

## PLENARY SPEECH 5

### USING YOUNG CHILDREN'S ORIGINAL ART WORK AND IMAGINATIVE PLAY TO ENHANCE CREATIVE THINKING AND STORY TELLING SKILLS

By

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*Whenever a child draws a picture, creates a three dimensional art project, builds a structure from blocks or plays dress up, there is a wonderful story behind this imaginative play that is never heard. As adults we have a tendency to look at the child's lovely creation, say how beautiful it is then hang it on the refrigerator never to be thought about again. By spending a few minutes with the child, and asking a few open ended questions, beautiful stories can begin to be told. Furthermore, the child is expanding his creative thinking skills and having them "honored" at the same time. In a classroom or group setting, each child can share his original creation and story with the other children, whereby he is also enhancing his public speaking and spoken language skills. Children ages six years and above are usually ready to put their oral story into the written word. These activities are especially helpful to the child who is in an educational environment, whereby he is speaking and learning in a language that is not his first language. Participants will view slide pictures of two different original works by two different children along with their original stories. The process of "open questioning" and "active listening" skills to use in order to facilitate the child's original story will be explained and discussed.*

It is always a delight to roam through the classrooms and school halls of early childhood centers and primary schools. The bulletin boards and walls are usually decorated with lovely paintings and drawings that the children have created. A beautiful three dimensional sculpture of folded paper or colored clay serve to enhance the shelves lining the walls of the classroom. Lovely mobiles dangle from the ceiling; often the theme of such creations change as the holiday season changes. Fortunately, these unique, original art creations can remain visual for a long time.

However, in these same early childhood classrooms, less permanent displays of childhood creative wonders are also made. Such creations might include a large, marvelous structure made from blocks which covers the entire floor space of the play area. A young child might be sitting off alone in the corner very engrossed in his imaginative play of various sorts. Perhaps this child is preparing a wonderful gourmet meal using pots and pans from the kitchen cupboard in the activity center area. The playground also serves as an arena for unrestrained childhood stories to come to life. Maybe, as he gallops about the playground, the child is the knight in shining armor galloping to rescue the damsel in distress. Then there is dress up day when the child comes to class wearing his homemade costume and informs the students and teacher that he is a superhero, or she is a princess.

This is only the beginning of the child's active imagination process. Behind every picture, sculpture, structure or dress up is a wonderful, unique, and creative story waiting to be told and brought to life. Unfortunately, busy teachers seldom hear these stories or encourage them to evolve into a more comprehensive learning process. We tell the child how beautiful his picture is then hang it on the bulletin board where it soon becomes wall paper. We tell the child how marvelous his block structure is then quickly remind him to pick up the blocks before we get ready for lunch. We smile as we look over our shoulder as she is creating her gourmet meal, imitating mom or the house keeper, or we quickly tell him how handsome he looks in his superhero costume then remind him that free play ends in a few minutes.

How sad that these creative moments are so briefly acknowledged; and sadder still that the wonderful stories behind them have so quickly faded into oblivion without ever being told. In short a



wonderful opportunity for a child-centered learning experience, which is holistic in its very nature, has been missed.

In all aspects of life we will be called upon to solve problems, whether it is on the playground at school, in the science lab, with our siblings or as adults in the world of work. Problem solving begins with imagination and the ability to think individually, uniquely and creatively. This begins not in secondary school but in early childhood and can be enhanced through the child's imaginative play.

A constructivist approach to the teaching-learning process is a learner-centered approach to learning that emphasizes the importance of students' actively constructing knowledge and understanding with guidance from the teacher. Eby, Herrell and Jordan in their book *Teaching K-12 Schools: A Reflective Action Approach* (2006) define the constructivist approach as follows, "In the constructivist view, teachers should not attempt to simply pour information into children's minds. Rather, children should be encouraged to explore their world, discover knowledge, reflect and think critically with careful monitoring and meaningful guidance from the teacher" (Eby et al., 2006, p. 120). This is also in accordance with Piaget's Theory which emphasized that children learn best when they are active and seek solutions for themselves, in other words are self-directed learners.

There are several ways both formally and informally to engage with young children and facilitate their original story telling skills. As we see that a child has finished building his block structure, take a few minutes to ask a few open questions, that further facilitates his creative imagination. Have the child tell you the story behind the actions. Encourage him or her to elaborate. In doing so, not only will you enhance the bond between you and the children, you will help them to develop their imagination.

Below are suggestions as to how to take these moments and make them wonderful communication opportunities for enhancing the early stages of the child's problem solving skills. The following suggestions can be used when a teacher has brief one on one time with the child or in classroom group discussions.

### **Pictures and Art Work**

When viewing the original art work of a young child, open his imagination by asking, "What is this lovely masterpiece about?" If the child tells you it is he and his friend playing at the park, proceed to ask him what he and his friend are doing at the park. Continue to ask open questions which encourage your child to expand on his story.

Never "lead" his answers or story components by asking such questions as, "What did you and your friend build in the sand box?" Let the story totally unfold by the child; he will tell you what he wants. Instead ask, "What did you and your friend do in the sandbox?"

Encourage the child to go beyond the picture. For example, ask "What did you and your friend do when the two of you left the park?"

This is an incremental process. Be aware of when the child is ready to bring his story to a rest for that time. He may choose to expand upon his story another day.

### **Creative Play**

If the child is pantomiming play cooking, your first open question can be, "What is my clever child doing?" Even if it appears obvious that she is cooking, let her say what she is doing. If she is not cooking, her unique story will be inadvertently blocked.

Once she says that she is cooking, ask, "And what is my talented little chief cooking? Build your questions based on her answers. You may ask her what type of spices she is putting in her cooking; however, never ask specifically, "Did you put salt in your spaghetti."

### **Dress Up Costumes**

When the child comes in the class room wearing a "dress up" costume on costume day saying, "Look at me!" Respond by asking, "Who are you?" If she answers a beautiful princess, facilitate her creative



imagination story by asking such open questions as, "Hello beautiful princess; what is your name?" "What is your special purpose?" "Where do you live?"

If the child says that she is Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty, she may have a tendency to recreate the actual story. Try to encourage her to go beyond the story, such as, "What do you believe was Cinderella's favorite dish to prepare for the Prince?"

Remember, it isn't important for the child's story to have a completely developed plot which includes a beginning, middle and end. Just having segments of the story is a great place for children to begin expanding their creative imagination and story telling skills.

When engaging the whole class in the process, have the children sit in a circle and one by one have them show their art project and ask the same type of open ended questions. When considering creative play which is not permanent, take pictures of their block structures, or costumes, then they can refer to the picture when telling their stories.

This process can also be considered a holistic educational experience because all aspects of the child's intelligence, including cognitive, creative, social, emotional, physical and language development, are enhanced through this activity.

*Cognitive Development* – The child is thinking throughout the process by choosing colors, deciding how to combine colors when drawing and coloring. When the child is building with blocks, he is combining and coordinating the sizes of shapes and working with spatial relations. When creating his story, he is thinking about creating characters, actions and scenes.

*Creativity* – Because the child is given the total freedom in what he creates and how he creates it, his creative thinking skills are enhanced. Furthermore, his self- confidence as an independent, creative being is fostered.

*Emotional*– When a child's creation is admired then his story is listened to while he is dialoguing with a caring adult or heard by his peers, his self-esteem is being enhanced.

*Socialization* – Whenever the child is showing his creation and telling his story, he is socializing. Likewise, whenever he is looking at another's creation, he is socializing.

*Physical* – Both the child's fine and gross motor skills are being enhanced during the creative activity.

*Language Development* – The child is practicing and enhancing his spoken language skills whenever he is telling his story. If he is telling his story to his classmates, he is also practicing his public speaking skills. Children over the age of six are usually ready to put their stories in writing after they tell their stories orally. This activity is especially helpful to children who are being educated in a language that is not their first language.

It is important to remember that the overall goal is creativity and imaginative thinking, not formal skills. Each child will progress and develop at his own pace. It is important to be considerate of each child's individual growth continuum. The main objective is to honor the child's original creativity and facilitate a learning experience which originates from his own imagination.

## Reference

Eby, J. W., Herrel, A., & Jordan, M. L. (2006). *Teaching K-12 schools: A reflective action approach* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.