

History Invades the Preschool Classroom

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Abstract: Young children in a university nursery school engaged in a personal history project. Even with obvious developmental limitations to understanding past events, young children investigated occurrences of the past related to their families. The concepts of centration, reversibility, and transductive thinking impact the cognitive thinking of the young child and certainly present a limitation in young children's study of history in the typical manner. However, accounting for these limitations of a young child's thinking, it is important to understand and respond to their capabilities. With this in mind, a simple pictorial family tree was designed and completed by parents. The tree listed only immediate family members as far as the great great grandparents. Interesting tidbits about the family member were included and used to entice the children in their personal study. The results of the project were multifaceted with the engagement of not only children but family members.

Key words: early childhood, project, history

1. Introduction

Imagine, a young child talking to another child on the preschool playground about how the computer his grandfather used was as large as the school. Using the personal information provided by his parents about his grandfather, the teacher helped Sam visualize the size of the large computer of the early 1970's by using yarn the same length as the circumference of the computer. This piece of yarn became part of Sam's personal history scrapbook along with notations he dictated about his grandfather's work. This example comes from the early childhood teacher's endeavor to help children develop an interest in history but not just history as the study of past events but rather their personal history. With this method of discovering bits and pieces of a child's heritage, teachers can expand the child's thinking about history in a personal way. Social history is very relevant for young children.

2. Young Children's Conceptual Capabilities in Relation to History

It is important to consider a young child's conceptual framework that influences their ability to understand past events (Sunal & Warash, 1987). Borrowing from Piaget's theory (1970), centration, reversibility, and transductive logic affect the child's full understanding of events and temporal perspective which impacts the child's ability to understand history. Centration is the focus of one feature of a situation to the exclusion of all others with a child's focal point on an obvious part instead of the entire circumstances (Ginsburg & Oppen, 1979). Reversibility is the capacity to mentally compare the transformed appearance of a given quantity of matter to it is

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original shape (Piaget, 1970). Children often have a tough time retracing steps and thinking of events that occur one before the other. Transductive thinking is the child's assumption that cause and effect is based on the temporal relationship between two events (Ginsburg & Oppen, 1979). Preschoolers are more limited than older children in these cognitive functions even though some theorists say young children are more advanced than Piaget originally stated, especially when tasks and events occur with familiar elements (Berk, 2009). These concepts of centration, reversibility, and transductive thinking impact the cognitive thinking of the young child and certainly present a limitation in children's study of history in the typical manner. Just as it is important to understand the limitations of a young child's thinking, it is important to understand their capabilities. Preschoolers talk about yesterday, today and tomorrow and often say things like, "I am going to grandmas after dinner and in three 'sleeps'." This illustrates their understanding of sequential events that occur and makes sense to them because it is stated more concretely and in terms of their experiences. Young children are also beginning to order important holidays such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, personal birthdays, and Christmas.

It is during the preschool years that children expand their mental representations, logic and reasoning skills (Copple, 2012). Development is enhanced by giving young children first hand experiences so they can comprehend concepts (Piaget, 1970). Vygotsky (1978) believed children construct an understanding of concepts through the interaction they have with others. As a teacher understands the child's current level of thinking, they can engage children in appropriate experiences and interactions. This affords teachers the opportunity to scaffold children's thinking and assist them in making connections. With that said, the teachers of the Pre-K classroom were interested in helping children to discover their personal history by making it relevant to their individual family experiences.

3. Development of the Pre-K History Project

In developing the personal history project, the teacher took in account children's developmental level and planned accordingly. Even with obvious developmental limitations to understanding past events, young children have an interest in the past. What child does not like to listen to a parent or grandparent talk about events that happened when they were young? Young children especially have an interest in activities centered on adults who are important to them. They often find it intriguing that a parent or grandparent was actually little like them and yet did things differently. Statements from a parent or grandparent such as, "When I was little I used to play a game called kick the can. We stayed outside until the street lights came on and then I knew it was time to go inside." This engagement in conversing of occurrences of yesterday is a mechanism to build interest in family events and to begin the path for a child to learn his/her personal family history. The consequence of these initial conversations is that they soon lead to additional discussions of pertinent events. The cycle has begun.

Because children concentrate on one part of an event we decided to have them look at one segment of their personal family tree that the parents were asked to complete. This way, children were not overwhelmed with numerous family names and how they were related but rather they focused on one or two family members and their fame to the family lineage. Once the parents completed the family tree, which included tidbits and interesting facts, the teacher reviewed their family tree individually with the child. The tree only included names of parents, grandparents and great grandparents along with such information as occupations, awards, interests and any association to famous individuals. After reviewing, the child decided the family member(s) he/she wanted to study. For example, Doris wanted to know more about her great great grandmother who operated a candy store in New

York City, but she was also interested in a great grandfather who was responsible for the first hospital in town. Both of these individuals were fascinating to her. Doris and the teacher used the IPAD to find a picture of the candy store on the web. Doris saw pictures of the assembly line of female employees and the front of the store. We discovered her grandfather made the chocolates and her grandmother was in charge of selling them in the store. This picture was added to her personal history scrapbook, along with her dictated notes.

4. Steps of the Project

We created a very simple family tree that only included the parents, grandparents, and great grandparents and, in some cases, great great grandparents. We sent a letter to parents stating that the four- year-old class was embarking on a new project that required a commitment from parents and children. If parents and children agreed to participate, they both signed the contract. Parents were given the blank family tree to complete (see picture 1). The history project was an optional one suited for children who had an interest in past events. There were plenty of other projects going on at the same time that children could engage in if they did not want to partake in the history project. We did not anticipate a 100% participation level but had 11 of the 18 children engaged in this project. The remaining seven children often assisted their friends on some of their projects.

Once parent and children signed the agreement form we explained to parents that we were looking for occupations and interesting tidbits of the family lineage for children to investigate. This could also include just about anything related to the family such as customs, celebrations, family recipes etc. Their investigations and dictations of their family members would be included in the child's individualized personal history scrapbook. These were photo albums that the child helped to develop by putting replicas, pictures, and dictated information. The information from the family trees had the potential to branch into other activities such as learning about occupations, other countries etc. In the letter to parents the teacher gave the example of a former child who attended the nursery school whose great grandpa and grandma came to Ellis Island on the boat from Italy. This could possibly lead to this child's personal study of ships, trunks, Ellis Island, etc. It was noted to parents, that children would review the family tree with the teacher. The teacher would take the child's dictated notes on the family tree, highlighting tidbits and occupations the child wanted to further explore in learning about their family member. These roles were read back to the child each time the project was revisited.

5. Children's Area of Focus

This year long project was completed during the children's free play time. Children could choose to work on their history project for their desired length of time. The list of personal history projects varied but included: a grandfather who was a police chief of a university town, a great grandfather who owned the first dairy queen in town, a great grandfather who designed airplanes in World War II, a grandmother who played violin and piano, a grandfather who operated a dairy and ice cream parlor, a great grandfather who drove a tank in General Patton's army, a great grandfather who operated a candy store in New York City, great grandparents who were Texas gardeners, a grandfather who was a computer programmer, a great grandfather who was a pilot and a great grandmother, descendent to of Teddy Roosevelt, who traveled the world in a truck. Children and the teacher worked individually during choice time. Some children worked in pairs when their interests were similar. IPADS/computers were used to research some of the occupations and material items as a result of the occupation. Children generated questions and drew pictures. Once a child identified a family member that they wanted to

study, the child and teacher wrote a letter to their parents to identify their choice(s), the child's interest in the family member and what they have learned to date. The teacher took the dictations from the child for the letter. This was done so parents could elaborate on the family member and provide additional information on family traditions and customs that pertained to this family member. Parents were also asked for any mementos or artifacts that their child could use for Pre-K museum on personal history. For example, Ogden's parents indicated that his grandmother gave him a violin. He could share this with the class in the museum. As far as traditions, Ogden's grandmother taught the family how to make Italian meatballs and each Christmas they decorated sugar cookies together. All of this information became part of the child's scrapbook. Children engaged in their personal study of their family member in various ways. One child made a replica of an army tank; several used information to write a play, one made a police car which included a training book. The children who were involved in ice cream studies made replicas of the types of sundaes served in the shops. All of the children were involved in some type of three dimensional activities.

6. Greg's Study of Grandpa Sam

Greg chose to study his grandpa Sam, a well known business man in the area who recently passed. Studying his grandfather was a way of bringing tribute to him. Greg's family line is from Italy (by way of Ellis Island) so the family was well grounded in Italian heritage. In previous semesters, teachers would often ask Greg if he had any of his pop pop's homemade pasta. It was a well-known fact that Greg's grandfather had an elaborate pasta system set-up in his basement. Greg's interest was in his grandpa's dairy and ice cream store that closed many years ago. Typically, the teacher works with the child individually researching the topic but sometimes a child's topic becomes the interest of the entire group. When the teacher found a short video on a dairy farm, all the children wanted to watch. Most surprising to them was that milk and ice cream was not manufactured in the grocery store. This study trickled to other children's interest not only because it was dairy and ice cream but because another child in the classroom had their roots in "ice cream". Andy was studying his great grandpa who operated the local Dairy Queen since its beginning. A little competition began. Greg told his friends that his grandpa had an ice cream that was butterscotch and it was yellow. Andy said his great grandpa had butterscotch, too, and the teacher asked if it was a topping or ice cream. This distinction was made. Greg decided to do a play about his grandpa's ice cream parlor. The book, *Curious George Goes to an Ice Cream Shop*, was read to Greg and the class so he could have a basis to write his play. Greg's parents brought in some of the original equipment from the ice cream parlor. This included old milk cans, gallon glass jugs, aprons, menus, various ice cream dishes and original photos from the parlor etc. We knew this would be a popular project. Greg and all his classmates participated in the re-enactment of the ice cream store. Some children were customers while others were workers behind the counters. Simple props were created to supplement the donated items. Greg's entire family came to watch the five minute reenactment of the ice cream store.

7. Benefits of Doing a History Project

One benefit that caught us by surprise was the reaction of the parents to the project. Several of the parents commented on facts they learned things about their family members they did not know. One parent discovered something about his own father that he never knew. Many parents said this was an eye opener to details and information that they were not aware of. One parent was quoted as saying:

When we lived in New York City, I worked as a television producer on a variety of shows. One of shows that I worked on was called *Headliners and Legends with Matt Lauer*. It was a biographical series, focusing mainly on celebrities. One of the most enjoyable parts of the job was researching and digging to find rare footage, photos, or interviews that (hopefully) had never been seen before. Prior to Doris's pre-k project, I had never really dug into my own family's history. Once Doris and I started researching our family, we (I) sort of couldn't stop. Family members shared stories with us, and we began collecting old photos, documents and memorabilia. What we have ended up with is not only a very cool school project, but a meaningful keepsake for Doris and her brother to have forever.

The idea of children choosing the family member to learn about was giving them a choice to decide their own course of study. We have found success in this independence from previous work at the preschool (Warash, Smith, & Root, 2011). The aspect that children independently picked their topic and worked together was significant in building relationship based on the theme rather than playing with their usual "buddies". Children often initiated working with each other. For example, Carmen was making an army tank from the information he and the teacher read from a computer search. Carmen was interested in how the tank worked. He was making a replica using a box. Another child not doing a history project became interested in the tank, and the two boys became engaged in building and painting the tank. This type of affiliation with each other's projects was common.

8. Personal Presentation and the History Museum

Towards the end of the history project, children brought in relevant artifacts from their families (quilts, hats, tools, pictures, recipes) to display in the school museum. Greg's family provided ice cream and toppings so children could make their own sundaes. He decided to have his own challenge cone and named it "the Greg Challenge". He had posters from the store and wore an apron from the family business. Next to him was Andy's display of the local Dairy Queen that has been handed down to family members. Doris set up a candy shop with various candies for the children to sample. The pictures of the original store were in the background. With help from the teachers, children verbalized what they learned about their heritage to visitors on the museum day. The entire College was invited and helped the children celebrate their accomplishments. Children presented to each other their ancestry using their albums and artifacts for reference. The children made a formal program of events to invite parents, faculty members and other guests. What started out as simple project escalated to one that included many players from several generations.

9. Conclusion

Personal history for a young child is meaningful and the advantages of doing such a project are numerous. In the current activity, children not only learned a preponderance of literacy and social skills, they learned about a specific family member and were involved in making decisions and researching events of the past that were associated with the family member they chose. Children were encouraged to plan and reflect on what they were learning. They investigated and assimilated the information in their albums. They learned to make a presentation to their peers and later to other adults when they participated in history museum. Presenting helped children to further connect their ideas and gain confidence as a master of their personal history. The side benefit of this entire project was the family involvement that coincided with the child's interest. This was extremely reinforcing to children. Parents have reported they have continued their family studies at home and this initial preschool experience has given their children a foundation on which to build upon.

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