

Teachers' Perceptions and Beliefs about Field Trips as a Curricular Source

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Abstract

In today's educational arena, field trips are often viewed as an extracurricular activity disconnected from curriculum. Currently, teachers are experiencing pressure to prepare students of all ages to be college and career. Policy makers are mandating commercialized curricula as a means to ensure proficiency on standardized assessments. These types of curricula are often void of culturally relevant experiences that could be found through investigating local contexts. This study documented the process of two early childhood educators developing curriculum that stemmed from children's interests and their local contexts. During a 12-week period, a qualitative research study was conducted in a preschool located in a university lab school studying how the teachers, children, and families conceptualize field trips as a source of curriculum. To understand how educators plan for and implement meaningful field trips that are interwoven with curriculum, the teacher participants' beliefs and perceptions about taking children on field trips was explored. Additionally, the children's social construction of meaning of their physical and social worlds was observed and documented. The data collected was analyzed using van Manen's extensional categories of lived experience.

Keywords: field trips, curriculum, local contexts, preschool, community

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Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the notion of teachers taking children outside the classroom walls to study their immediate worlds. This research study followed a community of learners as they experience venturing outside the walls of their classroom and move from their own circles of knowing to gain a greater understanding of their cultural communities and physical and social worlds.

A current educator that inspired this research is Sal Vascellaro (2011). Vascellaro has experienced, taught, and written about the idea of field trips or “venturing out”, as he calls it, as the foundation for curriculum development for over four decades. This understanding has crystallized through his own experiences in taking trips in his multiple roles as an educator: teacher candidate, early childhood teacher, and college professor. In his book, *Out of the Classroom and Into the World*, he explains how he moved past a disconnected version of field trips and into a dynamic approach that enabled learners to “experience the deep connections that exist between the physical and social worlds around them and understand how these connections affect their lives” (Vascellaro, 2011, p. 9). This type of place-based education dually benefits both children and teachers as they are all viewed as co-learners. Educators are energized by this active approach to teaching where they develop a community-based curriculum that involves exploring local businesses, neighborhoods, and events (Field & Bauml, 2011). Investigations that stem from children’s questions about their immediate worlds are not geared toward grade-level norms but instead the curricular decisions are specific to the group of learners that have their own histories, interests, aptitudes, and struggles (Vascellaro, 2011).

This study was conducted in a preschool classroom studying how the teachers, children, and families conceptualize and realize field trips as a curriculum source over a span of eight weeks. The preschool is located on a university campus and serves as a lab school for pre-service teachers studying the field of early care and education. To understand how these educators plan for and implement meaningful field trips that are interwoven with curriculum, the beliefs and perceptions that the teachers hold about taking children on field trips were explored. Additionally, the children’s social construction of making meaning of their physical and social worlds is woven throughout the study.

Significance of Study

This research looks beyond the current crisis of standardization of education and seeks to support teachers and students by situating the learning in the here and now of a child’s life. The educational reform movement has situated early childhood education as the solution to high school dropouts, widespread poverty, and the future wellbeing of our U.S. population (Brown & Mowry, 2015). Up until the turn of the 21st century, preschools and kindergartens were viewed as settings for children to develop and strengthen their social and emotional skills before entering formal schooling. Through interactions with their peers, children learned how to get along with others and how-to problem solve. However, early childhood settings have become increasingly more

academic in nature, largely due to educational reform acts that have been passed in the past two decades (Saracho & Spodek, 2006).

The pressure to be “school ready” has become intense and often contradicts what is believed to be best for young children. Brown and Mowry (2015) warn that young children learn differently from their elementary school counterparts and they’re just beginning to develop the skills of an intentional learner (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000, as cited in Brown & Mowry, 2015). In a position statement by National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) current teaching methods that are of concern in preschool settings are excessive lecturing to the whole group and fragmented teaching of discrete objectives which are not conducive to young children’s learning styles nor culturally relevant to their lives. Many state standards focus on superficial learning objectives, at times underestimating young children’s competence and at other times requiring understandings and tasks that young children cannot grasp until they are older (Neuman, Roskos, Vukelich, & Clements, 2003 as cited in NAEYC, 2009). It is important to remember that the academic practices and expectations of elementary school can’t simply be shoved down into preschool (Hatch, 2002).

Not only do these high-pressure classrooms impact children’s growth and development, they are also having a negative effect on teachers. Because our nation has situated education in a competitive context by comparing scores and data on children’s achievements, from class to class, school to school, and nation to nation (Meeder & Suddreth, 2012) teachers have begun to ‘teach to the test’ in order to keep their jobs (Dimitriadis & Hill, 2012; Ravitch, 2012). When teachers’ livelihoods are at stake there is a prevailing fear that their teaching must produce favorable, measurable outcomes. The NAEYC (2009) recognizes that, “Teachers are currently being required to follow rigid, tightly paced schedules that don’t allow for valuable experiences such as problem solving, rich play, collaboration with peers, opportunities for emotional and social development, outdoor/physical activity, and the arts” (p. 4).

Additionally, there has been a narrowing of the scope of curriculum to literacy and mathematical skills which in turn creates a wide range of deficiencies in other areas of development, i.e., scientific inquiry, social studies, and emotional, social, and physical development. In this environment of accountability there appears to be very little space for taking children outside the classroom walls to explore their local contexts and communities. Kohn (2010) foresees this “top-down, get-tough movement to impose “accountability” as a crisis that is squeezing the life out of classrooms” (n.p.).

Purpose of Study

The study followed two preschool teachers and their students as they engaged in the project of storytelling and performance. Through careful observation and listening to children’s conversations, the teachers guided and facilitated the children’s interests by taking the children on multiple field trips around the university campus to investigate different elements that support storytelling and performance. The group travelled to an indoor auditorium, an outdoor stage, and a center for the arts with each visit building

upon the next. The children used these experiences to further their understandings of this topic and construct their own stage back in their preschool classroom. This project took place over the course of eight weeks, enabling the group to follow the multiple interests that emerged around the topic.

Teachers' Perceptions and Beliefs

During the research study, an underlying premise that guided the teachers' praxis and thought processes regarding their students was the idea that education is the basis for social responsibility and democratic practices. During an interview session, the teachers shared their goals for their students at the end of the school year. Their responses spoke clearly to the idea of building community, developing social skills, and creating a sense of belonging within their classroom.

Preschoolers learn through investigative experiences in small groups and through whole group conversations that foster a sense of community (Cahill & Theilheimer, 2015). Through these types of interactions children are able to build classroom community as they learn about their social environment. A sense of community does not happen on its own; instead it is carefully cultivated as children have ample opportunities to share their ideas and questions, participate in joint problem solving, and see that decisions they have made are valued and can indeed have an impact on their own environment.



Picture 1: A sense of community develops as friendships form

Both teachers emphasized the importance of social skills and the role they play in instilling the love of learning in their students. Community is built through the relationships in the classroom. Field trips and projects can provide children a place to learn about each other through common interests. The sense of community which had already been established since the beginning of the school year was strengthened and

fortified during the Project as the group experienced a curricular experience which they believed was important.

Throughout the Project and the corresponding field trips, children were engaged in collaborative and cooperative work. The teachers provided opportunities for the children to give input and make decisions throughout the project. Through trips to the various stages located on campus, the children shared the fun of exploring new territories and interacting with each other as learners and thinkers. They witnessed the work of individuals within their community and shared a common interest and expressed their understandings in multiple ways.

Curriculum Development

The teachers' vision for their students is that of honoring the individual child. Vascellaro (2011) aligns with this philosophy as he writes about projects that develop through the interests of a unique group of learners from year to year. "Projects are not geared to an abstract notion of a grade-level norm, but to the actual individuals – who have their own histories, interests, aptitudes, and struggles" (p. 68). The Project of storytelling and performance would have been impossible if the teachers were confined to a box curriculum with a predetermined script and timeline. Katz and Chard (2000), perhaps some of the most notable researchers on the subject of project work, explain project work as "[...a way of teaching and learning, rather than following a particular set of teaching techniques, or invariable sequences of activities, routines, or strategies. A teacher's special knowledge of her children enables her to encourage them to interact with people, objects, and the environment in ways that have personal meaning for them." (p. 3).

During the last interview session, the teachers shared their thoughts on curriculum development and how this impacts teaching and learning in their own context, "*[...a boxed curriculum is just what it is... it is saying here is what you need to impart on the children and there is no design factor. You can't make it your own and it is not unique...it is not fun*" and "*[...in a boxed curriculum it can be hard to draw the kids' interests into it and then we have to find ways to make it more meaningful for the children.*"

Physical Interactions

Throughout the Project, the teachers were continually reflecting on ways to support physical interactions between the children and content. During the time the children were building the stage they were constantly engaged in exploring, experimenting, negotiating, communicating and sharing. Through the physical process of engineering and building a wooden stage the children were physically and socially interacting with their peers and the adults within their environment. They carried boards and tools, measured spaces, crawled and crouched to position boards, hammer nails, and screw screws.



Picture 2: Children use fine and gross motor skills as they build their own stage

Physical interactions provided the children spaces to work out their own understandings and hypotheses about the world by observing what happens, reflecting on their findings, imagining possibilities, asking questions, and formulating answers. When children make knowledge their own in these ways, their understanding is deeper, and they can transfer and apply their learning in new contexts (NAEYC, 2012).

Language Development

Once back in the classroom, the children were engaged in literacy activities through many mediums. During group meeting time there are read alouds, shared writing activities, songs, reading of charts, and sharing of ideas that related to their current field trips. In the dramatic play area, children engaged in writing lists, making signs, reading to stuffed animals, and using environmental print to write letters and names. The teachers engaged in intentional planning to provide the experiences their students needed such as exposure to books; rich conversations; experiences in drawing and writing, and pretend play.

The teachers created opportunities for the children to dictate stories and then turned those stories into scripts for the children to act out. The physical role-play continued with the other children's stories. The children's dictated stories became another source of material for read alouds. This practice promoted the children's awareness of themselves as producers of written language. During a committee time the children wrote invitations to community members asking for help to build a stage. This activity enabled the children take action on a decision they had made.



Picture 3: Children enact stories which stem from their imaginations



Picture 4: Using blocks to build a ramp

A small group of children are engaged in performing an impromptu play, while another student worked nearby to build another stage with wooden blocks, experimenting with various features. He created a ramp for easy access and encouraged a peer to try it out. Meanwhile another student worked in the art studio drawing a stage. Each child had opportunity to express their understandings through multiple modalities.

Mathematics

Children use mathematical skills to make sense of their physical and social worlds (Cahill & Theilheimer, 2015; NAEYC, 2009). Research has proven that when academic skills are embedded in play it supports children's dispositions to learn (Hirsh-Pasek & Michnick-Golinkoff, 2014; Katz & Chard, 2000). In this classroom mathematical thinking is incorporated throughout their daily work. This is evident as the teachers explained how they view the development of math skills. "Math comes in with the building in the block area." As children build with blocks they collaborate to count, measure, balance, and design representations of things they experienced on the field trips. Through this process they learned about size, shape, and patterns.



Picture 5: Dramatic play supports mathematical thinking

Children were provided with deep and sustained interactions with key mathematical ideas. They engaged in formal (measuring tape) and informal (their own body) methods of measuring spaces. They used numbers in both single and double digits to represent their findings. As the children helped to bring in the materials into the classroom to build their stage, they began discussing whether they had the right amount of boards thus comparing and identifying total quantity. The teachers instructed the children to line up the boards to create supports for the stage illustrating one-to-one correspondence. These simple and implicit activities all support mathematical thinking in meaningful ways for young children.

Science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) has been a prominent factor in education for several decades but now early childhood education is also included in this emphasis (Christenson & James, 2015). The block center in preschool classrooms is a natural method of engaging children in engineering and design (Wynn & Harris 2013). In the block area, children construct fundamental concepts related to science, engineering, and math as they experiment, observe, and develop inferences based on

these experiences, even if they cannot articulate them. Moomaw (2012) states, “One could almost call the block area a STEM laboratory for young children.” (p. 27). In this classroom the children have opportunities to plan, design, and build in multiple formats.



Picture 6: Engineering a stage

University Campus Provides Context

There were many options for this classroom to explore and study because of the location of the program. During one of their planning sessions, the teachers brainstormed possible site visits. The teachers’ list included the theater department, music department, cinematography department, and the film department. Each of these departments offered contexts that could be further explored and studied with the children in relation to this project.

An additional benefit of being located on a university campus was the free bus transportation. The university bus routes cover the entire campus and which made it possible to explore multiple locations connected to the children’s interests. Language, literacy, and math skills are embedded in the real and interesting world of the children (Cahill and Theilheimer, 2015). On each bus ride the children were taking note of their environment and discussing their observations with their peers and teachers.

The route that was taken for most of the field trips began with a tour around the outside of the campus and along the college of agriculture. *The children’s faces are pressed against the windows of the bus. We pass by a large pond with a stream flowing into it. The children are curious and want to know more about it. Katie wants to know if she can fish in that pond. Gabriel shouts out that he sees a tractor. There are open fields and pens with cows and horses. Several children say we have gone by their houses and Mateo states, “That is where my pop lives.” The children are making connections to the environment around them.*

Children's interests which begin on a bus ride can be the provocation for many projects.

Connecting to the Real World

The teachers reflect on how field trips provide the context for their development of curriculum. "[The children] are going and seeing something with their peers and we are seeing it together and we are extending something from the classroom or are taking it back to the classroom." The teachers view field trips as a way to help children make connections between what they are learning about in the classroom with what they are experiencing out in the world.



Picture 7: Venturing out with friends

Learning Dispositions

Curricula that are developed from children's interests which stem from local investigations can provide authentic experiences by supporting children's natural learning dispositions (Katz & Chard, 2000). The teachers are in agreement that cognitive development is only a piece of what goes into the education of young children. They provide ample opportunities for their students to make friends, create a sense of community, interact socially, and build self-confidence through age-appropriate and developmentally-sound activities that support all of the learning processes. The teachers' primary goal for their students' academic growth is understanding through action rather than acquiring rote knowledge (Dewey, 1916; 1966). They use the "texts of early childhood" (Cuffaro, 1991) such as paint, blocks, music, dramatic role play props, literature, and movement to teach the subject matter in interesting ways. The dramatic roleplay and block areas in this classroom take up the largest space which reflects the

importance of these activities. Subsequently, the teachers design learning experiences that incorporate learning dispositions, knowledge acquisition, and skill development.

Conclusion

The findings from this study produced two dominant threads that were identified from the teachers' lived experiences and field note documentation; (1) community building as a prevailing factor of curriculum and (2) the dynamic interactions among the teachers, children and the curriculum.

Community Building. Community building is foundational to the teachers' philosophy of educating young children. The in-depth interviews and observational field notes of trips, classroom activities, and planning sessions provided evidence that teachers were intentional about creating a caring community that promoted the children's social and emotional development. As noted in the stage building process, children were engaged in collaborative problem-solving by working together to construct a product for the common good of the class. Additionally, the children had ample opportunities to share their opinions and make decisions in the learning process. When young children are engaged in experiences where their voices are heard and acted upon, the self-identity of a competent learner is facilitated and promoted by the teachers (Casper & Theilheimer, 2010; Dewey, 1916/1966; Kohn, 2008; McCann, 2014).

The educators demonstrated a deep awareness of each child's unique characteristics as a means to develop curricula. Based on the relationships the teachers built with their students, the idea of commercialized curricula is considered to be both irrelevant and counterproductive to the process of community building for these teachers. They expressed the belief that curriculum design should not only emerge from children's interests but specifically these children's interests. As discussed by Cahill and Theilheimer (2015), Kohn (2008), and Vascellaro (2011), children need to play a vital role in helping to design the curriculum, think through the possibilities, and take ownership in the learning process. Young children can see that people working together can make a difference.

Dynamic Interactions. Children interacted with the people within their local contexts. Through the Project and the relating field trips the children were introduced to interesting people that could be further sources of curricular Projects. Not only were the children learning from the adults in their environment, but they were learning from their peers as well. The photographs are documentation of some of the children's daily interactions with each other. Growth and learning occur through the relationships children have with teachers, other children, and family and community members (Cahill & Theilheimer, 2015; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Montessori, 1946). Curriculum that centers and builds on human relationships integrates social and cognitive development.

Children interacted with interesting materials. Building blocks, real life tools, open-ended art materials, props in the dramatic role play area, writing materials, measuring instruments, and technology were just some of the materials the children had opportunity

to explore. The children engaged intellectually and emotionally with these materials both as individuals and as a community.

Children interacted with their environment. Each field trip provided the children opportunities to explore their local surroundings. As the teachers and children ventured out around the university campus they were introduced to real-life information that appeared relevant to them. The children made an important discovery about maps and local geography. These interactions provided spaces for children to strengthen their confidence in understanding their environment (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012; McCann, 2014; Montessori, 1946; Vascellaro, 2011).

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