

Teaching Young Children with Personal Histories and Primary Sources

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A bookmaking project in the pre-kindergarten classroom can teach a multitude of concepts related to literacy, but children can also be learning about themselves, their community, and their connections to the past when they create a book about their own personal history. Although pre-kindergarten-age students are unaware that their work could be considered “autobiographies” of their young lives, that’s indeed what these books are.

Introducing preK students to the excitement of compiling documents about their personal lives can inspire intellectual and emotional growth. It can result in a finished product that students, teachers, and parents can all be proud of. The “primary source documents” that preK students employ in their bookmaking can be the tangible artifacts from their own lives (copies of family photos, crayon drawings, food labels, magazine ads for toys, printouts of neighborhood map images, and the like).

During this unit of study, children can also look at historical photographs of children, making comparisons between the experiences of kids in the past and their own experiences today. Best practice connects the ideas of change, time, and the past with ideas about how we affect the world around us.¹ A project like this can be an effective tool for creating an environment of inquiry, setting the stage for success in later grades when students will get to practice higher-order thinking.

In this article, we’ll first describe how to foster a mindset of inquiry, then present a series of three lessons that culminate in a unit project. Finally, we’ll summarize how incorporating inquiry into project-based learning provides preK students with skills that promote school readiness.

Setting the Stage for Inquiry

Students entering pre-kindergarten, particularly in low socioeconomic areas, may have limited experiences about the world around them—limited knowledge of other cultures, art, books, and history; all of which we refer to as background knowledge. Teachers can set the stage for larger concepts connected to social studies through literature. The Creative Curriculum suggests using books to connect the experiences of fictional characters to experiences a young child is likely to have had.² Fictional

stories can become the talking points for ideas: the fact that one person’s opinion can be different from others’ opinions (e.g., how to fairly share time on the swing); changes in ourselves as we grow (e.g., how one was once a baby and now is a “big” kid); and how society changes (e.g., how the choices of people in the past affected our experience of the world today).

Bookmaking takes the power of literature and puts it into the hands of students. It provides experiences for students to investigate, question, and discuss how their own lives connect to their peers and to people of the past. Students can make connections to the real world, expanding their background knowledge. Bookmaking also serves as an evaluation tool, allowing the teacher to make observations about students’ prior knowledge.

Many pre-kindergarten curricula are making the move from theme-based to project-based learning. Projects like bookmaking can connect to the curricula and to learning standards,³ offering a multitude of concrete experiences, coupled with strong scaffolding, to increase the understanding of more abstract concepts and topics addressed throughout the unit.

Project-based lessons begin with a unit to introduce students to a formal school setting. In *The Creative Curriculum*, this unit is entitled “Beginning the Year.”⁴ During the first week of school, we read aloud some books that compare life at school with life at home. Students notice similarities and differences. Teachers can pair a book, such as *The Kissing Hand* (discussed below), with an activity, such as touring and photographing different areas of the school. Then the teacher can show students examples of historical primary sources to complete the main theme of each lesson.

Steps of Analysis for PreK Students

The Teachers’ Page on The Library of Congress (LOC) website has several different “analysis tools” in the form of worksheets for various types of primary sources, such as written documents and photos.⁵ One of these worksheets is adapted for early grades with the use of pictures that symbolize each of the three steps of analysis:

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1. Observe
2. Reflect
3. Question

Younger learners, not yet able to read, are able to decode what the next useful behavior is as they study an object or image. Even though they cannot yet read, these students have the cognitive tools for learning and remembering. What they need is practice. For example, the teacher will point out the symbol for “observe” (an eye) on the analysis tool and ask the students to simply look at and describe what they see. The teacher will then point out the symbol for “reflect” (a brain) and ask the students to think about who might have created the primary source document, when, where, and for what purpose. Finally, the teacher will point out the symbol for “question” (a question mark). Students can then generate their own questions about the primary source document. Breaking the process of analysis into three concrete steps—observe, reflect, and question—provides opportunities for teachers to scaffold the skills of inquiry during class discussions.

Teachers of young students can find interesting and powerful images in the vast online collection of The Library of Congress that are not only developmentally appropriate, but also engaging to the young learner. They can incorporate primary source photographs as examples of how students can document their own lives through the bookmaking project, allowing for a deeper connection to historical thinking.⁶

First Lesson: What is in the Image?

Beginning with the story *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn⁷ and a simple portrait titled *The Cradle* by Berthe Morisot,⁸ students think about what it means to have a mother’s love even when away from home. *The Kissing Hand*, first published in 1993, is often read to kindergarteners, as it’s about a young raccoon’s first day at school and the message of confidence that his mother gives him. Following a read-aloud of this book, we show students the impressionist painting *The Cradle*, which shows a woman watching beside a baby sleeping in a crib covered with a misty white canopy. Through “shared writing,” teachers record student observations on large chart paper that follows the three-step adapted analysis tool.

The classroom in which the following inquiry takes place is a Head Start in rural Southeast Louisiana. Looking at the painting *The Cradle*, students point out the woman, the sleeping baby, and the crib. The students eagerly touched the print, as many have never before seen an oil painting or visited a museum. The students made guesses about the roles of each of the people in the portrait, debating whether the baby is a boy or girl and whether or not the woman is the mom, a grandmother, or an aunt. One boy reasoned that the baby was a boy because he (the student himself) “has a baby sister” who does not resemble the

infant in the picture. A girl supported her claim that the woman is the baby’s mother because “only moms sit with babies.” The inferences about the role of the mother and gender of the baby illustrate students’ understanding of personal relationships and set the stage for future connections to figures of the past.

Several readings of *The Kissing Hand* (during reading circle over several days) provided another opportunity to use the inquiry process with *The Cradle* using a different section of the adapted analysis tool. Teachers asked students about what they thought the people in the portrait were doing, or why the artist chose to depict this scene. In the Head Start classroom, students’ perceptions included interactions and mood of the mother, such as, “She is mad at the baby for crying because my brother cries a lot.” “She is sad because she has her hand on her head like this.” The connections these students make are inferences based on interactions and relationships that students experience at home. Teachers can encourage students to expand on their reasons for holding these perceptions, to mention details in the image itself, as well as to use emotional terms (happy, sad, warm, worried, or sleepy, etc.) that they feel while looking at the painting.⁹

Berthe Morisot (1841–1895) created *The Cradle* as a portrait of her sister Edma and sleeping daughter. Artistic critique of the portrait suggests the bent arm of Edma mirrors the baby’s to reinforce the feeling of loving protection. The artist was the first woman to have work on display at The Impressionist Exhibition (in 1874). Unfortunately, her talent went largely unnoticed, and the unsold painting stayed within her family.¹⁰

Teachers ask students what questions they may have about the portrait after revealing the artist’s intention to sell the painting. Students love to make declarative statements, while creating and speaking a question requires more thought. The teacher’s first use of the analysis tool requires strong scaffolding because students are not practiced at framing questions about paintings or about the narrative in a book.

Once the students have an understanding of the inquiry process, the teacher can use the same process to enhance the other concepts associated with the unit. As the focus shifts from home to school, the teacher can make connections to school life past and present. Choosing photographs with themes to suit the project as well as connections to students’ personal histories requires teachers to research the geographic and economic history of their community.

Second Lesson: Doing Work and Answering Needs

This inquiry takes place in a Head Start classroom in rural Southeast Louisiana. Strawberry farming has been a large part of the area’s revenue. Primary source documents, such as Lewis Hine’s photographs of the Arnao family¹¹ can offer connections to the lives of students who reside in this rural community. These historical photos depict the life of the migrant workers who picked cranberries and strawberries from the northeastern to the southeastern United States, following the season of harvest across the latitudes.¹² In 1910, the Arnao family did



The Arnao family of berry pickers in the fields of Truitt's farm, 1910. "This is an Italian family coming from Philadelphia and now ready to go to Carmel, N.J. to continue picking. The family consists of: 1 child 3 years of age, 1 child 6 years of age, 2 children 7 years of age, 1 child 9 years of age, 1 child 10 years of age, 1 child 11 years of age. All of whom pick."

not have a permanent dwelling, and the five children did not attend school as they picked crops. The youngest was three years old.¹³

The students in our Head Start classroom have families with direct and indirect connections to migrant strawberry workers with. Some children have ancestors who worked in fields in the 1950s or earlier, and Mexican American students today see their parents working in the strawberry fields. Even children whose families have no direct connection to the practice of migrant farming will have experiences with the Annual Strawberry Festival held in Ponchatoula, Louisiana.

In our classroom, the students' inquiry leads to a specific question about the Arnao family in 1910, "Why do the children have to work?" The teacher leads a conversation about where and how goods and services are purchased. Children unanimously decide parents purchase items like food and clothes from the store, but they need a job to get the money. When questions about why the family did not have enough money arise, the teacher explains each person did not make enough money to purchase food so the family had to work together. And in 1910, there were some state laws, but no national law in the United States prohibiting child labor.

One student, whose aunt lives in New Zealand, had many questions about the Arnao family's migratory lifestyle. He had prior knowledge of maps and asked to see where (on the map) that family had lived and worked.

The inquiries about maps lead to a small group of students' looking closely at various geographic locations and comparing those places to their location, here in Louisiana. Students discussing distances also questioned how the Arnao family traveled. The teacher explains that, in 1910, the Arnao family probably would have traveled using a horse and buggy. They probably also did a lot of walking, moving from farm to farm,

as the opportunities for work shifted southward. Many of the students were unaware of what a "horse and buggy" was, so the teacher led them through an Internet search for images of this form of transportation. After observing these pictures, one student realized that he owned a toy horse and buggy, and offered to bring it in for show and tell.

Students' questions about how food is harvested, purchased, and stored also present opportunities to bring in artifacts connected to life in the early 1900s. Students' understanding of the time period increased as they touched and asked further questions about a bushel basket, glass milk containers, a syrup jug, and a glass canning jar with a glass lid. Discussions about social problems, map exploration, and real world objects illustrate the differences between the past and present.¹⁴

The inquiry to connect community to classroom will look and sound differently in different classrooms, reflecting the geographical and historical diversity of the United States. The connections in this lesson illustrate just one area in Southeast Louisiana. If the teacher and students live in New York, the inquiry could include connections to the Broad Channel and Jamaica Bay immigrant life. Teachers and students living along the West Coast in Southern California might make connections to livestock and dairy farming.

Creative preK teachers are willing to engage in some background research as part of their lesson planning. Connecting historical narratives to the personal histories of students requires some research into the history and culture of an area. Visit your local public library and historical society for assistance. Connections to the lives of students, dependent on the geographical region, will shape the scope of the inquiry to appropriately reflect the personal histories of the students and the history of the community. The main idea of the second lesson is to use the student's newly acquired inquiry skills to look critically at primary source documents depicting the lives of children living in the same region during a time "long ago."

Third Lesson: Kids Like Us Long Ago

The teacher now selects, in contrast to images of child labor, historical photos of children in a school setting: a photo from 1943 of an extended school day program (for children of working parents) in Orange, Texas.¹⁵ The inquiry in our Head Start classroom leads to questions about rules, fellow students, and the activities students engage in at school today compared to the activities of the students in 1943. Many students discover they have a great deal in common with those students of decades ago. As one student noted, "They have cots like us, but we have mats." Students had questions about why the children were coming to school very early (6:00AM) and staying after school. The teacher answered by discussing how students today participate in aftercare programs. Students' then discuss reasons that parents work and how students feel when they stay after school as part of a recreational and child-care program.

The teacher listed students' observations and questions about the photos for comparing with observations about students'

activities during aftercare and daycare programs today. In one photo, children are playing a game in the hall. Students asked, “What game are they playing?” A teacher-guided Internet search yielded no clear explanations. Students decided they could generate a list of possibilities based on games they play at school now. The inquiry of the extended day program allows students to question their own school activities while growing increasingly familiar with school routines and rules.¹⁶ They also became aware of ways to learn about the past, such as asking teachers and parents, looking on the Internet, and going to the library. Now there’s a field trip idea: visit a school or public library and ask for books about children’s games of the past.

A Final Project: A History of Me

The unit culminated with a bookmaking project. The teacher provided an example of the type of book the students would be making by reading excerpts from a kid friendly biography or autobiography, such as *The Man Who Went to the Far Side of the Moon: The Story of Apollo 11 Astronaut Michael Collins*, which contains a series of letters the astronaut wrote to his family during his training for the Apollo lunar mission.¹⁷ For example, one excerpt read,

Here I am, a white male, age thirty-eight, 5 feet 11 inches, weight 165 pounds...state of mind unsettled, about to be shot off to the moon Yes, the moon.

The teacher also asked parents to complete activities with their children at home, providing items to be included in the books, such as copies of family photos (major family events like birthdays or every day activities), a family recipe, lyrics to a favorite song, or a short statement providing the meaning of their child’s name.

Children worked in teams of four to six students, and completed the books over the course of one week. The teacher visited the various groups, giving general directions and then focusing on the needs of individual children. The students also added their own drawings to the books. The teacher prompted each student to make connections to inquiries from the previous lessons as they shared their personal documents. Students referred to the lists generated by the teacher during discussions, the analysis tool charts, and artifacts to make connections and give deeper meaning to their books.

Finally, students were eager to share their books with classmates and parents. The children understood that their books were meaningful documents, reflecting their real-world experiences.

Connections to Future Learning

The use of primary sources in inquiry lessons and a meaningful project create a pre-kindergarten classroom rich in inquiry and historical thinking. Students are able to draw conclusions about the world around them and increase their background knowledge. Students begin to understand how the past con-

nects to their personal experiences now. Teaching with primary sources creates an environment of rigor and sets high expectations that students are eager to achieve. Concluding a series of primary source inquiry lessons with a project connects concepts and provides students with a tangible object for sharing their knowledge with others. Bookmaking gives students the opportunity to create their own primary source documents and drives home the idea that students can make connections to history on a very personal level. 🌍

Notes

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