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Language Activities in Pre-kindergarten

Cathy O'Berry Edington

I plan language activities for my Young-Five classroom before school even begins in the fall. About two weeks before school starts, I mail each student an invitation to bring his or her favorite teddy bear on the first day. Besides the added comfort of having a familiar "bear buddy" with them in a new environment, my purpose is to have the children find some commonalities with their classmates.

The "buddy" is often held tightly in arms until the initial shyness abates. Kids compare each other's bears and discover that the other children (and their bears) are alike, different, larger, smaller, older, newer, etc. than their own. The discovery process affords the children common ground to talk about and creates a safe, comfortable place where they can begin to get to know each other. Soon the conversations turn to other topics, and the kids are willing to loosen their grip on the buddy. Before too long, the bears are left behind as the children become accustomed to each other, the classroom, and, I suppose, the teacher.

One of the biggest challenges at the beginning of the school year is to encourage each child to communicate. The children are four- or five-years old and have been enrolled in the program either on parent request or through a screening process that looks for kindergarten readiness. Placement is not determined by academic or intellectual skills. An important aspect of the screen is the

child's communication ability. Those that readily speak to the screener tend to score better on the test; this signifies social aptitude rather than just "smartness." The children that score lower on the screening are placed in the Young-Five program, where we try to encourage the social skills that the child will need for a successful school experience.

Pre-writing activities in the developmental pre-K class fit with these goals. One early means of fostering communication is to have the child begin with a drawing or painting that he/she has created, and then prompting a conversation about the artwork. Most children are excited about explaining their creations. Even if the piece seems to be a shapeless form, the artist knows exactly what it represents. I print their dictation, which they now see as a story about their art. The child sees that words have meaning and that his/her own words have importance. Later the children may "write" their own stories using playwriting or invented spelling, and I have the option of including my interpretations depending on the intended use. If the project is going to be posted in the hallway, for example, I usually choose to translate for the benefit of those not as familiar with very beginning children's writing and artwork.

A language activity we include at Thanksgiving time is to have the child dictate the directions for making a turkey dinner. This is quite enter-

taining, and the parents love it, although the recipes are not always appetizing. One young chef directed me to "get a turkey at a farm, then put it right in a big pan on the stove for thirteen minutes. Then serve it with tacos for us kids who won't eat turkey."

Frequently we create class charts about varying subjects, from science (What do we know about air?) to social studies (Where did I visit?) to circle activities (My favorite _____ is...). Each child is invited to contribute and is then listed on the chart. They wait eagerly for their turns, and enjoy "reading" each other's responses. During free times I often observe the children pointing to the charts and remembering who said he/she liked the snakes, or who liked the frogs the best. They are practicing language and connecting symbols (letters), and thus words, with meanings.

Another language activity involves the many songs that we incorporate in our daily routine. Once the class has been introduced to a song, I print the lyrics on big-chart paper. Sometimes I include pictures or graphics with the appropriate words to keep everyone together. "You are My Sunshine," for instance, has little smiley sunshine-faces at the appropriate spots. The kids especially like the part that goes "...you'll never know dear..." because I drew a deer. We talk about different words that sound alike (dear, deer) because, of course, they don't know the proper spelling. They do know that we don't really mean a forest animal, and they think it's funny. It helps them to remember the lyrics. They are free to visit the song-chart at center time and free time to read and sing along with the words. The repetition and reinforcement enhances their language experiences.

Visual displays are another reinforcement. We work together to create a bulletin board entitled "Words We Can Read." The children bring

logos or magazine pictures or actual grocery items that they can recognize to be placed on the wall. Some bring cereal boxes, others wrappers. They are so anxious to read and are sometimes disappointed when they haven't learned reading and writing by the first week of school. To those who persist, I explain that when they learned to walk, they took baby steps. When they begin to learn to read, they have to start with small steps like recognizing letters and words. These types of activities show the youngsters that they can indeed "read" some of the packages and symbols around us; recognition and differentiation are first step to achieving their goal.

One of my goals for these Young-Five students is for each of them to recognize that words are a means of communicating their thoughts and ideas, and that those ideas matter. It matters in assessment, since listening to the child's stories tell me so much more about what he/she knows than any standardized test could. It matters that the child can create and share; five-year-olds are so egocentric and love the spotlight. It matters that the "at-risk" kids, all kids, get the individual attention that language activities afford. Certainly not the least way that the communication of ideas matters is that the child's self-esteem can only be bolstered by the accomplishment of the writing process, even on such a rudimentary scale.

When I compare the child of September, clutching the "bear buddy" and too shy to speak to anyone in the room to the confident, communicative child of June, I have the satisfaction of knowing that these types of language activities matter in the education of the very young.