Using a Weekly Story

to Plan Creative Activities and Promote Early Literacy in Preschool

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Early childhood teachers are faced with many more choices and decisions regarding the development of their curriculum than ever before. The development of state standards for young children in prekindergarten (pre-K) programs not only provides guidance but also places demands on content that must be addressed. Recommended practices from national associations also shape the classroom schedule, pedagogy, and curriculum (e.g., National Association for the Education of Young Children; Division for Early Childhood and The Association for the Gifted of the Council for Exceptional Children; National Association for Gifted Children). At the same time, the diversity of children enrolling in preschool, childcare, and pre-K programs is increasing as states and local communities expand access for children considered at risk for later schooling problems. The number of children in formal programs continues to increase as families view a preschool experience prior to kindergarten as the norm and in many cases as a way of meeting childcare demands. Many preschool classrooms are characterized today by the diversity of students and families, who may vary by race, ethnicity, religion, language, values, economic conditions, and family composition (Lynch & Hanson, 2004).

Finding the time to plan creative activities that will meet the diverse range of children's interests and abilities, as well as meet state learning standards, is a challenge for teachers today. This article will address ways to accommodate a range of differences and abilities in preschool through the traditional elements of play, music, art, movement, and story reading common to many early childhood programs. What follows is a discussion of the development over the past decade of a curriculum model, the Spark Curriculum for Early Childhood (Lewman & Fowler, 2001a, 2001b). This paper will describe the model and the weekly curriculum and end by discussing the many ways in which teachers who adopted the model created their own units and met many of their state learning standards.

Several of the following principles undergird the Spark model. They include:

1. activities and teaching strategies address many developmental levels to accommodate the range of children's ages, as well as abilities (including gifted, developmental delays, and

Table 1
Spark Curriculum for Early Childhood Books

Book	Ethnicity
Abiyoyo by Pete Seeger	African
Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock by Eric Kimmel	African
Baby Rattlesnake told by Te Ate, adapted by Lynn Moroney	Native American
Big Al by Andrew Clements	European American
The Bossy Gallito by Lucia M. Gonzalez	Cuban
Chicka Chicka Boom Boom by Bill Martin Jr. & John Archambault	European American
I Need a Lunch Box by Jeannette Caines	African American
If You Give a Pig a Pancake by Laura Numeroff	European American
Jamela's Dress by Niki Daly	South African
Jonathan and His Mommy by Irene Smalls-Hector	African American
The Lady With the Alligator Purse by Nadine Bernard Westcott	European American
The Little Mouse, the Red Ripe Strawberry, and the Big Hungry Bear by Don and Audrey Wood	English
Mama, Do You Love Me? by Barbara Joosse	Native American, Inuit
The Napping House by Audrey Wood	English
Nine-in-One Grr! Grr! told by Blia Xiong, adapted by Cathy Spagnoli	Laos, Hmong
No Fair to Tigers by Eric Hoffman	European American
Polar Bear, Polar Bear, What Do You Hear? by Bill Martin, Jr.	European American
The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats	African American
Tree of Cranes by Allen Say	Japanese
The Very Quiet Cricket by Eric Carle	European American

second language learners) typically found in most programs;
2. activities provide a sense of continuity between home and school for children and in doing so relate to their daily lives and honor the diversity of cultures, beliefs, and languages of the community;
3. activities are sufficiently open-ended so that they provide opportunities to address specific developmental and educational objectives for individual children, as well as enable teachers to address state or local learning standards;
4. activities within a given day and week share a common theme, which can be expanded and enriched over time, supporting children's language development, early literacy, and creativity; and
5. activities relate to a storybook selected for the week so that children are exposed to many aspects of early literacy, including repeated story reading, opportunities for predicting and retelling story actions, relating the story to play, and access to the book throughout the day.

These principles were met by selecting 20 readily available, published storybooks that represent different cultures in the United States. (Table 1 provides a list of books used.) These stories typically can be read aloud to the children in 20 minutes or fewer. Story reading is followed by the choice of three activities, each scheduled for 15–20 minutes. The activities for each day and across the week are framed around the story.

The choice of a weekly story provides a framework for teachers within which they can develop smaller group activities incorporating music, make-believe play, and art, traditional to many preschool centers. For each weekly story, the Spark Curriculum provides recommended daily activities, a language concept drawn from the story (e.g., appear/disappear, loud/soft), and family materials (in English and Spanish) to be shared with home. The lesson plans for the activities that follow story time include recommendations on ways to address the following developmental goals: social/emotional, language, fine and gross motor, self-help, and cognitive. Finally, the lesson plans recently have been aligned with some states' learning standards for prekindergarten to assist teachers in demonstrating that they are meeting state standards through the curriculum.

Using a weekly story not only provides a planning framework for teachers but also provides opportunities to actively engage children in early literacy opportunities. As the teachers read the story each day of the week, most children grow increasingly familiar with the characters and actions and aspects of the text. The approach of selecting a very engaging story and reading it repeatedly is supported by the joint position paper of the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association

for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which states, "The single most important activity for building these understandings and skills essential for reading success appears to be reading aloud to children" (IRA & NAEYC, 1998, p. 33). The report also recommends repeated story reading so children become more familiar with "listening to patterned, predictable texts while enjoying the feel of reading and language" (p. 34). Teachers who participated in the field testing of the curriculum reported that when they reread a story the second or third time, most children began to anticipate what was going to happen, began to use language patterns from the story, generalized information from the story to their own life experiences, and often told their families about the story. In addition, several speech therapists reported that they saw an increase in children's vocabulary in classrooms using the Spark Curriculum. Typically, children maintained interest in the story as the week progressed and by the end of the week began to show ownership of the story. As one teacher reported, "Taking one book and repeating it over and over was something I never would have done on my own. I was shocked to see how the kids were so interested in the book after four days of repetition" ("Highlights From a Spark Outreach Site," n.d.; Yates & Fowler, 2004). One program reported extending the unit on *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock* (Kimmel, 1998) for two additional weeks because of the intense interest expressed by the children about spiders and other arachnids; as a result, the teachers and children developed a project about spiders, incorporating other stories in place of the original book and bringing factual materials and artifacts for the children to further explore. Children could work at many levels on this extended project, based on their interest, abilities, and talents (Fowler & Lewman, 2001).

To recognize the diverse cultures, ethnicities, values, and beliefs often represented by children attending early childhood programs, storybooks were selected that represented African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and European-Americans. Stories also were chosen to represent not only common daily events in the lives of children (*I Need a Lunch Box* by Jeanette Caines) but also magical or extraordinary events, often found in folk tales (*Abiyoyo* by Pete Seeger [1986]). To accommodate the seasonal celebrations of many programs, stories taking place during the four seasons (*The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats) and certain holidays (*The Tree of Cranes* by Allen Say) were also included in the mix.

A Sample Day

The following vignette demonstrates how the Spark Curriculum might be used on a typical day. The teacher has chosen the book *Abiyoyo* by Pete Seeger to read to the children. *Abiyoyo* is an African folktale that centers on a boy and his father and their encounters with a giant named Abiyoyo. This is the first day that she has read the story to the children. The concept for the day is *disappear.*

The children are sitting on their carpet squares and the teacher is holding the book so that all of the children can see the pictures and participate in the reading of the story. She shows the children the cover of the book, title, and author and explains what the book is about. As she begins to read the story, she talks about the father who is a magician and how he makes things disappear by waving his wand and saying "zoop." She pauses every time the father makes something disappear in order to have the children wave their hands like magic wands and say "zoop!" The children are laughing, asking questions, and commenting. As the teacher continues with the story, the boy and his father try to get Abiyoyo to fall on the ground so they can make him disappear. She involves the children by telling them that they need to help the boy and his father make the monster disappear by singing the Abiyoyo song. They sing the song faster and faster until Abiyoyo falls on the ground and the father uses his magic wand to make the giant disappear.

When they finish reading the book, the teacher has the children recall the events of the story. Because the concept for the day is "disappear," she asks the children what the father did when he would wave his wand and say "zoop!" She writes the word "disappear" on chart paper, pointing to the letters. She then asks the children what happens when something disappears. She tells the children that when something is there and then it's gone, people say it disappears. To demonstrate, she blows some bubbles and then pops them. She blows more bubbles, giving all of the children an opportunity to make them disappear. Several of the children tell stories about magicians they have seen and how they made things disappear.

As they continue to talk about how to make things disappear, the teacher describes the centers that will be open for center time. Three of the centers have activities that are related to the concept of the day. As she briefly describes each center, she asks the class how the activities relate to the story, encouraging children to identify actions, relationships, and concepts from the story. She also demonstrates each of the activities so the children will be better able to choose which center they want to go to first. For

example, she tells the children that in the art area they will be able to make pictures disappear. She paints with water on a chalk board, fans it with a piece of paper, and lets the children watch as the picture disappears, just the way the boy's father made things disappear. She then tells the children that in the music area, they will be able to make sounds disappear. She has everyone sing the Abiyoyo song and then cover their mouths with their hand to make the sounds disappear. In the make-believe center, she explains that they will pretend to be magicians, make magic wands, and make things disappear.

The children are then invited to choose one center and then during subsequent times, move to the other centers. Several children choose to go to the make-believe center where they find a variety of materials (e.g., construction paper, tape, glitter, glue, pipe cleaners) they can use to make magic wands. Ali and Wu-Ying make glittery wands and find fabric and clothespins to make magician capes. The teacher blows bubbles so the children can use their magic wands to make them disappear. Ali puts a stuffed animal on a chair, waves her magic wand, and says "zoop!" She quickly takes the stuffed animal and puts it under the chair exclaiming, "Look, I made it disappear!" Wu-Ying claps her hands in delight and the teacher says, "Wow Ali, you made her disappear just like the father and boy made Abiyoyo disappear!" The speech therapist joins in the play and encourages Wu-Ying to blow bubbles and say "zoop" and "disappear" as a fun way to practice the speech goals that she is working on. Alberto asks everyone to come over to the stove where he is pretending that he is boiling water. He tells them that his mother showed him how water disappears when you boil it. He then takes his magic wand, says "zoop," and shows them the empty pot. Children can work at different levels of skill and knowledge in each center, based upon their abilities and interests.

In the music center, Quan, India, and another teacher are making sounds by strumming an autoharp and then putting their hands on the strings to make the sounds disappear. Brandon and Katie are also in the music area, but they are singing the Abiyoyo song and recording it on the tape recorder. The teacher joins in to help them rewind their song and then stop it to make the sounds disappear. Brandon asks the teacher to help them record their monster songs while they play different instruments and try covering them with objects and materials (e.g., hands, construction paper, cups, plastic) to see which ones will make the sounds disappear. Quan and India join in to help make the sounds disappear. The tape recorder was intentionally placed in the music area for Brandon who is often disruptive during center time and seldom interacts with the other children. He is very creative and likes to come up with his own ideas and activities. They knew that he really liked to play with the tape recorder and thought he might be enticed to figure out how to make sounds stop, erase, and disappear.

To extend the book reading and concept of the day to other parts of the classroom schedule once center time was over, the teachers suggest that the children take their magic wands outside to the playground and see what they can make disappear. They drew pictures and wrote their names in the sandbox and watched them disappear as they moved the sand around. They made pebbles disappear as they hid them under leaves while saying "zoop!" with their magic wands. When they returned inside, they washed their hands to make the dirt disappear. At snack, they made their food disappear by eating it all up.

As the children were getting ready to go home, the teacher asks them what they might tell their parents about *Abiyoyo*. How will they explain what disappear means? She also asks them what they think they might be able to make disappear at home. The teacher has already sent information about the book and activities home to parents the week before. The information contained the name of the book and a brief description of the story, the concepts for each day, and one or two questions (with answers) about the story that parents could ask their children. This information was provided in the Spark Curriculum. One parent told her son's teacher,

> He loves that *Abiyoyo* story. He told me the whole story so I went to the library to get the book for him. He can't seem to stop talking about it. The other night he ate all his vegetables and said, "Look, they disappeared just like Abiyoyo!"

This vignette demonstrates several important features of the Spark Curriculum. First, the teacher encouraged the children to be actively involved during story time by asking questions, responding to comments, getting them to make the "zoop!" sound, and singing the Abiyoyo song. She introduced the concept of the day, wrote the concept for the children to see what the word looked like in print, and then demonstrated what the word means. Three center activities were set up in a way that allowed children to actively explore what "disappear" means. Children were encouraged to experiment with materials and create their own products. The adults were actively engaged with the children at the centers. This allowed the teachers to increase opportunities

for learning, address learning standards, and support individual needs and talents of children. The teachers also carried over opportunities for children to relate the story and concept of the day to other parts of the schedule, as well as encouraged them to talk to their parents about the story, concept, and activities. Table 2 shows an example of how the *Abiyoyo* Spark activities used by the teachers align with the Illinois Early Learning Standards. Although this example focuses on one state's learning standards, these are very similar to the standards that all states have developed.

Table 2
Sample Spark Activities for the Concept of the Day ("Disappear") Aligned With Early Learning Standards

Center	Activity	Illinois Learning Standard (examples)
Art (This also would be a great activity for the science area.)	Paint with water; picture disappears as it dries.	1.C.ECa—Retell information from the story 5.A.EC—Seek answers to questions through active exploration 11.A.ECa—Uses senses to explore and observe materials and natural phenomena 10.A.ECb—Engage in active play using fine motor skills
Make-Believe	Pretend to be magicians (like in the book). Make paper wands and make bubbles disappear by touching them with a wand.	1.C.ECb—Respond to simple questions about the reading materials 1.C.ECc—Demonstrate understanding of literal meaning of stories by making comments 19.A.ECa—Engage in active play using gross motor skills 19.A.ECb—Engage in active play using fine motor skills 32.B.ECa—Engage in cooperative group play
Music	Make sounds disappear by holding hand over mouth or holding hands over mouth of horn; recording sounds on tape recorder and then turning off tape and stopping; and exploring vibrations of instruments.	1.C.ECa—Retell information from the story 5.A.EC—Seek answers to questions through active exploration 11.A.ECa—Uses senses to explore and observe materials and natural phenomena 10.A.ECb—Engage in active play using fine motor skills 25.A.ECc—Investigate the elements of music 26.A.ECc—Participate in music activities 32.B.ECb—Begin to share materials, experiences and take turns

Development of New Units

Many teachers, after using the Spark Curriculum and format, began to develop their own units. Some teachers wanted to include their favorite stories (such as *Corduroy* by Don Freeman and *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak) and activities that specifically related to their geographic region (e.g., coastal) or type of community (e.g., urban) or culture (e.g., Hmong). Others selected stories that they were able to easily relate to other areas within their learning standards such as math (such as *How Many Snails?* by Paul Giganti).

To help teachers in creating their own story units, the Spark Curriculum provides the following guidelines:

1. *Selecting a story*. A short set of questions is recommended to guide selection of new stories (see Table 3). Teachers also are invited to consider the developmental level of the story, including the complexity of the syntax, the vocabulary base of the story and the length and complexity of the storyline.
2. *Drawing concepts or themes from the story to broaden children's knowledge base*. Children's stories often include several themes. Teachers are encouraged to select one theme for each day so that children have an opportunity to relate the story to their own experience and gain a deeper understanding of it. The story *Mama, Do You Love Me?* by Barbara Joosse is set in the Arctic and is a story about a mother's unconditional love when she is at home and leaves home to fish or work. The story has several cultural words inserted into the text such as *mukluk*, which is much more fun to say than boots. In addition to the new vocabulary words that can be learned, the themes from this book would allow children who are gifted and talented to extend their study of the Inuit culture. For example, because the clothes worn by the story char-

Table 3
Selecting a Story

Will the children find this story interesting?
Does the story include events to which children can relate?
Does the story include concepts for acquiring knowledge?
Is the story culturally sensitive, avoiding stereotypes and presenting characters from various ethnicities?
Is the length of the story appropriate for young children?
Is the vocabulary age appropriate (not too hard, yet not too simple)?
Is the number of words on the page appropriate?
Are the illustrations developmentally appropriate and available on each page?
Do the illustrations have simple, clean lines?
Do the illustrations contain vivid colors?

Table 4
Designing Activities

Can the children relate the activity to the story?
Is the activity appropriate for the range of development of children in the class?
Does this activity promote understanding of the theme/concept of the day?
Can individual child goals be embedded in the activity?
What state learning standards are introduced or met in the activity?
Are required materials readily available?
Will this activity fit into the classroom schedule or require carryover to another time or day?

acters are traditional Inuit dress, children could find present-day pictures of people who live in the Arctic for comparison. They could discover what kinds of foods the Inuit people eat and how those foods are similar or different from the foods they eat. They could even try to cook some of the foods so they can taste the difference. Children could also discuss the many things that their parents do, where they work, and where they go while the children are in school. This story could also be used as one of many books to explore a variety of cultures.

3. *Developing activities for each concept or theme*. As described in the vignette, teachers are encouraged to develop activities that provide opportunities for all children to participate and succeed regardless of their skill level. Activities can be open-ended or produce a permanent product. A few examples of products include finger painting or making free-form structures from recycled materials. Open-ended activities include moving to music, exploring sounds, and pretending in the make-believe center. These activities should be designed so that children with differing levels of skill can participate and teachers can use the activity to shape and prompt specific child goals, such as the communication and social goals of turn taking and initiating and responding to peers, or the fine motor goal of using the pincer grasp with construction materials. If developing a product is the outcome, it may be complex or very simple depending on the child's skill level. Table 4 presents some questions for planning activities. The Spark Curriculum contains planning pages like the one in Table 5 to assist teachers in developing their own activities. In this example, the story *Abiyoyo* serves as a framework for discussing shadows, their appearance, shape, and ways in which changes in light (angle, intensity, time of day) can influence shadows.
4. *Aligning the lessons to meet state standards and to accommodate individual child goals*. As noted in Table 2, teachers can identify the state learning standards that are introduced or met through the daily story reading and accompanying activities. Teachers in programs adopting the Spark Curriculum in Illinois and Louisiana have aligned state standards for each story original to the curriculum, as well as to units that they have developed. Similarly, the curriculum is flexible enough to accommodate adaptations to meet individualized goals for a wide range of children.

Conclusion

Teachers who use the approach described in this article consistently report that they are amazed at how children's interest in the same story increases over the week. One teacher commented,

> They loved the stories and reading the stories, repeating them

every day. They loved it! You know, by the end of the week they would be saying it right along with me. As the week went by they got better at participating and did not get tired of it.

Observations and feedback from teachers and their supervisors indicate that an approach that promotes children's skills through systematic repetitive reading and open-ended expressive arts activities is effective. Preschool teachers know their students, what stories work, what activities the children like, and what types of materials are available. This knowledge can enable them to develop a unified set of activities that will promote all of the children's skills and organize the learning centers of the day in a meaningful way for children and teachers.

The Spark Curriculum for Early Childhood consists of 20 weeks of story-based activities. Thus far, the model has been field-tested with more than 6,000 children and their families in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Oregon, and North Carolina (Yates & Fowler, 2004). The premise of Spark is that children learn more when they are actively engaged in activities that hold their interest. Developmentally appropriate stories, with activities centered on the arts, have the potential to be highly interesting to most young children. The Spark Curriculum format encourages children to choose activities and explore colors, textures, structures, materials, concepts, and movement in ways that promote their creativity and individual interpretations of the story and activities. Teachers are actively engaged, which allows time to give individual attention to children in order to better support, enrich, and challenge their emerging talents and abilities. GCT

Table 5
Sample of Matrix Used to Develop Activities

Day	Concept	Music Activity	Art Activity	Drama Activity
Day 1	Shadows	Make dancing shadows by moving to music in front of a bright light; use streamers; change the angle and intensity of the light to vary length and visibility of shadows	Make and take apart junk structures. Using flashlights examine the different shadows made from parts added and subtracted. Discuss shapes, placement of shadows, and how shadows shift.	Go outdoors and draw each other's shadows using chalk. Give shadows a name and pretend they are a friend. Use scarves or capes to change shape of shadows. Repeat at different times of day and compare changes in the shadow and direction.

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