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Unfolding the power of water

by Kasondra Brown, Fran Brockington, Shannon McClellan, and Leslie Jeter

After many days of planning and preparation, our 2010 Teachers' Retreat arrived, with the theme of "Unfolding the Power of Water." Our retreat location was a historic hotel on Galveston Island overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. Living in a part of the United States where hurricanes have wreaked havoc with pounding wind and water, we looked forward to this opportunity to show our teachers how much we appreciate their hard work and dedication. We felt strongly that hosting a retreat that was both meaningful and offered the benefits of professional development was the right thing to do.

United Way Bright Beginnings (UWBB), founded by ExxonMobil and United Way in 2002, is an early childhood initiative in Houston that is changing traditional child care, especially for centers serving and staffed by some of the low-income communities in our area. Part of our professional development work has been to form teacher cohorts around children's ages as a method of supporting teachers and facilitating their growth as leaders. Each cohort meets with their UWBB consultant to share their experiences and to adopt a new focus for their work. They, in turn, take this new information back to their centers and co-teachers.

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Our mentoring framework is based on the understanding that early childhood teachers deserve extended time for reflection and study. Teachers need individual support and opportunities for collaboration, along with participation in a learning community that challenges them to take intellectual and emotional risks. For our training this summer we chose as our topic the value of water play in children's lives. We invited teachers to the retreat who have consistently demonstrated leadership skills and have provided engaging experiences for their children in the classroom. We understand that giving attention to details is what helps guests feel welcomed. So, we rolled up our sleeves and rolled out the red carpet. For some, this was their first time away from their own families. Being mindful of the fact that each teacher brings her own set of expectations and levels of comfort, our simple, yet intentional, environment set the tone for each to have her needs met.

Mother Nature as a collaborator

The stage was set and Mother Nature cooperated. Upon arrival, teachers felt the first raindrops fall from the sky. We began our time together with our chairs in a large circle. Mentor-consultant, Sanjuana Frank, asked teachers to bring an item that is meaningful to them that they would share with the large group. This open-ended activity was filled with tears and stories of both joy and sadness. Teachers were able to share some of their deepest feelings about the work they do with young children. Being in an environment that was soothing and relaxing helped teachers to learn and explore in various ways. There were times when teachers shared, cried, and consoled each other as water flowed down in streams on their faces. Teachers were empowered and able to show compassion toward each other.

After this opening activity, we divided the cohort teachers into their respective age groups, each led by

Kasondra's Reflections

Our goal for the retreat was to provide an opportunity for teachers to slow down and reflect on the work they do each day to impact the lives of children and families. We did not want the retreat to lack purpose or focus. We wanted teachers to grow professionally and emotionally during our time together. There was time and opportunity for fun, relaxation, revelation, and rejuvenation. We want the teachers to feel special and remember how important and valuable they are. All too often, teachers are so involved in their care-giving responsibilities that they forget that they require care as well. In order to be effective and productive care-givers, we must allow ourselves time to become care-receivers.

a mentor-consultant. Although the agenda was the same for all three groups, each subgroup has its own 'culture.' During our cohort meetings teachers were provided with materials to create an image that represented their answers to questions asked. Some questions focused on road maps for their lives, while others remembered teachers who had supported them in their lives. The teachers were given a large block of time and ample space to spread out and create. There was also music, the tapping of strong rain against the windows overlooking the waves splashing against the seawall. A great environment for quiet reflection! Each teacher could safely share her feelings and discoveries in a group setting free of judgement. Rarely are teachers able to have their voices heard by their peers.

Shannon's Reflections

This retreat was another way we wanted to help teachers realize the importance of water. We helped them understand that we should have respect for nature that surrounds us and that water is a tool of survival as we live day by day. As teachers created images they were able to hear the pounding of the rain against the windowpane. There were sounds of waves flowing against the ocean walls with great force. I heard on several occasions how awesome it was to have a retreat that connects with the reality of nature, especially water. Our body is made up of mostly water. Every cell in our bodies needs water to live. Teachers were able to drink, swim, walk, and immerse themselves in this important substance. Water is not a want, it is a need.

Through our daily work with the teachers we see firsthand how their power often goes unnoticed and unappreciated.

Scientific inquiry

Our retreat was more than mere fun and games. Each planned activity was designed with a focus in mind. When teachers have a chance to observe and wonder and use critical thinking skills, they see for themselves how things work and what a delight inquiry can be. This gives them new ways to think and encourages them to give their children similar experiences to discover the wonder in the world.

Teachers had the opportunity to explore the many ways we could change water. We froze it and then carved it when it was in solid form; we put rock salt and food coloring on it; we melted it; we whipped it up; we added soap and made bubbles, and heated it up to make vapor, clouds, or 'Texas humidity.' We explored descriptive vocabulary about water and its properties: wet, liquid, trickling, calming, rushing, soothing, flooding, swirling, flowing, raining, and cleansing. We discovered firsthand the things scientists do:

- wonder and ask questions
- learn from their senses
- observe closely and notice details
- describe, draw, and write what they see and think
- compare and sort by looking carefully
- count and measure to make comparisons
- experiment by trial and error and test predictions
- keep trying over and over
- work together with others and have fun

We wanted each teacher to feel the joy that children discover when they have these same experiences.

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Beginnings Workshop

When we slow down long enough to hear our own thoughts, form new ideas, and offer them as gifts to the rest of the world, this is the greatest gift.

Fran's Reflections

Several weeks after our retreat, a few teachers from each cohort met at one of the UWBB centers and offered some of the same materials to explore water with the children. Some engaged with the children while others practiced their observation skills:

- We noticed what touched our hearts as we watched and listened.
- We wondered what each child was trying to accomplish.
- We observed how they interacted with each other.
- We tried to capture the children's inquiry with our cameras.

Afterwards the cohort teachers got back together to analyze what the children may have learned from this water play and how we can build on these experiences and extend their play and discovery. One discovery was that the children learned that they could put a finger or a sponge in their mounds of bubbles without popping them. One child said, "It's humongous; it has to be a hundred bubbles!" Her mathematical mind was at work as much as her scientific reasoning. We wrote learning stories about the children's explorations with water in these ways.

The following weekend all the teachers from UWBB centers came together for a training. Each cohort leader took responsibility for setting up learning stations for all the teachers to have hands-on experiences with water. Just as they had encouraged the children, these teachers encouraged their coworkers to make predictions and engage in scientific thinking. We wanted them to feel the joy that the children had discovered!

We wanted each teacher to feel the joy that children discover when they have these same experiences.

Connections made

The time away allowed the teachers to think deeply about their work and how they will see the children they care for with 'new eyes.' We discussed the parallels between "Unfolding the Power of Water" and the daily conditions we find ourselves in. Early childhood educators are seldom encouraged to see the details in the children in their care. Our beach 'treasure hunt' reminded teachers to find the treasures in each day. When each teacher combined her 'found treasure' with

Leslie's Reflections

As a director, I think this training was different in that it provoked some thought as to why children and adults are so drawn to water. The teachers were able to use so many different materials to store water, move water, color water, and measure water. And then they were able to take these materials back to our centers. This kind of experience encouraged the teachers to be generous in planning and providing water activities for the children.

If I had to pick a single skill that we learned that week from the children, it would be that there are endless possibilities. Children recognize that there are infinite ways to use materials and infinite ways to learn. Of course, there was much more! They also learned how to interact with an important material, that they are important and deserving of a variety of materials and activities, and that there is joy in learning. And what the teachers learned is invaluable. I think they learned the same things the children learned: that they are important and deserving of excellent training and materials. They were reminded how important water is and how connected to it we are, and to think about how we marvel at it and the deep mystery of our attraction to it. The teachers were also reminded how important they and the work they do are. This inspired them to think about other materials they could provide for the children.

Through this training the teachers enhanced skills they already possessed, but on a much deeper level than they had anticipated.

the group's, a beautiful work of art emerged. We want teachers to find the joy in their work. Each moment spent with children in the classroom brings a new layer to our lives. Do we stop to notice? We want teachers to reconnect and not overlook the basic needs of humanity. When we slow down long enough to hear our own thoughts, form new ideas, and offer them as gifts to the rest of the world, this is the greatest gift. The end of the retreat was bitter-sweet, filled with refreshing smiles, hugs, and a new-found kinship among sisters.



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