In all settings that strive to nurture small hands and great minds, teachers are faced with a multitude of challenges that are rarely fully understood without contemplation. Reflection upon a three-month investigation of heroes by two team teachers in Concordia University’s full-day preschool program, a university resource librarian, a preschool class, and numerous university teacher candidates has provided a rich source of ongoing learning for all.

A recent move to a newly constructed Early Childhood Center (ECC) brought the teachers, families, community, and university enormous benefits. ECC’s original home (the vision of Shirley Morgenthaler, chair of Concordia’s Teacher Education Department) was in the lower level of one of Concordia’s hallowed halls, an area sometimes prone to flooding. In 2002, with the building of the Walter and Maxine Christopher Center for Learning and Leadership, the early childhood program doubled in capacity and sparked a renewed commitment to the quality training of early childhood educators and young children. The Christopher Center is also home to the Department of Teacher Education as well as a newly created resource center/library for teacher education that houses the curriculum and juvenile literature collections.

Accompanying these benefits were new challenges for ECC, one being increased student capacity. Now we were able to accommodate seventeen children, three through five years of age, from a wider range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. My team teacher, Jill Herlien Novak, and I welcomed responsibility for nurturing their cognitive and social growth when the start of the year brought us widely diverse children with an amazing array of personalities and backgrounds.

At the start of the school year the classroom dynamics concerned both teachers. A number of factors provided a rich diversity among the group. Not every student spoke the same language. In one case, there was very little language at all. The inability to communicate produced widespread strain among both boys and girls. Furthermore, the range in ages seemed to produce a hierarchy of power that did not benefit even the most socially skilled. Finally, the level of physical activity among the boys was ever present. Early childhood research recognizes that boys may be developmentally younger than girls and require more physical activity than girls. However, when a communication conflict arose, physical activity turned to physical aggression. Reflective problem solving was especially difficult for the boys, and the effect seemed to channel into difficulty for the girls as well.

For the first several weeks of school there were constant eruptions among the boys. They engaged in unremitting sword making throughout the day, using every imaginable material. They hit each other and chased the girls. The girls screamed, cried, and then proceeded to make their own swords. We used every strategy in our professional repertoire—stimulating activities, redirecting energy, banning weapons, designing small-group activities, and endless discussion of problem-solving scenarios during morning meetings. The children made more swords. The sword fighting was winning! At this point, we recognized our challenge, and reassessed the availability of resources. They included the Concordia University Resource Center, a very...
patient and knowledgeable librarian, Jan Bakker, and, of course, the children themselves.

ECC’s mission and philosophy includes developing students’ cognitive and social skills while providing quality, hands-on training to teacher candidates enrolled in the teacher education program at Concordia. Our move to larger quarters fueled our determination to thoroughly integrate the center’s constructivist theories and practices with the curriculum and with the teacher candidates’ experiences. Thus we developed the Hero Project, a curriculum committed to an understanding of relationships and using the riches of the resource center for an in-depth investigation. Project objectives included guiding our students to become a more cohesive unit, improving their communication and problem-solving skills, and promoting a stimulating learning environment around curricular areas. The literature-rich project resulted in phenomenal experiences and affected many learning domains as the children explored their findings about heroes in the library.

Constructivist philosophy stems from the works of a variety of philosophers, researchers, and educators, including Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Kamii, Devries, Malaguzzi, Gardner, and Katz. Constructivist teaching is supported by a framework that focuses upon a child’s interaction with his or her environment in the pursuit of developmental, cognitive, social, and emotional growth. According to the constructivist philosophy, supportive relationships among children, their peers, and adults are critical for positive growth. Real experiences coupled with child-initiated research are integral practices of constructivist-based approaches, such as Reggio Emilia and The Project Approach. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) regards such practices as developmentally appropriate practices (DAP). In order to thoroughly adopt constructivist teaching, all Concordia early childhood teachers participated in a graduate-level curriculum course during the semester that our new facilities opened. This class strengthened our ability to channel high-energy chaos toward improving social relationships, engaging learning, and acquiring measurable skills in a variety of domains and subject areas each day.

Initially the classroom’s team teachers were wary of the Hero Project—after all, would you undertake a project that began with sword making when that was a key part of the problem to begin with? True to the DAP training, one of our first planned activities was a visit from our university computer consultant, Jim Goudy, a hobby fencer. Jim wore his fencing gear, taught the children how to use their paper swords, and introduced the concept of fighting with rules. The children wanted to know more. This gave us an opportunity to introduce looking for resources and conducting research during our weekly library time.

In order to facilitate optimal use of the resource center, the team teachers met with Jan Bakker, the curriculum/education librarian in charge of the resource center. Our first challenge was to pinpoint the areas of need within the classroom and our goals for the project and students. We discussed our curricular goals, information literacy goals, and the challenges we were experiencing. The children had entered school with a wide range of reading experiences and levels of book understanding. None had mastered sight words. A few were aware of sound-symbol association. Some knew that to find out something, you look in a book. Most quickly became aware that you can find out what’s in a book by looking at the cover. Initially the teachers offered books about fencing and medieval weapons. In subsequent visits the children gained a basic familiarity of what type of books were located on what shelves, including hero tales.

A large part of our Christian-based curriculum typically focuses upon developing spiritual relationships. In our discussions about heroes, comments about God and Jesus frequently surfaced. When the children stumbled upon the series of Arch Books (Bible stories that help strengthen reading skills, published by Concordia Publishing House), it was the hot topic on the block. Friends were called over to examine the characters immersed in the familiar scenes of arks, rainbows, and Technicolor coats. Their discovery generated tremendous excitement, and an obvious ownership of the library shelves followed.

Before our next trip to the library, the teachers and librarian arranged a variety of Biblical stories on various tables. We wanted the children to circulate among the resources to determine their extent of interest in these stories. Instead the children excitedly raced to the tables and began poring through the selection of literature in groups of two to four. The teachers and teacher candidates settled in at tables in order to help children investigate the resources. Most of the children quickly identified a character or event of particular interest. Several children had difficulty establishing a place at the tables, so an adult escorted them until they noticed a large picture book of Bible stories and decided it was theirs. Since many children could not read, they scrutinized the illustrations for information and asked the adults to read aloud. Paper, pens, and pencils were handed...
out for the children to record their findings. Children’s findings often consisted of observational drawings of the pictures with writing that described their findings. Children’s writing ranged from copying words that appeared in bold print (the children increasingly recognized these as the important words) to a mixture of familiar letters or symbols that described or labeled their pictures. Even the youngest children labeled their work with invented symbols, and every child knew what their writing said.

Later, children used their recorded information to illustrate their understanding of heroes, accompanied by dictated captions scribed by the teacher candidates and team teachers.

Then children collaboratively sequenced their pictures in a timeline, from Noah through the life of Jesus. At the culminating event a week later, parents viewed the timeline mural and listened to the children share the stories of their heroes. Children who selected and researched other heroes, such as ancestors in their native land, also participated in the presentation.

As we reflect on this project, several aspects of our library process were particularly notable. Among these were the comfort level that the students felt in the library, which carried throughout the process of checking out their books and the ownership they established over these books in the classroom. Borrowed books were kept in a blue basket in the foyer of the classroom. Accessible all day long, these books were used as resources for a variety of purposes. At one point, when heroes were the focus of a dramatic play, the children decided they needed paper beards to add to what they called their daddy roles. The bearded characters in the Biblical story books were examined, used to create observational drawings that were cut out and taped onto chins for daddy faces. The walls of Jericho were researched through the books, discussed, argued over, built, and rebuilt in the block area according to the pictures in the Arch Books.

The process by which the children used the books to problem solve their play scenarios closely reflects the steps of the Big6 model developed by Eisenberg and Berkowitz. Unlike a process in which students learn to recite, describe, and list information, this process called for student problem solving as they located and accessed information, then used it to analyze, make inferences, draw connections, and evaluate and reflect upon their findings. Information literacy skills and early literacy skills, as reflected in the Illinois Early Learning Standards and NAEYC’s developmentally appropriate practices, were learned simultaneously.

There was a special sense of respect for the library books, as they were seen as a source of real information, an insight that the children carried into other curriculum investigations. Their natural interest and fascination with the library and its books were continually capitalized upon by the teachers and teacher candidates. The teacher candidates were wonderfully open to helping the children find the answers to their questions and remarkably skilled at building upon these answers to produce higher-level questions. Development of this skill was a goal teachers had previously established for teacher candidates.

According to Morgenthaler, allowing this process of children’s learning to unfold before teacher candidates is critical to their becoming quality teachers. Often, even teacher candidates are left to believe that the purpose of children using books in libraries is to simply develop an appreciation for books, rather than to use them in an “authentic and intellectually stimulating way.” Thus children are taken on library trips and simply read to, with the objectives being to amuse, entertain, or create library awareness or interest alone. Literature-dependent investigations such as the Hero Project “provided an example of children gaining information from books before they could decode all the words. What this project demonstrated to teacher candidates was the power of giving children a reason to engage in the hard work of learning to read by helping them use books and the library to solve their own problems, or answer their own real questions.”

References
8. Eileen Bredekamp and Copple, eds., Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs.
10. Ibid.
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