Effective early childhood instruction does not happen by chance; it takes careful and thoughtful planning. To ensure that all children in Ohio enter kindergarten ready to learn, the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio Department of Job and Family Service have collaborated to develop Ohio’s Early Learning Content Standards (ELCS) in English Language Arts. As young children develop their literacy skills, exposure to good literature supports their intellect, imagination, and language development. The purpose of this article is to describe a project completed by early childhood teacher licensure candidates in an undergraduate field-based curriculum course to support children’s early learning. Beginning with observation and assessment of children’s interests and needs, candidates select a children’s picture book, plan content-rich learning experiences, and develop props which support creative play; encourage oral language development; foster cognitive engagement; and teach concepts of print. Candidates gain confidence and competence in designing appropriate integrated learning experiences for young children.

**Imagination 2 Go: Supporting Intellectual Integrity**

Sarah, a third year early childhood teacher licensure candidate, submitted a lesson plan for an experience that she intended to introduce to kindergarten children. She planned to read a story about a baby bird and have the children color a line drawing of a baby bird breaking through a shell. To complete their picture, she planned for the children to paste different colored shell fragments to the page. She wanted to make sure that the project would be sent home with the children at the end of the day “so the family could see what the child was learning at school.” In preparation for the lesson, she planned to dye several dozen eggs the night before the lesson “to make it easier and give the children a choice of color to make their picture.” When I asked Sarah to reflect on the content and teaching strategies in her plan, she responded by saying the lesson was “hands-on,” and she thought that the children would have fun pasting the egg shells. I had several reactions to Sarah’s response, the first of which was, “But, what did the children learn as a result of the experience or how did the experience maximize opportunities for oral and print language development?”

The lesson itself was neither horrible nor harmful, and one could say it provided opportunities for the children to use fine motor skills as they peeled and pasted the egg shells. Nonetheless, the lesson was a series of missed opportunities for the children to use language, build vocabulary, develop concepts of print, compare and contrast size, shape, texture, color and count. Furthermore, the children missed opportunities to develop important pro-social behaviors such as sharing, taking
turns, and listening to others. In the final analysis, was the activity worth doing? How can I support pre-service teachers as they learn to plan curriculum with “intellectual integrity” relevant to the knowledge base of the disciple and worth knowing (Bredekamp and Rosegrant, 1992)?

Sharing good literature with young children challenges their intellect, inspires their imagination and nurtures their desire to read (Fisher, Flood & Lapp, 1999). Furthermore, literacy competence opens the door for all other academic learning for preschool and kindergarten children (Casey & Sheran, 2004). In a comprehensive literacy program, early childhood teachers must implement both evidence-based reading research (EBRR) instruction and emergent literacy experiences focusing on the social and meaning-based aspects of literacy (Rayner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky & Seidenberg, 2002) focusing on mastery of print processing skills and emergent literacy experiences focusing on the social and meaning-based aspects of literacy (Vukelich & Christie, 2004).

The Imagination 2 Go Project described in this article was developed to help early childhood teacher candidates learn to design language rich, developmentally appropriate, and intellectually stimulating experiences for young children.

Literacy Development is Dynamic

The International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children agree that all “teachers of young children, whether employed in preschools, child care programs or elementary schools have a responsibility to promote children’s literacy development...” (NAEYC/IRA, 1998, p. 38). Regardless of the instructional approach, most successful preschool curricula focus intensely on developing children's language use and skills (Mead, 2004). Reading and writing skills provide a critical foundation for a child’s academic success (Bredekamp & Rosengrant, 1998). Furthermore, language and reading provide a portal to much of the learning that children do throughout their lives. Children who read well often read more and, therefore, acquire more knowledge in other domains. The children who lag behind in their reading skills, miss opportunities to develop reading comprehension strategies, often encounter reading material that is too advanced for their skills and acquire negative attitudes about reading itself (Whitehurst, 2001).

Literacy development in its earliest phase is a dynamic process of forming reading and writing concepts and skills (National Research Council, 1998, 2000). Children need developmentally appropriate experiences and instruction to support literacy learning. These should include positive and nurturing relationships with adults, who engage in conversations, print rich environments, daily reading of high-quality books, opportunities to engage in play that incorporates literacy tools and firsthand experiences that expand children’s vocabulary (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Children’s exploration, manipulation of objects, and dramatic play make critical contributions to children’s literacy development (Neuman & Roskos, 1992, 1993). Play allows children to express and represent their new knowledge, making it their own. “Developing a strong foundation for literacy does not just happen. Instead, early childhood educators must thoughtfully and purposefully interact with children and plan experiences that support emerging literacy” (Ohio Department of Education, 2004, p.11). Learning to read and write for young children is embedded in a larger developing system of communication; “young children need writing to help them learn about reading, they need reading to help them learn about writing and they need oral language to help them learn about both” (Roskos, Christie & Richgels, 2003, p. 54).

Curriculum Development

Literature enriches the child’s life and plays a vital role in curriculum development. Teachers promote development when they create learning
experiences that build on and extend the child’s competence. These experiences must be challenging, but achievable. Dewey (1963) suggests that learning is fostered by experiences grounded in children’s firsthand knowledge and to be educative the experience must lead to expanding knowledge of subject-matter facts and ideas. Children’s literature supports cognitive development by encouraging children to exchange ideas and develop their thinking skills as they observe, compare, sort, sequence, summarize and evaluate information. Furthermore, standards-based early literacy programs provide the foundation for the academic success of at-risk preschool children during their elementary school years (Dickinson & Neuman, 2005; McCardle, Scarborough & Catts, 2001).

Interactive, shared storybook reading can positively impact the child’s emergent literacy knowledge (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). As children engage in storybook reading, they begin to understand that letters form words, and words on the page have meaning as the story unfolds (Goodman, 1986). The key to successful literacy experiences is first hand, personal involvement of the children in an active learning experience interacting with story (Orlando, 2005).

Experiences with content-rich literature help children build an understanding of ideas and connect new learning to what they already know (Neuman & Roskos, 2005). Teachers facilitate learning by encouraging active inquiry, guiding learners to question their tacit assumptions and coaching them through the knowledge construction process (Kerka, 1997). Informational books or nonfiction books enrich children’s background information, help them explore new ideas and stimulate interest in a topic. However, fewer than 15% of shared reading experiences in early childhood classrooms include non-fiction texts (Yopp & Yopp, 2000). The challenge for preschool educators is to develop classroom experiences that support acquisition of knowledge and development of skills in all domains while engaging and developing children’s interests and abilities.

**Imagination 2 Go Project**

The Imagination 2 Go Project was a collection of planned experiences and props designed to support creative play, foster development of the whole child, and align to the state’s ELCS. To support children’s social and emotional development, the experiences intentionally provided opportunities for social interaction, appreciation of diversity, and respect for the environment. To support physical development, experiences challenged gross and fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination. To support creative development, the candidates designed process oriented arts experiences and creative drama scenarios with authentic props and costumes. Children’s cognitive development was challenged by problem-solving games, auditory and visual perception or memory activities, inquiries and experiments. Language development was encouraged throughout the project with finger plays, songs, guided reading, informational texts and writing experiences.

**History of the Project**

For the past several years, I have taught a field-based early childhood curriculum course to undergraduate students at the University of Akron. The course is designed for candidates to learn to develop and deliver appropriate curriculum for preschool children with an emphasis on authentic assessment, child-centered instruction, developmentally appropriate practice and Ohio’s Early Learning Content Standards. Candidates complete 33 hours of field experience working with children in a preschool or kindergarten setting.

At the beginning of the semester, candidates completed a semi-structured observation/interview with cooperating teachers to collect information about the students, curriculum, class policies and teaching practices. Cooperating teachers indicated that “state standards, pre-k academic content standards, or Head Start Standards” influenced their curriculum planning. One teacher indicated that she felt the standards were “common sense,” and that she “has been doing what the standards
say for years.” In several instances, cooperating teachers indicated that although they did not intentionally align each lesson with standards, they were “sure that all the standards are hit throughout the program.” Anecdotal information from candidates’ class discussions, site visits, and planning documents indicated, however, that teachers were often spending time in “craft-like” tasks with little intellectual engagement. In addition, candidates’ field journals documented free play time was often shortened or canceled completely to make time for isolated phonics, alphabet or number “skills and drills.” The Imagination 2 Go Project was designed to help pre-service teacher candidates learn to develop curriculum for young children that is intellectually challenging, developmentally appropriate and aligned to Early Learning Content Standards.

**Imagination 2 Go Project**

Candidates began the project by observing and listening to children’s conversations in learning centers, in play areas, and during class routines. Each candidate identified an area of interest upon which to build an Imagination 2 Go Project and selected an appropriate children’s book to support the topic of interest. The candidates then brainstormed concepts, skills, or processes presented by the story and created a concept map for the topic. They located informational books, photographs, authentic props, or artifacts to supplement the instruction. The candidates used the Imagination 2 Go Planner (Appendix A) as a visual organizer to think through the following planning questions:

1. How will the topic be initiated with the children?
2. What do the children already know about the topic?
3. What about resources for students? What first-hand experiences will enhance learning (field trips, visits with experts, examinations of artifacts, and experiments)?
4. What activities provide opportunities for self-initiated learning?
5. What activities provide opportunities for parent/family involvement?
6. What activities provide integrated learning in domains (physical, cognitive, language, social/emotional and creative)
7. How will student achievement be documented?

**Candidate Reaction to the Project**

Each candidate implemented at least two planned experiences from his or her project plan. At the end of the semester, the candidates participated in a colloquium during which each candidate showcased her project. The colloquium provided a context for candidates to exchange ideas and provide each other with professional feedback. Furthermore, the candidates had an opportunity to engage in guided personal and professional self-reflection as they described the successes and challenges of their work.

Data were collected over two semesters between May 2006 and December 2006. At the end of each semester, candidates were asked to reflect on the project as a whole. They identified the strengths of the assignment and made recommendations for the future. All comments were submitted anonymously. Comments from candidates were generally positive, such as, “It was a great idea!”; “Although it was time consuming to make, it was worth using in the field”; “great project, fun, gained a lot of new ideas, pulled everything together, and something I will use in the future.” One candidate suggested that her project was “challenging and exciting throughout the entire process.” Another said, “I learned valuable insights into my own abilities and the project made me aware of how to think like an educator. This project is a true representation of thinking and behaving as a teacher should.”

One candidate recognized that learning to teach is a developmental process: “Make sure to have taken all of the prereq courses, because
background knowledge from these is really helpful in applying to this class." Several candidates suggested the project supported collaboration with the cooperating teacher. "She will guide you through the lesson and give you ideas and suggestions, when needed." Finally, a perceptive candidate suggested, "Make sure to put a lot of planning into lesson plans/activities and think about types of higher level questions to incorporate. I learned that communication with preschoolers is key!"

The project was designed to be flexible enough for candidates to use in student teaching. One student teacher noted, "I used it in my student teaching and the students enjoyed it even though they were in third grade." Several student teachers said they would use the project in the future: "I haven't used it yet, but definitely plan to use it when I have my own class."

**Conclusion and Implication**

Learning to read and write are among the most important and powerful achievements in life. Preservice teacher candidates recognize that learning to read and write is critical to a child’s success in school and later in life. As an integrated, authentic planning experience, the Imagination 2 Go Project encourages candidates to utilize resources, materials, skills, and knowledge from a variety of sources; fosters a disposition for collaboration; nurtures cognitive engagement and problem-solving; supports developmentally appropriate standards-based instruction; promotes collegiality with meaningful peer feedback and provides for professional growth with guided self-reflection. Additionally, the project provides the candidates with flexible and well designed experiences, materials, props, songs, poems, finger plays, and games that could be used with confidence to springboard effective learning experiences in future teaching situations.

Effective early literacy instruction does not just happen by chance; it takes careful and thoughtful planning. It depends on teachers who are highly skilled, adaptive and responsive. They must have working knowledge of how reading and writing are learned, of how to determine the needs and strengths of individual students, and of what to do next to support student learning. Although a few candidates are still writing lesson plans like Sarah’s, most are more insightful in their planning. The Imagination 2 Go Planner helped candidates focus attention on the content and purpose of the planned experience, as well as on the appropriate strategies to assess students’ learning. Candidates were forced to think through the impact of instruction on all developmental domains before the instruction was implemented. As candidates completed the Imagination 2 Go Project, they gained confidence and competence in designing early learning experiences with intellectual integrity. Confidence was seen in their ability to synthesize knowledge from a variety of sources as demonstrated in the intellectually challenging experiences they planned reflecting knowledge of child development, current research, and core concepts of the discipline. Their competence was demonstrated in their ability to utilize developmentally appropriate practices and to support instructional experiences with Ohio’s Early Learning Content Standards.
Appendix A

Name: ___________________________ Date: ____________________

Book Citation: ______________________________________________________________

The following Imagination 2 Go Planner is an expandable organizer to use for planning. It is a working document that you will revisit throughout this course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Project Description:</th>
<th>Project Outcomes: What are cognitive (concepts or knowledge), psychomotor (skill), dispositions (habits or tendencies i.e. curiosity, friendliness, creativity); feelings (competence, confidence, security, sense of belonging) outcomes for this project?</th>
<th>Standard—What ODE Early Learning Standards &amp; Indicators support this experience</th>
<th>Activity—Describe grouping, procedures and materials</th>
<th>Assessment Strategy—How will you determine level of mastery/understanding?</th>
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<td>Physical Development</td>
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Project Considerations

What interests did the children display that could springboard other experiences or inquiries? What would you do next in response to their interest(s)?

APA 5.0 STYLE Resources

What resources can be utilized to assist learners (texts, trade book, picture files, websites etc.) and to increase your knowledge of the content? Include narrative and informational text resources.
References

Lynn S. Kline is an Assistant Professor in the Dept. of Curricular and Instructional Design at the University of Akron where she teaches courses in the early childhood licensure program. Her research interests include professional development of preservice and inservice teachers, teacher mentoring and early literacy.
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