in the castle because there is so much stuff!

A visual record of their engineering feats was sketched by Ms. Marinelli on a daily basis (Figure 3). She had taught preschoolers for several years, and was pursuing her Masters in Early Childhood. Her first degree was a Bachelors in the Visual Arts. Her ability to sketch the castle structures with such ease and fluidity, and to design art-inspired literacy tasks was extraordinary. She was passionate about the arts and thoughtful about ways to integrate it with early literacy learning. Through a multimodal approach to instruction, Ms. Marinelli moved her students from surface to deep levels of understanding about the processes of building and writing. The children enjoyed the personal attention they received during transcription times, and often asked to have something written about their work.

Figure 3



Phase Two

The Smart Board became a window into children's work over time. Ms. Marinelli uploaded photographs, and students enjoyed talking about their creations. The Smart Board was also a window to the outside world for the preschoolers, as fieldtrips were not possible due to issues related to insurance coverage. Therefore, the three- and four-year olds watched shows and viewed pictures related to Stonehenge, life in medieval times, and even the contemporary construction of a medieval castle in Normandy, France. They enjoyed YouTube videos about making armor, tournaments, and jousting. One preschooler associated the jousting activities to his own world stating, "My dad watches horses too at Belmont." The influences of Black Board texts found their way into the preschoolers' block center conversations as well. When

constructing fortifications and structures, they implemented toy tools to imitate the engineers they watched on the Smart Board chiseling stones for a castle in France.

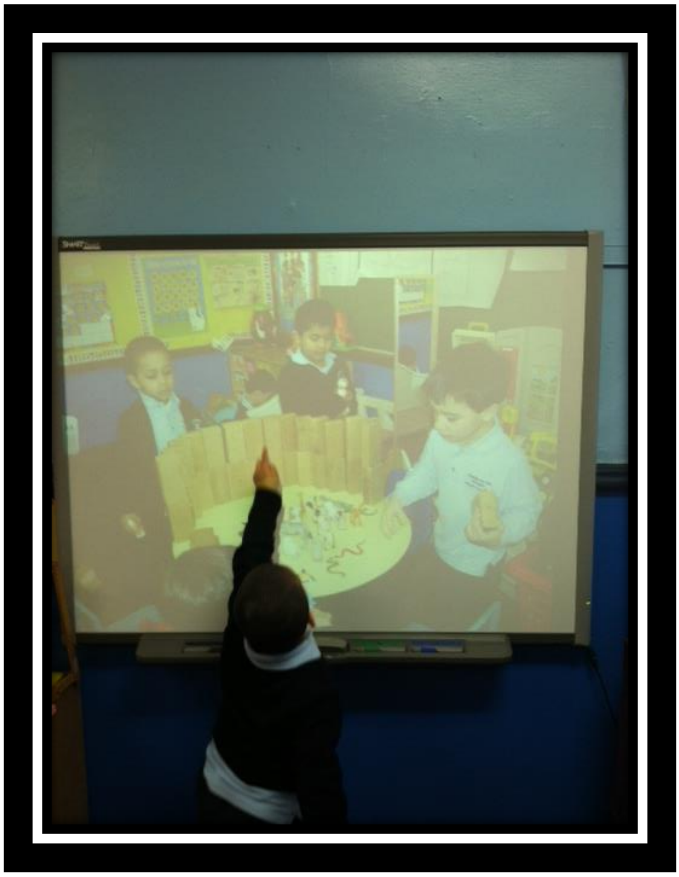
Figure 4

Ms. Marinelli read narrative and expository texts to extend her preschoolers' sense of story beyond fairy tales, and to answer the questions they continued to ask as the project evolved. In addition to listening to traditional stories such as *The Princess and the Pea, Rapunzel,* and *Saint George and the Dragon*, they sang nursery rhymes such as "The Queen of Hearts," "Humpty Dumpty," and "Sing a Song of Sixpence." They diligently studied the illustrations in

Gravett's (2008) book entitled *Inside a Castle.* Ms. Marinelli began adding more books to her library to match the children's enthusiasm for nonfiction texts.

The preschooler in Figure 4 emulates the French engineers, as he puts the finishing touches on the drawbridge for his moat. The student in Figure 5, is using a Smart Board to tell us how he constructed his curved wall. We noted how confident, articulate, and proud he was to share his construction details. We also perceived how the integration of technology can facilitate oral language development. The Smart Board aided four-year-old Lorenzo to direct my attention to specific parts of the fortification he could not explain. The Smart Board also enabled preschoolers to reflect upon their own learning.

Figure 5



Playing With Passion and Writing With Purpose

Children became eager builders! Three-year-old's first constructions were linear, and we appreciated how easily they integrated pop culture characters (Thomas the Train) into their castle enactments. Play was cooperative and storytelling revolved around familiar themes. The three-year-olds in Figure 6, would eventually extend the linear structure below into the nearby bookshelf, creating a their first castle room on the lower level. Concurrently, they generated new questions for exploration, expressing an interest in musical instruments and farming in the Middle Ages.

Figure 6

Preliminary stories were straightforward as well. Three-year-old Kelsie's writing sample (Figure 7), demonstrates typical emergent literacy behaviors. Everything she knows about writing is evidenced in the marks she makes upon her page.

Figure 7

There is an illustration, recurring straight marks, wavy lines (perhaps mimicking cursive writing), and some conventionally written letters (A, H, and I). It is clear that she has been observing the form and function of print in her environment. She uses all that she knows to create her story with a title and ending. She dictates the following to Ms. Marinelli:

The Princess

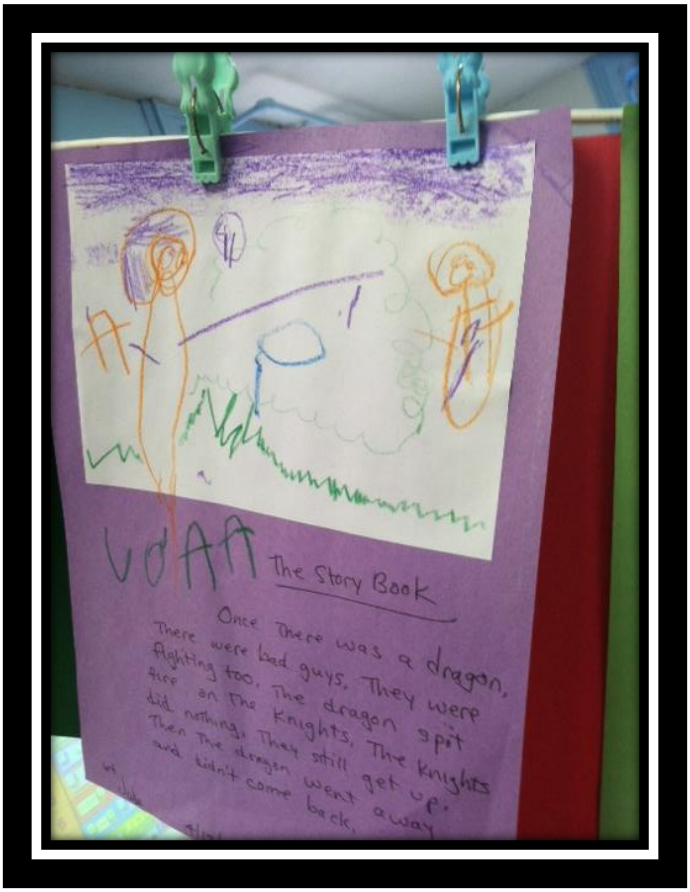
Once upon a time the daddy of a princess was fighting with a dragon. The dragon died with a sword.

The End

Kelsie reveals a basic understanding of story in her simple narrative. There is a genre, as evidenced by "once upon a time," indicating that it is a fairy tale. Even though the title says

"The Princess," the protagonist of the tale appears to be "daddy." The antagonist is a "dragon." The problem is resolved in a sword fight. Kelsie provides closure by dictating "The End." The story is cohesive in the fact that the actions work together towards resolution. Applebee (1978) asserts that children's early narrative forms progress from basic to more complex. He describes "unfocused and focused chains" (gathering or ordering) and "centering narratives" (linking and enriching with character, setting, and theme) story structures. Using Applebee's (1978) six stages of development in learning to communicate through story, Kelsie's story is an early "focused chain." She has begun to combine two aspects of a story, and to create a preliminary sequence of events. Applebee (1978) proposes that children from ages 2 to 5 possess this story schema.

Figure 8



Four-year-old Sergio, exemplifies similar concepts of print in Figure 8. His wavy lines, illustration, and letters A, V, and embellished O with a curlicue, represent his knowledge about writing. He dictates this to Ms. Marinelli:

The Story Book

Once there was a dragon. There were two bad guys. They were fighting too.

The dragon spit fire on the knights. The knights did nothing. They still get up.

Then the dragon went away and didn't come back.

The End

A beginning and ending are clearly present in Sergio's story, as well as protagonists (the knights) and an antagonist (fire spitting dragon). The story has happened a while back, as he begins with "once," a past tense. It is definitely an action story with a rudimentary plot. Using Applebee's (1978) categorization scale this as an "unfocused chain." That is, the child has joined story elements to produce a narrative with undeveloped events leading from one another. Sergio's initial stories were a wonderful frame of reference when analyzing the collaborative stories the children drafted a couple of months later. Collecting authentic data within an authentic context, at different points in time, enabled me to obtain a multilayered overview of oral storytelling during the "Castle Project."

As children's knowledge about castles increased through exposure to multimodal texts and socialization in the block center, their structures began to move upwards. Over the course of three months, heaps of blocks replaced flat rows, and a sense of organization appeared as well. In Figure 9, we see fortified walls, as well as sentries on the watch towers. Later, preschoolers would add layers of flooring, throne rooms, and entry and exit points and hiding places to their castles. They were intrigued with chandeliers, and they became a prominent feature in many.

Figure 9

Dictated stories were also becoming organized with added details. Sergio told a story every day, and gained great status in his preschool community as an "author." He dictated the following:

The Knight and the Dragon

Once a knight was fighting a dragon that was spitting fire all over the place!

The knight had somehing to protect himself. It was a shield.

The knight saved all the people in the castle. The knight was

shooting bows and arrows and made the dragon go away.

The End

Four-year-old Sergio is well on his way to becoming a proficient writer, and is learning how to arrange story elements and content to create an exciting tale. Just imagine how delighted he will be when he learns about pronouns! This story has all the basic elements and begins to

surpass the criteria outlined by Applebee. We especially appreciated the students' articulation of a perfect title for their stories. For, children's stories were thematically related to the Castle Project and influenced by the social contexts of their learning.

Phase Three

Sergio's literacy development continued to grow over three months. Initially described as a reluctant and disinterested learner, he became a leader in many project activities. His classmates enjoyed playing in the story worlds he created, especially the three-year-olds. Project work enabled Sergio to capitalize upon his strengths, and to read and write for his own purposes. The same was true for Ms. Marinelli, whose arts background, was a perfect fit for a Reggio inspired approach. She was able to capitalize upon her artistic talents and knowledge base to enrich literacy instruction for all of her students.

The boys in Figure 10, led by Sergio, created maps to specify their castle location on a hill. They rolled them up to look like the scrolls they had seen. A paper towel roll became their telescope, and a fire helmet became a head armour, exemplifying the transformative thinking of the young child.

Figure 10

Ms. Marinelli continued to promote children's symbolic representation through the arts, using their artifacts to assess literacy growth. Preschoolers enjoyed creating and talking about the symbols for their shields. Lady Natalia and Lady Jada in Figure 11, used bright and sunny colors and symbols. As in the dictated stories they generated, there were differences in boys' and girls' shields. However, in the dramatic center, most children enjoyed dressing up as kings, queens, princesses, and knights, and sitting on a throne. No one dressed as a servant! Their enactments during sociodramatic play, would later surface in their oral storytelling.

Figure 11

Figure 12

Sharply defined perimeters began to emerge in their fortifications for their livestock and figurines of people (Figure 12). Children's experimentation with design, stability, and balance led to visually impressive structures. More defined structures were complemented by more defined stories, including multiple characters, more interaction between them, and insertions of dialogue to move the plot along.

Figure 13

The addition of a round table to the block center led to the structure in Figure 13. Ms. Marinelli labeled it a "shutter" effect, and we agreed that it had Stonehenge-like features. Blocks were carefully chosen by the preschoolers to create this edifice, and I noted their selection of just the right word to express emotions during play scenarios. For example, "foe" was one of their favorites, a synonym for "bad guy." Inventive stories were told within this concentric circle, as children adopted different personas through the manipulation of figurines and blocks.

Concurrently, three- and four-year-olds collaboratively dictated stories to Ms. Marinelli, which they were proud to show me when I visited. These stories were made into board games they enjoyed playing (Figure 14), since they were drawn from their own work. As we reviewed their games and writing samples, we were reminded of a quote by Britton (1970), that "writing flows on a sea of talk," building the foundation for literacy development, and supporting identity development, including gender perceptions.

Figure 14

Three-year-old girls collaboratively dictated a version of a familiar tale. The text is in two fonts to honor both their voices:

The Knight and Cinderella

Once upon a time there was a knight. He grew up. Then he went on his horse. He was going to a different castle. He crossed a river. He went over a bridge. He saw a ghost! It was Casper! He was friendly. Then he saw Cinderella. She was sleeping.

She wanted to get away from the ball because it was night. She lost her shoe. The knight took Cinderella to the castle. He married her.

The End

Using Applebee's Stages of Schema, their collaborative stories represented a "focused" chain. There are multiple characters, events following upon each other, a conflict and resolution, and the traditional happy ending. The girl's story is basically a rescue story with a passive princess, and a take charge knight. Applebee did not study gender differences in his seminal study, though we noted some apparent differences.

Next, a four-year-old boy and a girl collaborated to generate this story. The girl's voice is italicized.

The Story of the Food

Once upon a time there was a princess and a knight. They lived in an old castle. ***They have to go to the forest to get food because nobody would go. There are scary animals in the forest.*** **They were riding on their horses. They saw a wolf! They ran very fast with their horses, but the wolf almost got them.** ***The knight protected the princess. He was shooting bows and arrows at the wolf. The wolf ran away.*** **Then they saw some shiny red apples. Someone owned the trees. The man said no one could eat the apples. Someone had to defeat him first. The knight began to fight. The knight won! They got the apples.** ***They picked all the fruits and vegetables they wanted. They brought back a lot of food to their castle. The servants cooked it. The king and queen were happy.***

The End

What a creative tale these four-year-olds create, packed with details and an evolving plot. There are two antagonists in the story. First the wolf, who they escape by a wild horse chase. Then, the owner of the apple orchard who challenges the knight to a sword fight. In both instances the knight protects the princess, who picks fruits and vegetables to bring to the castle servants to prepare. The preschoolers had been studying community life, specifically farming and agriculture, so they have included this new knowledge into their story. They are very much influenced by the literature and multimodal texts they were exposed to. The boy creates an action-packed narrative. The girl cushions and softens the story to create resolution of the conflict.

Lastly, three four-year-old boys write this story, presented in three fonts to represent individual contributions.

The King's Forest Adventure

Once upon a time there was a king. He was riding on a horse in the forest. He didn't wear his armor. He saw a unicorn gallop up on front of him. The unicorn was a queen unicorn.
He bowed and said, "Your highness" to the unicorn.
Then she ran and told an animal friend she had met a king.
Then the king saw an owl. He [the king] went [climbed] on his back and began to fly around.
He said, "Weee!"
He saw a baby whale. When the animal owl flew down the king saw a house and a kitchen. The king saw a cow. The king went on the cow. The cow took him to the woods. Then she took him back to the castle. The king saw the horse come back to the castle.

The End

The boys have created a circular tale that starts in the forest and ends in the woods. The four-year-olds exhibit many strengths as storytellers, not outlined in Applebee's (1978) "narrative" stage. The concept of story he attributed to five- to seven-year-olds was present in the stories of the preschoolers. We observed that four-years-olds can:

- Write with purpose
- Incorporate themes from the "Castle Project"
- Choose interesting and varied topics
- Use word choice and new content vocabulary
- Sequences events
- Use dialogue
- Use personal voice
- Insert elements that add to the whole story
- Are creative

At first, the castle corner was dominated by boys. However, as the project progressed girls were building castles on a daily basis (Figure 15). Of particular note in this analysis was the oral language development of one newcomer student, who was very reticent to speak when she came into the preschool classroom. Ms. Marinelli wasn't sure how much she actually understood, or if she was just in the quiet period of transition to an English speaking environment. At the end of the three months she was sharing stories with her classmates.

Figure 15

Many of the preschoolers' parents were thrilled about the sophisticated vocabulary their children were sharing about the project at home. At the end of the three months, Ms. Marinelli invited them to school to view the documentation and to celebrate their children's accomplishments. The medieval feast included grape juice, cookies, and snacks!

"Pillars of Knowledge"

The foundational skills that produce motivated, and confident literacy learners in the preschool years have been documented in educational research. However, contemporary approaches to teaching and learning in the formative years have privileged one set of strategies over developmentally appropriate approaches. Therefore, robust discussions of alternative, research-based ways of meeting the needs of the young child must begin again to ensure that this generation of learners remain enthusiastic about learning to read and write. A multidimensional approach to teaching, assessment and evaluation allows the teacher to modify classroom instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse populations of students, explore the ways meaning is constructed through multiple modes of symbolic representation, comprehensively document literacy development in urban settings, and focus upon learning environments that foster transactional rather than transmissions models of classroom discourse, to promote new ways of thinking, being, and doing.

As we analyzed the children's talk, actions, and learning artifacts in greater depth, we came to realize that the preschoolers were not only constructing block structures, but building a sense of themselves as readers and writers. The three- and four-year-olds developed concepts about the structure of story through integrated, playful, and developmentally appropriate content study. Ms. Marinelli reinforced phonemic awareness, alphabetic awareness, fluency, and vocabulary awareness through "Castle Project" work. The conversations around and about the texts the preschoolers read, the unique structures they created, and the play scenarios they enacted all helped them to rehearse and internalize notions of setting, characterization (including antagonist and protagonist), plot, conflict, and resolution. Their castle constructions served as prototypes for the stories they would later write.

The stage model (Applebee, 1978) provided a starting point for analysis, however, preschoolers' collaborative building and story writing efforts were multilayered and rich in understandings. Their block structures and stories defied allocation to one specific level of schema. Preschoolers' collaborative stories were more sophisticated than the individual children described in Applebee's (1978) seminal research study. What he described as present in five-year-old narratives, could now be seen in the three- and four-year-olds' collaborative stories. This illustrates Vygotsky's (1978) theories about the social and dialogic nature of becoming literate, and Bakhtin's (1981) concept of "heteroglossia," or the shared and communal use of language.

It also makes sense that 21st century preschoolers would write different stories. They have greater access to technology and electronic devices in and out of school, including but not limited to eBooks, iPads, and learning games. Preschoolers are digitally literate, having grown up with interactive toys that create story worlds to enter and experience. These mentor texts and the Internet, along with the traditional literature parents and teachers read, have impacted three- and four-year-olds sense of story and character. Future research might explore the influence of technology upon preschoolers' collaborative choices of story genre, characters, plot, action, and theme.

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