Singing and Dancing Our Way Through the Day

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A few nights before the first day of school, the stress dreams had worked their way into my peaceful summer sleep. A scene of chaos unfolded, where I had lost complete control of the classroom. The students were running wild, trashing the room as if their favorite sports team had just won the championship. Waking up in a panic, a flood of questions rushed to the forefront of my mind. Am I really going to be able to get 20 three- and four-year-olds to do what I say? How am I going to teach them to line up, when they have never stepped foot into a classroom before? What if they don't want to listen to me? How can I create the classroom I always envision; one that encourages a love for learning and helps students build relationships with others? As all of these thoughts swirled around in my head, I thought back to the many teaching courses I took at ISU. The professors highlighted the importance of setting clear expectations, explicit teaching of the classroom procedures, and building a positive rapport with your students early on. Focusing on these aspects within the first weeks of school is critical to their success throughout the year, and I found that one way to support all of these goals was through music and movement.

Transitions

Early on, I found that my preschoolers were extremely responsive to music. If I sang something they were more likely to follow through with the expectation, versus when I spoke it. As a result, I became the teacher version of a Disney princess by singing my way through our transitions! When we are preparing to change activities in preschool, we look to the class schedule. To engage students in this transition, we sing a transition song, “It’s time to check our schedule, schedule, schedule, it’s time to check our schedule so we know what to do.” While singing this, students participate in a repetitive motor movement such as patting their lap or stomping their feet to the beat. This helps students focus their attention on the visual schedule and prepare their whole body for the change that is about to take place. This activity benefits students of all ability levels, including those who struggle with transitions or focusing their attention on one task at a time. Additionally, if they are non-verbal or an English language learner, they can still participate by following along with the motor movements and turning their eyes to the picture schedule.

Another important transition in early childhood is cleaning up the play space. I play a clean up song over the speakers to cue students that it is time to clean up without me having to use my voice at all (I keep in mind some students require visual/verbal warnings leading up to this transition). Some classrooms can even use this song as a count down for how long clean up should take!

One transition song that was extremely helpful to my group was one I discovered from a fellow preschool teacher: “My hands are at my side. I’m standing straight and tall. My eye’s are looking forward…I’m ready for the hall!” is the song we sing to line up and prepare our bodies for walking in a line. This may have been the biggest triumph in our preschool day, as running through the halls while yelling is much more fun! You can use transition songs to sing hello, goodbye, prepare for snack or story time and everything in between! Here is a link to the playlist of songs I use throughout the day! https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLy7qMs9muNqEH QAQobN6wgl_–_Qd mN09
Learning Experiences

We set aside time everyday to sing and dance in preschool. Whether it’s during our music and movement time or with a music therapist who comes in once a week, the students are motivated to participate in musical activities. There are endless songs and musical activities out there that are engaging and fun for young learners, while also sneaking in academic building blocks that benefit their learning and growth. All areas of the curriculum can be embedded within music and movement, including math, literacy, and social emotional skills. A current fan favorite in our classroom is “The Number Rock.” This simple song prompts students to repeat back numbers 1-20, while playing their air guitars, drums, and tambourines. To increase the excitement, we start low to the ground at the beginning of the song and slow rise until we reach 20 to celebrate! Songs can be made increasingly interactive and motivating with the use of visuals, hands on materials such as instruments, motor movements, and videos. To practice identifying emotions in facial expressions, we sing a song called “can you make a happy face, jack-o-lantern?” by Super Simple Learning. For this song, I printed out the different facial expression on jack-o-lanterns, the students can take turns holding up the correct face, while mimicking that face on their own.

Large Motor Activities

There are endless musical large motor activities that can be incorporated in the early childhood classroom, however including music in your gym activities helps to offer structure where structure can be more challenging in large spaces, such as a gym or outside. Beginning with a warm up song can inform your students that it is time for gym and will offer a fun, quick activity for students to become engaged. Everyone fondly remembers their favorite day in gym class; the parachute. What they don’t recall is the chaos that quickly ensues if the teacher does not come prepared with clear expectations and a plan. One way to avoid students being whipped around by their peers with the parachute is to pair the activity with a song. Music can offer step-by-step directions for students to follow along with, set the pace, and offer a clear start and end to the activity.

Bringing music into the early childhood classroom can benefit students’ educational experience in a multitude of ways. Whether you are looking to facilitate smooth and clear transitions or help support students’ social-emotional growth, music can play a large role in reaching those goals. My classroom wouldn’t be the same without starting the day with a hello song to greet each student. How do you incorporate music and movement into your classroom? You might be surprised at how often it naturally occurs, or this may have sparked some ideas to embed into your classroom routines. Please feel free to share ideas or things that have worked in the comments below!

This post was brought to you from Julia Spencer, ’15. This is Julia’s second post on the blog, and we’re so glad to have her as a guest blogger. Check out her profile on the “Meet the Bloggers” page.
Structure & Routine

We've all seen the student that comes into the classroom first thing in the morning and immediately starts goofing off and wandering around... What if instead of having a loose direction of “unpack and sit down,” she had a checklist that walked her through exactly what she needed to do and showed her what her “reward” was once she was finished? I don’t know about you, but I’m going to guess the morning routine is going to improve for that student.

Having a predictable and routine structure helps students to self-regulate and stay focused on what is expected of them. Structure begins as soon as students walk in the door, and I find planning for it to be one of the most difficult parts of teaching Special Ed. It involves thinking through every single second of your students’ day and figuring out what your expectation (as the teacher) is for them, what they will have to accomplish, and what problems might arise while this is happening.
For example, if my expectation is: Jimmy needs to wash his hands, throw out the paper towel, and sit down at the table for sensory time.

Jimmy's tasks are:

1. turn on water
2. put soap on hands
3. scrub hands
4. turn off water
5. get paper towel from dispenser
6. walk across classroom to garbage can
7. throw out paper towel
8. walk across classroom to sensory table
9. sit down

That's nine tasks! Something that you, or I, or most general education students could do without any further direction is actually a lot of tasks for my 4-year-old friend with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Thinking through exactly what we are expecting of students helps us see where possible breakdowns may occur. As I was typing that example (and it is a real example from my classroom), I was thinking to myself, “Why is the garbage can so far from the sink? That’s a huge transition from one side of the room to the other.” The answer is that it is close to the door so the janitors can grab it easily to empty the breakfast garbage, but getting a second garbage can is a very cheap and easy fix to remove two unnecessary transitions in this friend’s day!

In all of this, I am thinking through my students’ day in a way that allows me to make changes (like fixing that garbage can first thing Monday morning) that will help the day run more smoothly and will help my students be successful. It is a tedious task that often gets lost because we forget that things like walking across the classroom twice are where a lot of issues come from, but when we have a strong, intentional, structured classroom, we can resolve issues before they even arise, which is always a win!

Language Supports

I don’t know about your caseloads, but in my three years of teaching preschool special education, I have only had one student that did not have some kind of language delay, which means that 99% of them did! That’s a huge percentage of students with related issues. So, it has been a big focus in my classroom, and, I believe, in all preschool special education classrooms.

One of the most important language supports in my classroom, and one that completely changed how I looked at language learning, is a Core Board. A Core Board is a visual that includes images for some of the most commonly used, or “core” words, such as “I,” “you,” “want,” “need,” “help,” “more,” “go,” “see,” and many more. Focusing on teaching my students to use these “core” words as opposed to more nouns or one-use-words like “pencil” or “bear” has lead to a huge amount of language growth, because my students are able to use these words across activities and throughout the day. The blog The Autism Helper has a great post that has a more detailed description of Core Boards with a lot of good examples. You can check it out here.

While Core Boards have been the biggest game changer in my room, we also use a number of other strategies to help give every child the means to communicate. One way we communicate is to have images of classroom objects/ materials that students are able to physically hand to a teacher in order to request that item. This is kind of an improvised version of PECS (the Picture Exchange Communication System), which I have not been trained in, but love the concept of. I am hoping to add PECS in its pure form to my classroom later in the year, once I am able to attend the training. We also use some very simple signs using American Sign Language, for things like “more” and “help” (though ASL, again, falls into the category of “Things I Need to Learn More About”). I also have one student who uses an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device that I am still learning about, as it is brand new to us. It uses the Core Vocabulary concepts, so I am excited to get into it.

Overall, I don’t think there is any ‘right’ way to support language in your classroom, because every student needs something different. What is important is that you are making sure that every single student has at least some way to communicate because without that, everything else (behavior,
academics, social skills, everything) will suffer.

Visuals

This one goes hand-in-hand with language supports, but really in a preschool special education classroom, there is no such thing as too many visuals! I have visuals for communication, behavior strategies, the daily schedule, labeling where items belong on shelves, how to wash your hands, choice boards for which song to sing, options for greeting your teacher when you walk in... You name it, there is a visual for it! A lot of my visuals I have made myself (because I am overly picky), but there are a ton of ready-made things out there for you to print and laminate and you’re ready to go. The website TeachersPayTeachers.com is a great resource for ready-made visuals and Boardmaker is an amazing way to make your own. Many school districts already have accounts, so be sure to ask around!

The most important visuals in my room are the visual lanyards that my paraprofessional and I wear around our necks. They are small cards that each have an image and a word for common directions such as “sit” and “no yelling.” Having these right there with me at all points of the day without any scrambling to find them has been invaluable in supporting my students that have trouble following verbal directions.

Another important visual (that may belong in language supports, but bear with me) in my classroom are choice boards. We use choice boards for everything from picking which song we are going to sing to identifying colors to identifying characters in the story we’re reading. They are a super easy way to include your non-verbal students in the conversation and to support the students who are verbal, but who may have still have trouble answering questions or making choices. I make my choice boards on Microsoft Word using Google Images, so they are simple, and I can find whatever images I think best represent the ideas we need.

Support

Being a teacher is rough. Being a special education teacher can be even more so, because it is very easy to feel isolated and alone. We do not always have teaching partners or even anyone else in the school who has the same type of classroom (in my school I am the only “cluster” teacher), and that can make it seem like no one else knows what we’re going through, but that’s not true!

Talk to the other teachers in your building! Even the 7th-8th-grade inclusion teacher has been able to help me brainstorm my preschool problems! Talk to the general education teachers in the same grade level; they may not have exactly the same dilemmas you do, but they can still be a great resource.

Look online! There are a ton of amazing special education blogs that have helped me so much I cannot even begin to say. Considerate Classroom and Fun in ECSE are two that are both dedicated to early childhood special education, but there are tons more that have a broader focus, but no less helpful information.

Talk to your family and friends! My roommate has become quite the preschool expert (despite her job in the business world), thanks to all the times I get home, and I just need to tell somebody about the crazy day I had.
Take a break! Sometimes the best thing you can do for yourself is to step back and say “I’m done with school for the day.” It is so easy to get caught up in looking for ideas on Pinterest and cutting out materials for tomorrow that we spend all our time outside school, doing things for school. Step back and take some time to do something for yourself. It will benefit your students in the long run if you are able to stay focused because you haven’t burnt yourself out.

These are just my ABC’s (and D) on special education, not the whole book, not even the whole alphabet! There are so many more things to consider, but this post was meant to be something to get you thinking! I hope some of the pieces are applicable to your classroom, even if you’re not teaching preschool or special education, and that you can take away something new! I am not an expert, just a teacher, but feel free to reach out if you have any questions or comments!

**Killian McIlvain** is an ISU ECE alumni, and a third-year, Special Education teacher in a Chicago Public Schools, blended, and bilingual Pre-K classroom. See Killian’s past post on this blog [here](#).

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**Say Hello: Using Books to Support Oral Language in Diverse Learners**

Uncategorized  
March 6, 2017  
Leave a comment  
by Sherry Sanden

A little disclaimer: In my 17 years of teaching in early childhood classrooms, in a variety of Head Start, child care, and primary-grade classrooms, I never once had a student whose birth language was not English. And I am monolingual; I speak only English. That is the background from which I, as a teacher educator, approach my pre-service teachers, who will encounter a very different world of teaching than the one I entered. Most of them will have one or several dual language learners in their early childhood classrooms, probably every year of their career. So I recognize the concern in the faces of many of my mostly white, mostly monolingual, mostly female teacher candidates when they ask the question, “How do I support the language and literacy development of all of the children in my classroom, even when we don’t share a language, or when I don’t have experience with their culture or their background?”

There are lots of suggestions I give, like my recommendations to pursue our university’s ESL endorsement, and especially to use their time and resources to learn more about their students’ languages and experiences. But another way I suggest they bridge that gap with their students in real time is to plan experiences with children’s books. Children’s literature can provide a context through which to help bridge the divide and cross language and cultural barriers.

Burnam (2009) discusses a “culture of conversation” that needs to be the norm in early childhood...
classrooms, to support children’s speaking and listening skills. She mentions two types of conversation that are important, spontaneous & facilitated. We know how important authentic spontaneous verbal interactions are. That’s the chatter that is the lifeblood of the early childhood classroom, student to student, teacher to student, student to classroom pet turtle, all of it. That kind of natural talk is how children learn to speak from the beginning. The inclusion of spontaneous conversations in our early childhood classrooms is essential for language development. The focus here, though, is on the second kind of conversation: facilitated conversations in our classrooms, the planned instances of oral interactions that, if they’re done right, will look spontaneous to our students but that we will know were purposely inserted into classroom activities to support our students’ listening and speaking growth.

There are many ways that children’s literature can be used to facilitate those conversations amongst all of our learners. I present below children’s books that can be used to prompt children’s oral language development. Hopefully you will find both some new ideas to support students’ developing oral language and some new multicultural titles that you can include in your diverse classroom library.

**Purposeful greetings & ordinary interactions**

In my Head Start and my primary-grade classrooms, our day started with Morning Meeting. This low-key, welcoming introduction to the day always began with a greeting of varied spoken and unspoken messages letting our friends know we were glad they were there. One of our primary greetings involved saying good morning and shaking hands, because that was a greeting familiar to me, from my tradition, but it certainly isn’t the only possible greeting that could be used.

In *Say Hello!*, children are introduced to multiple ways that people let each other know they are glad to see one another. As a monolingual English-speaker, a book like this supports my tentative attempts to include varied languages in my classroom greetings. Inviting family members to be a part of morning greetings would allow them to introduce their own familiar greetings and help your children learn them as well. *Peekaboo Morning* might be used with younger children, prompting them to mimic the teacher’s peekaboos and then to create their own. These are examples of facilitated everyday greetings and interactions, planned in a purposeful way to not only prompt children to participate but also to value the multiple languages of the students and to expose them to languages and traditions different from their own.

**Experiences that inspire “extended discourse”**

Extended discourse is talk that requires participants to develop understandings beyond the here-and-now and that require the use of several sentences to build a linguistic structure, such as in explanations, narratives, or pretend talk (Dickinson & Tabor, 2002, p. 12). This kind of often-decontextualized talk is important for developing young children’s ability to tell stories and carry on conversations about current and past events. Books can support experiences that provide topics for conversation about familiar and unfamiliar topics...cooking, zoo, library, and gardening are just a few. Experiences in a school or community garden, for example, provide a wealth of opportunities to prompt contextualized and unusual language.
One book that allows you to integrate varied cultures is *The Ugly Vegetables*, which depicts a family growing and then cooking Chinese vegetables, and can culminate in cooking “ugly vegetable” soup. There are numerous gardening-related and food books, all of which support the integration of literature and oral language.

Other experiences that can prompt rich conversation, or “extended discourse,” in a familiar environment are community interactions, or simply walking the neighborhood. A great book to include with neighborhood walking experiences is *Last Stop on Market Street*, the 2016 Newbery medal winner.

An opportunity to integrate multiple literacies through extending neighborhood experiences is a photo essay activity. Take your camera or smart phone along and allow children to photograph their experiences and what they see as important in the community. This exercise provides multiple opportunities for contextualized and decontextualized oral language, along with reading and writing. Using the photos in class books or on concept charts provides lots of opportunities for children to relive and discuss their experiences. This also provides opportunities for labels and captions in the multiple languages of your students.

**Poetry, rhymes, and word play**

Rhyming and word play support oral language, phonemic awareness and “…offer each child the opportunity to join with others and share the joy of language” (Buchoff, 1994, p. 29). While the use of nursery rhymes and finger plays is traditional in early childhood classrooms, the inclusion of poetry, nursery rhymes, and chants from multiple languages and cultures provides the opportunity to value the traditions of a diverse student population.

The book *My Village: Rhymes from Around the World* shares 22 nursery rhymes from multiple languages, included in English and their native language, and provides the opportunity to get to know and enjoy them all. You might rely on options like bilingual staff members who could audio record the nursery rhymes in their traditional language or family members who could join you, to provide a supportive language experience for your students’ biliteracy.

Another option is this website: [http://www.mamalisa.com/?t=hubeh](http://www.mamalisa.com/?t=hubeh). It provides rhymes and poems in multiple languages. This would also allow you to create your own class books of rhymes from targeted languages.

**Story reenactments**

Use familiar and well-loved stories to encourage children to act out the plot lines or make up some of their own, relying on a story’s characters. For story reenactments, use books with a clear sense of sequence and provide repeated readings so children are familiar with the plot and the language. You can use puppets or props or just children acting out parts, but the goal is in the process, not in a polished performance. Just let the children have fun with it. After children are familiar with the story
perhaps after you have prompted a reenactment with the group, put the book in your library or other space where children feel free to be performers. I guarantee you will have children acting as little thespians on their own!

Using puppets to reenact stories is excellent support for oral language as well as for reader response. In fact, *Louie* by Ezra Jack Keats, tells the story of a neighborhood child who is reluctant to speak until puppets catch his attention. After that, everyone wants to be involved in the puppet show.

Wordless picture books are an especially good choice for story reenactments. Wordless picture books like Jerry Pinkney’s gorgeous 2010 Caldecott award winner, *The Lion and the Mouse*, inherently inspire language since the illustrators so considerately leave the story telling to us, without a right or wrong way to interpret the story.

Interactive Read-alouds

Finally, I can’t end without advocating for interactive read-alouds, with both fiction and nonfiction texts. Using read-alouds with plenty of opportunities for children to talk—to you, to each other, to the story and the characters—is highly motivating for oral language production. Children get the opportunity to hear and to use decontextualized language in an atmosphere of authenticity. Informational and conceptual text are especially supportive of diverse student populations since they often contain fewer cultural barriers to understanding than do fiction texts (Kamil & Bernhardt, 2001).

Early childhood educators eager to support the oral language of their young learners can rely on children’s books to build bridges across language and cultural barriers. Learners who spring from languages and backgrounds different from our own will especially benefit from our efforts to allow children’s literature to pave the way toward greater interactive language experiences in early learning settings.

References


**Web Resources:**


Mama Lisa’s World: [http://www.mamalisa.com/?t=hube](http://www.mamalisa.com/?t=hube) (songs and rhymes from multiple cultures and languages)

**Children’s Books**

**Food and cooking:**


**Clothing:**


**Gardening:**


**Celebrating individuality & differences:**


**Rhyming & poetry:**


**Local and world community:**


As the influx of technological devices in the lives of young children has evolved, so has the concept of "screen time." Recommendations for the amount of exposure to screen time were originally based on children’s TV viewing. Agencies like the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommended that children under the age of two should not watch TV, videos, or DVDs at all. Today, the Internet provides access to digital media with capabilities beyond passive viewing, on an ever increasing variety of devices. Children can now access videos, games, educational apps, even Skype with grandma on computers, tablets, and phones in addition to TVs. This variety in digital media content has resulted in a reconsideration of screen time. In lieu of recommending a specific number of hours, the AAP now...
recommends parents create a family media plan that takes into account each individual child’s needs, as well as the benefits and challenges that come with children’s media use (see Online media plan tool).

Rather than using the element of time to designate limits on screen time, we should consider how the devices are being used. A distinction must be made between creativity and consumption – are children passively consuming media or are they actively engaged in some type of creative production? Devorah Heinter cautions this should not be considered an “either or” situation, but more of a continuum. For example, passively watching YouTube videos on how to use Minecraft can lead to cognitive engagement and creative problem solving, while watching numerous episodes of Paw Patrol will not. Likewise, there is a difference in the degree of creativity. Curating or reposting the content of others is not at the same level as creating original material and sharing those creations via online sites.

Here are just a few of the many ways screens can be used to promote creativity.

**Making Art**

- **MoMA Art Lab** (Free – iPad only)

Students can use a pencil to draw or stamp shapes using a variety of colors. Consider offering a challenge of using a specific number of shapes or limiting it to just a single shape. Students can narrate a story to go with their creation. All the student drawings can be uploaded to VoiceThread to create a class collection. Students can then individually record a narration for their picture. (See this earlier eceteachertalk blog post for more information on VoiceThread)

- **Bord** (Free for Android; $1.99 for IOS)

This app lets children create original artwork on a green or black chalkboard background. Tools include six different chalk and size options. The app chalk functions the same as actual chalk. The more strokes applied to the same area, the more concentrated the color will become, just as all the chalk will not be removed with the first pass of the eraser.

- **Creative Commons – More apps for making art**

**Making Stories**

- **This Is My Story (and I’m Sticking to It)** (IOS only – $1.99)

Children can make their own story book by dragging images onto the page. Simple sentence frames can be completed. Finished stories can be saved and read by a narrator.

- **Storybird** (free)
Storybird, a web-based app, is more complex. Students can use professional artwork to create their stories in the form of picture books or poems. They can then write a story to fit the images they have selected. Keep in mind, users must be 13 years of age to become a member but a parent's email address can be used for younger children. The parent will receive an email when the child becomes a “storybird.”

- Creative Commons – More writing apps and websites

Making Music

- Toca Band ($2.99 – IOS only)

Children are charged with creating a band. They have 16 band members, each with a unique appearance and talent from which to choose. Characters can be placed on the “golden star platform” to perform a solo. While there is basically one song, children can experiment and manipulate the instruments to create many variations.

- Creative Commons – Best creative apps

Programming by Design – Early Childhood Coding

The word “coding” can spark concern among early childhood educators. How can children who have yet learned how to read, learn how to code? MIT Professor of Learning Research and head of the Media Lab’s Lifelong Kindergarten group, considers coding to be an essential literacy. The newly released standards from the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) call for all students to be “computational thinkers” and “innovative designers.” “As young children code with ScratchJr, they develop design and problem-solving skills that are foundational for later academic success,” said Marina Umaschi Bers, professor in the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development at Tufts, and director of the Tufts’ Development Technologies research group which co-developed ScratchJr. “By using math and language in a meaningful context, they develop early-childhood numeracy and literacy.”

Perhaps the most impressive observation I’ve made when watching young children use coding apps, is their resiliency. Rather than becoming defeated and quitting when a path they’ve set doesn’t work as intended, they are anxious to try again! Since there is little risk associated with this trial and error environment, students are more than willing to pursue alternate solutions; a great way to learn from mistakes! I can’t encourage you enough to try these apps out on your own and judge the value they have to offer for yourself.

- Scratch Jr. (Free for IOS and Android)
Students can program their own interactive stories and games by dragging LEGO-like pieces that snap together to create a command sequence for Scratch the cat. After some carefully planned instruction to guide students through the activities, students as young as 5 will be ready to modify existing programs and begin constructing their own interactive stories.

- **The Foos** (Free for IOS and Android)

This app was specifically designed to be used with children as young as 4-year-olds. The Foos has three worlds, each with its own set of programmable characters. Children create a series of actions by dragging blocks at the bottom of the screen to create a series of commands in order to help a character achieve a goal, such as earning stars or capturing the Glitch. As children progress, the levels become more challenging requiring more complex programming skills, making this app suitable for a range of ages.

**Final Thoughts**

As with all things, creativity is in the eyes of the beholder. Not every child will get excited about the same creative outlet, and no one app or website offers more creative potential than another. Playing with each of these apps can only help in determining possible matches for the children you know so well.

I hope this has helped to offer an alternative perspective about children and screen time.

*Rena Shifflet spent over thirty years in public education as a classroom teacher and district technology coordinator. As an assistant professor at Illinois State University, Rena works with preservice elementary education majors and practicing educators.*
Breaking Down Standards to “Bite Sized Pieces”

A little background...

In January 2016, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) adopted the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies prepared by the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) and integrated that framework into the Illinois Learning Standards. The rulemaking requires school districts to fully implement these K-12 standards for social science in the 2017-2018 school year. The Illinois Social Science Learning Standards introduction states, “[t]he vision supporting this design is to produce Illinois graduates who are civically engaged, socially responsible, culturally aware, and financially literate” (Illinois State Board of Education, p. 2). Additionally, the document (click on the first bullet point for the entire K-12 standard document to download as a PDF) details that in Illinois, social science curriculum is determined locally and that these standards are broken into two broad categories as a framework for implementation: inquiry skills and disciplinary concepts.

Changes to curriculum and learning standards can be unsettling to both new and experienced educators for the obvious reasons: Will I have to create my own curriculum for my own grade? Will I receive some professional development to promote this shift? How will students be assessed on the new standards? These are all real concerns weighing on the minds of already very busy teachers. I can relate, albeit in a much different situation...

Last semester, I was contacted by a faculty member in history education to assist in developing a bibliography of children’s books tied to the new standards that could be used in a K-5 professional development session that she was facilitating with area teachers. The process through which I attacked this relatively daunting task made me think that both the process and the product might be of interest to early childhood educators, ECE pre-service teachers, and other readers of this blog. With that in mind, I shall attempt to walk you through my thought processes and searching of the library’s online catalog, and I will only focus on K-3 social science standards. Preschool (Age 3-KDG enrollment age) Early Learning and Development Standards (iELDS) can be found here.

Where to start?

In order to build a useful bibliography, I knew that I had to first understand the structure of the standards themselves from the document that had been provided to me. The Illinois Social Science Learning Standards are broken into K-12 Inquiry Skills (not addressed in this article) and K-5 Disciplinary Concepts (I’ll call them DISCIPLINES) that include civics, economics and financial literacy, and geography. These broad disciplines are further delineated into disciplinary concepts that spread across the K-5 standards and align with a particular standard. Themes by grade level allow teachers to see the “big picture emphasis” for a specific grade level. This flow chart (see below) that I sketched out helped me better understand the structure of the document itself before I even attempted to think about or locate books that would complement an individual standard.
In addition to making my own flowchart, this piece within the standards document was helpful in terms of the coding convention that was used to format the document:

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[Note: Only the first four on the list apply to Grades K-3.]

Formatting the document:

For the in-service training, I thought it would be helpful to have the structure of the Standards document replicated (sort of) in the handout/bibliography.

Using Children’s Literature with the Illinois Social Science Learning Standards

(F) and (NF) at the end of the citation indicate Fiction and Non-fiction titles, respectively.  Kindergarten Theme: My Social World

Civics Disciplinary Concept: Understand Political Systems, with an Emphasis on the United States

Civic and Political Institutions

SS.CV.1.K. Describe roles and responsibilities of people in authority.

Beginning the search

Hmmmmm. As I looked at the broad scope of each standard, I realized that I wouldn’t be searching the catalog “as usual” by title or author, or for that matter, even a subject or topic. Fortunately, Milner Library
has a "faceted catalog," allowing one to "filter" or narrow one’s searches. I knew I’d limit my search to children’s books in Milner Library's Teaching Materials Center by following these directions:

Keyword searching in online catalogs has made searching much easier because the term or terms used will result in a “hit” for that word that appears anywhere in the catalog record. Because the topics were written for educators and not for children, I had to think “simply.”

I went back to the structure of the standard and drew on my own experience as a primary teacher when I looked at SS.CV.1.K. I realized that I needed to think about how I would explain roles and responsibilities of people in authority through the lens of a kindergartner’s social world.

Eureka! This standard is talking about community helpers! Firefighters, police officers, mail carriers, the principal, teachers and nurse at a school! Now I had the vocabulary to begin my search.

In the catalog search, I used school nurse as my search term on the Books & Media tab and then limited the Teaching Materials Center in the location after the initial results displayed. After getting the results for just children’s books (PK-12), I looked in the individual title record to determine whether that particular book was appropriate for kindergarten.

I could see from the More Details tab in the first title in my results that this book was 24 pages (a picture books is typically 32-pages) and would provide information about what the nurse does at a school. Clues from the catalog record allowed me to search and determine age-appropriate titles for many standards from the comfort of my office chair/computer screen. When I did go to pull the individual titles, I determined I was very successful on identifying age-appropriate books, with few exceptions (e.g., the book was too advanced in typography/layout/content for Kindergarten). Ultimately, you know your students best, and therefore can determine which books “fit” the learning outcomes for your students.

As I proceeded, there were some standards that I realized would be best implemented with local resources, as the state of Illinois is so diverse in its typography, commerce, and urban versus rural populations. Some standards were really tough, but once I thought about how to explain them to children in an age-appropriate way, it made searching the catalog much easier. One of the standards for
Kindergarten in the Economics discipline was a real mind-bender:

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**Economic Concepts**

**SS.EC.1.K.** Explain choices are made because of scarcity (i.e., because we cannot have everything that we want).

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This one was a challenge, but I entered the term(s) poverty AND easy ("Easy" is the TMC locater for picture books; this might vary from library to library) in the advanced search, limited to the Teaching Materials Center, and looked at the results. A great book titled Those Shoes lent itself perfectly to this standard for this grade level!

![Book cover for "Those Shoes"

Finishing the bibliography...

After a lot of hard work and hard thinking, I was able to produce the beginning of a bibliography that includes a book for almost every social science standard. This is by no means an all-inclusive list nor one that is "bound" to a book for a specific grade for a specific standard (click this link to view the full bibliography: [social-studies-standards-and-childrens-literature-derden](http://illinoisearlylearning.org/IELDS/index.htm)). It is meant to serve as an example of how using children’s books on social science topics can enhance the unit or lesson and allow children to help drive the conversation and learning.

Ultimately, by thinking about our students FIRST, we can find stories and materials that can help children grasp the concepts set out in the standards, and we, as educators might learn a little something along the way, as well!

**References**


Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards [for Preschool to Kindergarten enrollment age]. (September 2013). Retrieved from [http://illinoisearlylearning.org/IELDS/index.htm](http://illinoisearlylearning.org/IELDS/index.htm) [html version]. [PDF]
The primary goal of reading instruction is to enhance the reader's depth of comprehension. For a teacher of emergent and early readers, it sounds like a challenging task. After all, these students are learning, “the processes of knowing how to read” such as attending and searching, anticipating/predicting, cross-checking and confirming, and self-correcting. In 2010, The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) published a Practice Guide entitled, Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten through 3rd Grade (USDOE, 2010). This guide was written with the objective that, “reading instruction is to give young readers the tools they need to understand increasingly sophisticated material in all subjects from elementary through later years of school” (USDOE, 2010, p. 5).

IES research found that explicit teaching of reading comprehension should begin as early as kindergarten with the understanding that it will look different at this level than it would in grades 2-3. This guide further recommends that reading comprehension strategies be taught before word level skills are fully established and that these strategies are taught alongside decoding skills. This study provides, “strong evidence” of increased comprehension knowledge at an early age when students are taught how to use these comprehension strategies either individually or integrated with decoding skills. Students should be provided many different opportunities to explore how the strategy is applied and how it is different than other strategies taught. A strategy is referred to as “intentional mental actions during reading that improve reading comprehension and deliberate efforts by a reader to better understand or remember what is being read” (USDOE, 2010, p. 11). A strategy is not, “instructional activities such as completing worksheets or exercises that are aimed at giving students practice with skills such as sequencing or drawing conclusions, but that lack explicit instruction in how to think in these ways during reading” (USDOE, 2010, p. 11). In a review chapter of Building Comprehension Strategies in the Primary Grades, by Alison Davis (2011), she states that “good readers use a range of strategies” (p. 9) and that “deliberate and explicit instruction is important to enable students to understand individual strategies…how to integrate a range of strategies to assist comprehension…and how to use strategies to monitor comprehension” (pp. 9-10).

Duke and Pearson (2001), reported on over 30 years of research and found three features that consistently promote reading comprehension; reading, explicit instruction, and talk. They went on to report that, “Young children are developing as readers when they are able to understand, interpret and critique what they read. Research has consistently shown that the goal of developing comprehension should go hand-in-hand with the goal of developing solid sound-letter knowledge, even for our youngest learners” (p. 421).

The Workshop Model provides a framework that offers the opportunity for this type of instruction. In my second-grade classroom, the model includes a mini lesson, which involves reading a mentor text that will be used to focus on a specific strategy. I first model how I will use the strategy with a particular book, then the next day, I provide a guided opportunity for students to use the same strategy. After that, students try using the strategy on their own. In addition to whole group instruction, students also discuss
the strategy within guided reading groups with their “on-level” books. They write in their “My Thinking” section of their reading notebooks using thinking stems specific to the strategy. Younger students who may not be able to write in a notebook about their thinking could draw pictures or participate in a discussion.

An example of Reading Workshop Mini-Lesson:

Reading Comprehension Strategy: Making Predictions

Day 1 – I read Owen, by Kevin Henkes aloud to the class. As I am reading, I used a think-aloud approach to make predictions aloud at certain points in the book. Then, I ask myself aloud if my prediction was correct and what made me think it was correct. After I read a book, I asked my students why making predictions is important to understanding what I read. We discussed this for a few minutes. As I make predictions, I record them on chart paper to create a classroom anchor chart.

Here is an example of an anchor chart for asking questions.

Day 2 – I read Bear's New Friend by Karma Wilson aloud. This time, I stopped at certain points and asked what my students' predictions might be. We continued to discuss if our predictions were correct and why/why not and why it is important to make predictions. Later in guided reading groups, I have students begin to make predictions while reading the books.

A student writing her prediction.

Day 3 – I read The Relatives Came by Cynthia Rylant aloud. I have students raise their hands when they make a prediction. Then we discuss if their prediction was correct and why/why not. Students continue to discuss predictions in small guided reading groups.
Students writing about their reading in their Reading Notebooks in small group.

After I feel that the students have a good grasp on using the predictions strategy, I give them a graphic organizer to fill out during their read-to-self station. This graphic organizer is then turned in at the end of the week for a grade. At the end of Reading Workshop each day, I look for students to share what they have written about the prediction strategy.

One of the most important things to remember is once a strategy is taught, continue to integrate it into your read-aloud and small group lessons and discussions. Spiral review with other strategies teaches the students how a good reader uses all strategies simultaneously when they read.

According to the IES Guide referenced earlier (USDOE, 2010) the most effective reading comprehension strategies to teach in the primary grades are:

- Activating prior knowledge/predicting
  - Pull out the main idea and ask students to relate to their own experiences
  - Ask students to predict what will happen and look at deeper meaning

- Questioning
  - Use who, what, where, why, how; encourage students to use these words

- Visualizing
  - Read to students and have them visualize what they see

- Monitoring, clarifying, and fix up
  - Relate strategies to a traffic sign; (stop sign can be used to stop reading and retell what you are reading in your own words, u-turn go back and reread parts that don’t make any sense)

- Drawing inferences
  - Identify keyword

- Summarizing/retelling
  - Describe what is occurring in the text in their own words

The book *Comprehension Connections*, by McGregor and Harvey (2007), goes into more detail about each of these strategies. It is a short, easy read that for me has proven to be a very applicable way to teach these reading comprehension strategies. Many of the anchor charts I created were taken from this text. There are examples of thinking stems to use when discussing and/or writing about these strategies as well. Younger students can use only one or two. This list can grow as they begin to read harder and more complex texts. The idea is to get them thinking about reading.
Students are watching a short video clip. They will predict the ending using background knowledge and evidence from the video.

I am always amazed that even the youngest students can participate in collaborative discussions about the text. Several years ago, several children with significant delays were placed in my classroom. One of the strategies that worked well with them was using collaborative discussions about texts. Although they were well below grade level, they participated each day in discussions on different strategies we focused on during our read aloud. This particular year, I also had two students who had parents that were terminally ill. I asked our media specialist if she could read some stories to my class about illness, death, etc. In class, we had been discussing making connections with our read aloud and the water cycle during science. One student who read four levels below grade level said, “Life is kind of like the water cycle. We come to earth, have kids, our kids have kids, and then we go back up, just like the water does.” If he had not participated in the class discussions, he would never have been able to make this connection. Yes, an eight-year-old was able to make that connection!

Does this kind of thinking happen overnight? Can an educator just pick up a book and know what type of questioning and/or modeling to use? Like everything else in the world of education, it is a process. Start small. For me, orchestrating effective mini-lessons took several years of trial and error. I still reflect on how I could have more effectively used a text to encourage better discussion and application of a strategy. Formative assessment continues to be a key part of what drives my mini lessons. If I notice a large part of my class is struggling with using a strategy, I plan more mini-lessons to guide them through the process. If a small group is struggling, I guide them in small groups during guided reading.

My favorite quote is by Ignacio Estrada, who said, “If a child can’t learn the way we teach, maybe teach the way they learn.” Students need explicit instruction, maybe even more than once, to become thoughtful readers of any text. Is it worth the planning and effort? Absolutely! Comprehension is what matters the most!

**Works Cited:**


**Julie Schopp** is a second grade teacher at LeRoy Elementary School in Leroy, Illinois. Now in her 13th year of teaching, Julie holds a master’s degree in reading and literacy. You can find the rest of her bio here!
Layered Learning

As a first grade teacher, I am responsible for teaching many concepts within our Literacy Workshop Model, such as:

- Guiding students through multiple reading levels. Within this reading path, students must learn to independently use visual, structure, and meaning cues. In order to accomplish this, they must be aware of letter-sound relationships, grasp the difference between letters, words and sentences ("a" can be both a letter/word), recognize varied punctuation and how the author uses it to teach the readers how to read the sentence ("Look out!"), link new learning to something familiar ("feed" has a part like "see"), and make strategic decisions that are necessary for problem solving. It's crucial that they understand that print contains a message.
- Teaching weekly spelling words and phonics lessons that will strengthen students understanding of letter sounds within words (c-a-t), the multitude of relationships between words (cat-mat; cat-can; fish-ship), and again, link new sounds or words to something familiar (such as a classmate's name).
- Choosing enriching texts for whole group read a-louds that intentionally provide ample opportunities for rich discussion, extend comprehension skills and support a deeper understanding of print, bolster student interest and conversation, and encourage positive student debates. Students learn to make text to self, text to text, and text to world connections….all of which relates to previous knowledge.
- Implementing mini lessons based on different genres, such as non-fiction, opinion and narrative writing. All types of writing are linked to something students already know. They write about small moments from their lives, teach about something they know how to do, share personal opinions of what they like or don't like, or write fictional stories using their knowledge of letters, words, punctuation, and what published authors do to make their stories great. Everything they learn to do in writing, is based on something they have already seen or heard….previous knowledge.

These lessons all occur at different parts of the morning during my 150 minute literacy block. However, the same concepts are often repeated in each component of the workshop. This is what I've come to call "Layered Learning".

Why do I feel layered learning is so important? Well, in early June one summer, I decided to take a class on how to use the smart board. I had just had one installed the previous year in my classroom and wasn't especially confident in the way that I had been using it (basically as a whiteboard). I was pretty excited for this class and I ended up "learning" how to do so many cool things! I just knew I would use all of these great ideas when I got back to school. Well, I'm sure you can guess what happened instead. By the time school rolled around in August, I had forgotten how to do so much of what I thought I had learned. I was pretty disappointed. Something to think about here is that even though I was truly excited and wanted to learn about this specific topic, paid attention in class (received an A) and had planned to do it, I couldn't remember. Why? Because I hadn't practiced it enough on a regular basis to make it actually stick! I had a book from the class and notes, but what I didn't have at this point was time to learn it all over again.

This caused me to do a great deal of thinking about the way I taught my students. Was I just giving them standard lessons during a specific time frame, testing them, feeling satisfied that they learned it and moving on? I decided I really needed to think long and hard about how often I was teaching concepts. This, for me, is when my "light bulb" moment occurred…I knew I needed to do a better job making sure that what I was teaching my students would stick. My goal then became to carefully link my lessons throughout the day, week and even months in order to facilitate the likelihood that my students would absorb knowledge in a more purposeful way.

So…how did I decide to do this?

Over 20 years ago, when I was obtaining my elementary degree, we were expected to create themed bulletin boards that went along with specific lessons. It was cute and fun, but it was not the same type of connecting that I am going to share with you now. This is not about making everything in the room match (although I will admit I have a monkey theme in my room going on). This layered type of learning is not about reading a book to students about pumpkins, having them work on a phonics sheet with a pumpkin theme and providing a fun bulletin board filled with cute pumpkin cut outs and sayings. Although these things can be fun and interesting to children and could most definitely be a part of it, layered learning goes deeper!

It's about deliberate, skilled, and purposeful planning. It's about reaching deep into the core of what you not only need your students to learn, but to absorb in order apply to future learning. I have seen clear
evidence of how layered learning empowers students with the brain tools to remodel their own learning as the school year progresses. Just think about the educational classes you've had and when you've truly learned information that stayed with you enough to have an impact. What was it that occurred that allowed this to happen, possibly before, during and after the class? I believe infinite learning takes place through explicitly planned interactions that persistently link with each other. Layered learning involves initiating background knowledge, promoting discussion and debates, providing multiple opportunities to learn the same concepts through various avenues, and continued use of vocabulary and previously learned concepts in order to keep student learning fresh and constant.

I’d like to share an example of a typical morning in my 1st grade literacy workshop that demonstrates this type of learning.

Current Unit of Study: Apples (plants)

Comprehension Skill: Cause and Effect

Word Study: Letter Clusters (sh, ch, etc.)

Writing: Non-fiction Teaching Books

Language Workshop (40 Minutes)

I begin the day with two short read-alouds. The first text is a non-fiction, teaching book on apples. After reading about the life cycle of an apple tree, we have a discussion on how this text may give us ideas for writing our own teaching books in Writing Workshop. I ask students what this author did that helped us understand and learn about apples (bold print, fun facts, ellipses, zoomed in photos, labels, diagrams, etc.) I then casually lead the students into a discussion about different examples of factual cause and effect through what the author has shown us in his text (seasonal changes and apple growth, etc.)

I move on to read a fictional text about a little girl visiting an apple orchard with her family. This character shares many things in her story that also teach us about apples. I ask students if this is a teaching book and why or why not. They bounce their thoughts around with each other on what we’ve learned by reading this book (there are many kinds of apples, special tools to pick apples, different foods may be made from apples, etc.) I then prompt students into a discussion that this is another type of teaching book, using small moment fictional writing, and that it is also a mentor text that they may choose to help them write their own teaching books. I ask students for examples of cause and effect in this text and quickly jot them on the easel (they went to the orchard for apples so Grandma could make a pie, they had to choose a certain kind for baking, the orchard was packed with people because it was harvest time, etc.).

We move on to phonics. We are working on letter clusters. I do a short mini lesson on different letter blends called clusters. Students write down words they know that start with clusters. I emphasize clusters in student names.

Each grade level at our school has a set group of spelling words that must be covered during the year. I have made sure to pick groups of related words with the short “a” middle sound that also contain initial cluster sounds (flat, glad, stand, black). We play a quick spelling game with this week’s words.

Reading Workshop (70 minutes)

At the start of the mini lesson, I pull the 2nd text I read earlier and we flip through it to find words with clusters (such as orchard, bruised, climb, stand). I encourage students to find clusters in words during their station time (in books, task cards, technology, etc.) and record them on post it notes.

During the new book meeting with my guided reading groups, I find opportunities to ask students to point out clusters and their sounds and show them how knowing those sounds can help them solve tricky words. After students read, I ask them to share examples of cause and effect in their new story and if it reminds them of anything that’s happened to them (have they ever been lost, moved to a new house, felt scared, etc….depending on the specific text being read). After I meet with my guided reading groups, students join me for whole group time and share words from their post it notes.
Writing Workshop (40 minutes)

During my mini lesson on writing teaching books, I offer a quick reminder that the texts we’ve read earlier may be used for ideas. I also ask for suggestions of other teaching books they like, ones that we’ve read or that they personally enjoy. I prod them to explain why. As I meet with students for individual conferences, I encourage them to use a known book to help generate ideas they could use, such as fun facts or diagrams and I carefully observe to see who is already doing this independently. I also reinforce what they’ve learned about clusters and the short “a” sound to use in their writing. During our end of the workshop share time, I asked the students I’ve worked with or observed to share what they did as writers that day. This shared learning consists of students talking about using mentor texts, as well as how they used clusters/short “a” sound/ spelling words in their writing.

If you look back through each lesson, you can see how the same concepts have been woven in layers within each other. Our Unit of Study was integrated by reading two books about apples with factual information. I used these books to discuss cause and effect, clusters and as examples of what two different types of teaching books may be. I reinforced clusters and short a words, as well as cause and effect with guided reading groups. Students were encouraged to explore on their own to find words with clusters. Students were encouraged to find similar texts to use to help them find ideas for their own writing. Students were directed to think about cluster and short “a” sounds in their writing. Current background knowledge was utilized as well as building knowledge for future learning.

I enjoy planning this way every day! It’s the greatest feeling when my students take over their own learning by coming over to me, their voices filled with excitement, as they proudly explain to me connections they’ve made while reading independently or how they’ve helped themselves figure out a word by using a known word or when they’ve noticed something in a book and use specific terms like cause and effect to describe it.

I’ll leave you with this thought. A one layered plain cake tastes fine, but it won’t be something people will remember. Blending a layer of frosting on top will improve its flavor and interest. Each layer of cake and frosting that’s added will enhance the richness and deepen the flavor that one layer by itself cannot provide. This is the cake that takes patience, perseverance, planning and care. This is the cake everyone will rave about. This is what our students deserve!

Kim White has been teaching 1st grade at LeRoy Elementary for 9 years. Additionally, she teaches summer school lab, tutors year round, and is a certified Reading Recovery Teacher.
Breaking down work sounds straightforward, but it can take some practice if you aren't used to working in this way. For example, if your task is to plan an event, you may just put one item on your to-do list and call it, “Plan event.” But this task is actually a series of tasks (and maybe even a series of mini-projects) that require various people and resources to get done. To begin breaking down your work, think of it in terms of action steps. If a task has more than one action step, it should probably be further broken down so that those steps can be clearly represented on a task board. By breaking large business goals down into bite-sized tasks the absurd aims suddenly become feasible. The next step is to put these goals into action by putting one foot in front of the other to deliver. Knowing this nifty trick is only a very small part of the battle unfortunately. Even having broken down the goals a large number of people still give up only halfway up the mountain, whether they are satisfied with their progress or not. As a business coach, one of my roles is to define a company’s Mount Everest and break it down into ten-year, five-year, one-year or even 90-day plans and work towards them. But without these answers we’ll be unable to develop the data-driven apps that analysts are flagging as the next “Big Thing” in the sales and marketing arena.


Customers want “mainstream” apps that are useful, provide information or tie into key personal or business data. They want apps that can deal with huge amounts of data, while providing it in an intuitive, visual way – much the same as consumer apps -- that are “click and go.”