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Literature extension activities: Connecting with careers in primary grade classrooms

The second-grade teacher was reading aloud from a brightly-colored book, **If You Give a Mouse a Cookie** (Numeroff, 1985). In this story, a boy's decision to share his snack with a mouse created a chain of on-going aftereffects. "What do you think the boy will do next?" the teacher asked.

There were several suggestions-that the tired boy should take a nap, go out to purchase more cookies, or clean up the kitchen "before his mom sees that mess." The teacher extended the conversation to decisions children sometimes make and the good or bad consequences that may follow, then helped the class understand that adult decisions have far-reaching outcomes as well. After a lively discussion, the children began writing about what might happen if the mouse tried to help them with their homework. Later they would make finger puppets and share their stories through dramatization.

This well-constructed lesson included all of the arts of language. The children were engaged in the topic, the conversation was productive, and the activities nicely extended the story. However, the teacher had an additional objective that did not center on language or literacy. The emphasis on decision making and related consequences also supported career education goals.

CAREER GUIDANCE FOR THE PRIMARY GRADES

Experts suggest that the next few decades will be marked by significant changes in "The World of

Work" (Secretary's Commission, 1991). Blue-collar occupations, once an economic mainstay, will be replaced by service sector jobs that draw on very different skills (Rifkin, 1997). Educators will then face the monumental task of preparing children for a future that has little resemblance to society's current ideas about work. Because young adults must make important choices about their futures, career guidance has long been part of the middle- and high-school curriculum. However, life-shaping decisions are not made quickly, and in fact, many adults can trace their career choices to favorite childhood activities. Therefore, it makes sense to begin career guidance in the primary grades (Jalongo, 1989).

Elementary school career guidance is framed by significant questions about "The World of Work." These may be organized under five broad themes:

- 1) **Information:** What is the range of careers available? What qualifications, duties, and working conditions are related to specific jobs?
- 2) **Self-awareness:** What talents and abilities does each child possess, and how can those attributes translate into suitable careers in adulthood?
- 3) **Good habits and attitudes:** Which habits and attitudes foster success in school, and how will they be important for career success in later life?
- 4) **Equity issues:** Why should career potential not be limited by gender, age, race, ethnicity,

or physical disability? What does “equal employment opportunity” mean?

- 5) **Competencies:** How is success in school and in the workplace affected by academic competencies and work-related skills (e.g. teamwork, communication, creativity, decision making, conflict resolution)?

These five themes are interrelated. Children grow in understanding of equity issues, for example, as they gather information on other topics (i.e. a child reading about the arts may learn that both men and women dance in ballet performances). Therefore, a given lesson might address more than one theme.

Literacy and other academic competencies translate into fundamental workplace skills, but preparing for a successful career requires more than isolated proficiencies. Children must use those skills to synthesize and apply information from all subject areas (Secretary’s Commission, 1991). It follows that career guidance should be integrated across the curriculum (Starr, 1996). Many career goals center on attitudes and feelings rather than on information alone, so children need opportunities to respond in ways that include affective as well as cognitive dimensions (Parker & Jarolimek, 1997). Because literature incorporates both, it is an excellent vehicle for teaching about careers.

SELECTING LITERATURE THAT SUPPORTS CAREER GUIDANCE

Teachers should select career-related books with the same care they use in making other literature choices. They should look for selections that stand on their own merits with respect to literary quality and illustrations, while representing a variety of genres. A good choice can also sustain content area instruction by answering questions even as it engenders new ones (Hancock, 2000). Because “The World of Work” permeates every subject area, teachers will find that many books they already use for other purposes will also support the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, and skills about careers.

Like all children’s literature, books that support career instruction may be judged according to certain literary elements. A fictional work needs a well-organized plot that evolves logically; credible and engaging characters; and an effective setting to frame the story in time and place, mood and symbolism (Huck, Hepler, Hickman, & Kiefer, 1997). Accuracy, authenticity, and adequacy of the content coverage are hallmarks of quality infor-

mational books (Huck et al., 1997). Accuracy demands that career images be current, so teachers must screen books for outdated portrayals, especially of race and gender.

Use of multiple genres is advisable. Teachers may believe the “real world” nature of careers dictates a focus on nonfiction. However, although information books are especially appropriate to extend children’s knowledge, fictional works also enhance comprehension of abstract ideas and clarify complex issues by providing necessary context. As children find personal relevance in identifying with the characters’ actions and interactions, knowledge is acquired in meaningful ways (Smith & Johnson, 1994).

Combining selections from multiple genres is effective in helping children to build strong concepts (Camp, 2000). For example, a teacher might introduce the topic of communication with the photographic essay **Handtalk School** (Miller & Ancona, 1991), then read **Dear Juno** (Pak, 1999), the story of a child who “reads” his grandmother’s letter (written in Korean) by examining the photograph and artifact enclosed. Each book emphasizes nonverbal communication - the former through American sign language finger spelling, the latter through analysis of context clues. Together, they show that different communication forms are both valid and necessary. “While the nonfiction book answers questions in a more straightforward manner, the story structure of a fiction book may be less difficult for children to comprehend” (Camp, 2000, p. 400). It is important to note that although these books do not focus on occupations, they still support career education by clarifying a work-related skill (communication).

Literature for young children generally has illustrations. Selections range from wordless books, which rely on pictures alone to convey the meaning, to picture story books, with interdependent visual and verbal representations that must work together to tell the story (Huck et al., 1997). Because pictures furnish content that contributes significantly to children’s knowledge constructions, the quality of the illustrations is important. They must be accurate and unbiased, depicting both males and females from all races and cultures in a variety of careers. Illustrations that are visually attractive will enhance children’s enjoyment, potentially increasing time spent with the text.

When selecting literature that sustains career guidance, teachers should first look for “good books” - those that touch children’s lives by aug-

menting familiar experiences, those that extend experience by suggesting new possibilities, and those that help children to identify their personal roles within those potentialities (Giorgis et al., 2000). What children read should be personally important to them on either a cognitive or affective level, or both. Books that also support one of the five career guidance themes can go beyond language and literacy objectives to encourage development of work-readiness.

In many classrooms, children's literature replaces basal readers and provides the foundation for reading instruction. One tenet of such literature-based programs is that children select their own reading materials (Hancock, 2000), and this is also consistent with developmentally appropriate career education. Even when young readers choose their own books, teachers may continue to support career education goals in two ways.

First, they can fill their classrooms with career-related books that cross multiple genres and appeal to a range of interests and ability levels. The best choices are suitable for both boys and girls. Fair representation of all cultures and socioeconomic levels in the literature will help overcome suggestions of a "hidden" curriculum that slots children into preconceived career tracks (Anyon, 1980). Teachers should include texts that are appropriate for children with limited knowledge of careers, as well as more challenging books for those whose concepts are more fully developed. "The key is the realization that literature is a powerful tool for learning and that students bring a variety of experiences and perceptions to their reading" (Smith & Johnson, 1994, p. 208).

It is important to remember that many books are appropriate for primary-grade career education, including some that at first glance may seem unrelated to the topic. For example, **Weslandia** (Fleischman, 1999) is a fantasy about an inventive nonconformist. It also points out that everyone is uniquely talented (self-awareness) and that no one should be judged by appearance alone (equity issues). **Flossie and the Fox** (McKissack, 1986) becomes more than an amusing folk tale by highlighting the value of problem solving and creativity (work-related competencies). **Stone girl, bone girl: The story of Mary Anning** (Anholt, 1999) is the biography of a girl who discovered dinosaur fossils. This book goes beyond providing information by framing Mary's accomplishment in determination and persistence (good habits and attitudes).

Teachers also support career guidance by

reading aloud from books that heighten children's awareness about "The World of Work." Youngsters who are not fluent readers can build concepts by connecting what they hear to what they already know (Richardson, 1988). Approaching career awareness through literature significantly increases the time currently spent on the topic. Literature is included many times each day - as the primary medium for literacy learning, as a support for content area instruction, and as the source of pure enjoyment. Children delight in its use and are likely to attend more carefully to lessons that involve an interesting book. In addition, because children sometimes self-select books that have already been read aloud (Fresch, 1995), career topics may be reinforced if youngsters reread teacher-selected texts. Table 1 (see next page) lists appropriate selections for the five early childhood career guidance themes, together with extension activities.

NEXT STEPS: GOING BEYOND THE TEXT

Just hearing or reading a story does not in itself promote the acquisition of work-related knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Each child still needs to make some personal connection to his or her own life. Without that personal connection, literature remains little more than a summary of someone else's experience. The story may offer wisdom, but that wisdom is not internalized. Literature extension activities promote both literacy learning and the acquisition of career knowledge, attitudes, and skills in several ways.

The following paragraphs describe examples from real classrooms.

First, extension activities help young learners to consolidate their knowledge. When leading an open-ended conversation about a book, the teacher helps the students to uncover abstract concepts and subtle themes. This guided discussion enables children to take ownership of the concepts set forth in the text. Planned experiences inform creative response, inspiring performance or product, and prompting in turn a reconceptualization of existing ideas. As an example, a teacher who read **Stone Soup** (Brown, 1947) to her first-grade class found that the children better understood the value of interdependence after they brought vegetables from home and cooperatively prepared a pot of soup. In the discussion that followed, the class related their experience to the work of fast-food cooks who create a complete meal in minutes by working together.

Secondly, egocentric perspectives are chal-

Table 1. Connecting Literature and Extensions for Primary Grade Career Guidance

Theme	Appropriate Selections	Extension Activities
Information	<p>The Almond Orchard - Coats Fire Fighters - Maass Jobs People Do - Maynard My Mom’s a Vet - Horenstein</p>	<p>Research automation via Internet Tour a community work site Interview school workers Survey adults about their jobs</p>
<p>Connections: All of the books listed above provide children with data about careers, and the extensions also build competence in the effective gathering and use of information.</p>		
Self-awareness	<p>Chicken Man - Edwards Evan’s Corner - Hill Matthew’s Dream - Lionni Pig Pig Gets a Job - McPhail</p>	<p>Dress dolls to show career choice Collect items of personal meaning Design their own “dream jobs” Link parents’ jobs to early talents</p>
<p>Connections: Dramatic play with dolls lets children “try out” careers. Collecting favorite items or designing an ideal job helps them focus on what they enjoy and do well, while parents’ experiences offer real-life examples.</p>		
Habits/attitudes	<p>A Day’s Work - Bunting Lyle at the Office - Waber Galimoto - Williams The Paperboy - Pilkey</p>	<p>Dramatize familiar fables Create an “office” play center Invent new toys from recyclables Map a neighborhood paper route</p>
<p>Connections: Children may find positive work habits in fables, demonstrate such habits in dramatic play, or emulate good qualities of story characters (e.g. prudently recycling found items, efficiently preplanning a route).</p>		
Equity issues	<p>Amazing Grace - Hoffman Mama Is a Miner - Lyon Oliver Button Is a Sissy - dePaola Sing to the Stars - Barrett</p>	<p>Debate gender-related job issues Brainstorm nontraditional jobs Sample hobbies that others enjoy Examine augmentative devices</p>
<p>Connections: Group discussion and brainstorming activities allow children to build on others’ ideas. Trying pastimes their friends enjoy or seeing devices that mitigate disability can broaden children’s ideas about possibilities.</p>		
Competencies	<p>Drummer Hoff - Emberley Frank and Ernest - Day New Shoes for Silvia - Hurwitz Seven Blind Mice - Young</p>	<p>Simulate a fast-food assembly line Web families’ work-related words Generate creative uses for objects Role play multiple perspectives</p>
<p>Connections: Competencies build on prior knowledge of ordinary tasks (teamwork), family terminology (communications), familiar objects (creativity), everyday problems (decision making, conflict resolution), and the like.</p>		
<p>NOTE: Many of these books can be used with multiple themes. For example, Galimoto extends concepts about creativity and problem-solving as well as positive work habits. Career guidance themes are interrelated, so exploring multiple themes is appropriate.</p>		

lenged and broadened through response to literature, helping children to realize the validity of views other than their own. Many work-related issues are multifaceted and may sound quite different depending on whose viewpoint is highlighted. An example is the question of who may do nontraditional jobs. Could a man be a nurse or a woman build skyscrapers? Such issues are not easily grasped only by reading the text. However, oral reflection and related experiential activity can help primary graders see problems from more than one viewpoint and make sense of inconsistencies (Parker & Jarolimek, 1997). Thus, when second-graders were unsure whether a boy should take ballet lessons (as suggested in **Max**, Isadora, 1976), a discussion of their own likes and dislikes helped them to see that preferences and talents need not be tied to gender. Ideas were strengthened, and misconceptions challenged, when the teacher set up stations where boys and girls alike sampled career roles such as hair design and carpentry, roles the children had previously viewed as gender related.

Third, extension activities can be valuable assessment tools (Hancock, 2000) for both literacy and career guidance objectives. Children reveal current understandings in their interpretive representations of literature experiences. Those whose reading skills are still emerging, as well as those who do not “test well,” may still demonstrate their comprehension of the material in many valid ways. For instance, second-graders who attended to plot detail and character nuances when listening to **You Are Special** (Lucado, 1997) were able to reenact the story, using props. The teacher evaluated students’ emerging concepts of equity issues in a follow-up discussion about judging people on appearance alone and whether that should determine occupational opportunities.

Typically, teachers plan a variety of activities to extend children’s experiences with literature, increasing academic competencies in the process. Children may gain skill in writing, for example, by creating a poem derived from informational text or by composing a new ending for a work of fiction. Although developing academic skills is indeed a component of work-readiness, it is concrete activity that best supports career instruction in early childhood (Harkins, 2000; Jalongo, 1989).

When ranked from most concrete to most abstract, experiences may be described as direct, simulated, vicarious, visual, or verbal (Roberts et al., 1996). Experts advocate using activities that

are as concrete as possible, especially with young children (Jalongo, 1989; Roberts et al., 1996). Direct, simulated, and vicarious experiences lend themselves to the integration of multiple subjects, as is consistent with recommendations for career guidance (Jalongo, 1989; Parker & Jarolimek, 1997; Secretary’s Commission, 1991). By drawing on perceptions from multiple senses, concrete experiences engage the mind along with the hands and are more effective in building concepts. They are also more like real life, providing an especially suitable context for studying “The World of Work.”

Extension activities that most effectively help children learn about occupations are built on concrete experiences. Additionally, they are logical extensions of the text, encouraging the integration of new and previously-known information through some purposeful application of newly-constructed concepts. Content knowledge and academic skills are still very important, but they are not acquired through drills and worksheets. Rather, they are situated in the contextualized activity, so that information is acquired through its use (Secretary’s Commission, 1991).

For example, second-graders who enjoyed **The Signmaker’s Assistant** (Arnold, 1992) extended their understanding of the story by making signs of their own. They first discussed the kinds of environmental signs found in their classroom, the school, and the larger community. Because each child was to make one “silly” sign and one that was “helpful,” they had to call on social conventional knowledge of what might be appropriate in each case. They also practiced spelling, grammar, and handwriting skills. Later, the children “played out” the story when their teacher helped them to hang the finished signs throughout the school building.

Ideally, experiential activity flows from literature, then leads children back to it once more. Playing the roles of the signmaker and his assistant could easily engender questions about related occupations or other modes of communication. Children might then want to read about illustrators (e.g. **From Pictures to Words**, Stevens, 1995) or practice writing letters of their own (e.g. **Messages in the Mailbox: How to Write a Letter**, Leedy, 1991). “Inquiry-based learning often begins with literature and exposure to a single title, but continues on an adventure of connections among books” (Short, cited in Hancock, 2000, p. 8). Teachers who provide a print-rich environment with many appropriate choices are helping children to move toward becoming lifelong readers,

and by extension, lifelong learners.

CONCLUSION

Educators of young children can begin implementing career guidance lessons in the simplest way possible - by stocking the classroom library with many good selections and by reading aloud from quality books. Literature supplies the all-important context that helps children make connections between their own world and the someday realm of adulthood. Group discussions scaffold concept development, and literature extension activities take children a step beyond the book to let them interact with the text in a tangible way.

Young learners who are immersed in exciting career-related experiences will also improve their language and literacy skills even as they are doing surveys, conducting interviews, participating in simulations, or searching child-friendly Internet sites for information. Knowledge acquisition embedded in activity is not unlike the on-site training which adults must frequently undergo to stay current in their fields of endeavor. In this way, learning while doing prepares children for the workplace roles they will play in the future.

No one can predict what directions young children may pursue when they reach adulthood. What is certain is that every child deserves the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that are needed to make an informed career choice, get a job, and do that job successfully. That will not happen unless teachers deliberately plan activities that will expose children to the right experiences. One way in which teachers can provide those experiences is by choosing and using literature that helps children to connect with careers.

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INTERNET SITES

THAT MAY INTEREST CHILDREN

<http://www.discovery.com/exp/rollercoasters/build.html/> (Build your own rollercoaster)

<http://www.dusklight.com/aesop/> (Read Aesop's fables online)

<http://www.kidsmoney.org> (Click on several areas to get advice and information about jobs children can do)

http://www.yahooligans.com/Science_and_Nature/Careers/ (Learn about careers in science and nature)