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From the Field

A Constructivist Educator in a Standards-Driven World: An Interview with Marita White

L. Kathryn Sharp, Ed.D, East Tennessee State University

In a busy, highly-productive first grade classroom in a Title I Memphis Tennessee school, first grade teacher Marita White skillfully blends constructivist principles with the standards-driven, commercial curricula to create innovative, effective learning experiences for her young learners. Her classroom, 98% minority, presents challenges found in many large urban settings. By using a constructivist approach Ms. White addresses these challenges and creates a community of learners_where children's ideas are respected and used to fuel learning.

As you enter the classroom you see children working in small groups in a variety of activities while Ms. White works with the children individually and in small groups. The room is rich in student-created work and reading and writing activities appear to be integrated throughout the curriculum. This is the type of classroom that inspires teachers and learners alike. The children are clearly engaged and so proud of their work. Ms. White was kind enough to share insights into how she has blended her firm constructivist philosophies with standards and other curricular requirements.

Ms. White explained, "I know the standards very well. Right now we use the state standards, but we are in the process of transitioning to Common Core, so I do look at both. They provide structure and a framework for our learning. However, I know that my children need to guide their learning experiences and that with this belief and this type of thinking my children are able to construct meaning in different ways and at different rates. It is so important that they take ownership of their learning. It is so amazing to watch as this takes place. It is possible for these two things (constructivism and standards-based instruction) to work together. We do it every day!

I always look at the standards to determine my framework and direction. I really can't think of anything I teach that I wouldn't use this resource. It is so important that I know what kinds of things first graders are expected to 'know and be able to do.' That's the language of the standards. The wonderful part is they go *with* our work and are not something separate. I think about what is developmentally appropriate and what the learning outcomes are—always the learning outcomes. That's the key! We are here to learn!"

White is a big believer in the process of investigating topics that the children find interesting. She believes her job is to look at where this investigation can overlap with the standards. One remarkable example of this is an investigation the children did into goods and services. Ms. White reads chapter books daily and one of the books had prompted the initial discussion. The project evolved as a result of some of the students' developing interest and awareness of this concept and a team brainstorming meeting at Ms. White's school. This is the exact window Ms. White looks for, so she researched the standards and saw the abundant links to social studies and literacy related to the topic.

After an enthusiastic community meeting to discuss the concept of *businesses* and *good and services*, Ms. White spent time introducing the academic language needed for the investigation.

Ms. White wove literacy through every aspect of her teaching. Literacy is not a separate part of the day, but is a part of each content area. For the goods and services investigation, they read

several books related to businesses, work, services, and so on, and the children began making personal connections with the topic (Katz and Chard, 1989).

Ms. White worked with the class to schedule meetings to plan the next stages of the investigation (Katz and Chard, 1989). If they had an idea for goods or services, what happens next? The children brainstormed the types of goods and services they could offer. Some of the ideas generated were: printed word card packets of adjectives used to describe favorite super heroes, braided book marks and journals/books, painted picture frames, snowman art activity with directions (and sequencing details), decorative yarn objects, heart ornaments, story time/read alouds and more.



This student's service was to provide read alouds.

The level of engagement was clear on the faces of the children. They knew they could have a business and “sell” what they made or their service, but how? They looked at books, talked to parents, business owners, and looked at online sources to direct their work. They next weeks were a flurry of writing activities to make supply lists, create business names, advertisements, and so on. The children chose to work on their businesses whenever they were not working on other aspects of their schooling. Ms. White also stressed this part of her teaching philosophy, “Our investigations and inquiries are not the ‘curriculum’ but supplement the curriculum. It gives the children a chance to apply the things we are learning in our content areas. When we work in ramps and pathways for example, we apply what we are learning in science and we use literacy, math and so on. When we had our exciting investigation in caring for pets, we used every content area in practical, real world applications. In these investigations they come to see how useful the learning is and it is always very intrinsically motivating because they generate the ideas—they direct so much of the learning. It is rewarding to see their ideas woven into other curricular requirements and to see my students so excited about their learning. During the goods and services investigation, one of my little boys who had often struggled academically said, ‘I have to finish this work because I want to go work on my business!’ To me, that’s learning!”



Students worked for days to prepare their goods for their business. These students are painting hearts for their “Lovely Hearts” business.

The investigation was multi-faceted and care was given to include families., “For me,” stated White, “one of the things that was most significant was the level of parental involvement that we achieved during this investigation. We informed parents of our investigation and provided pertinent information related to our study so that they could work with and support their child’s learning at home too. The parents were encouraged to use key vocabulary and also provide opportunities for their child at home to earn money so that they could purchase goods and services at the market.”

After the businesses were designed and the goods created, the children set up their markets and sold the items or services for 25 cents each. They counted the money, totaled the values, and discussed successes and ways to improve their businesses. They wrote about the investigation in their journals, in shared writing experiences, and through recording, labeling, and charting. Perhaps one of the most critical parts of the process was when Ms. White asked the children what they could do with the money they earned. This was challenging for the children and of course there were suggestions like “buy toys, candies” and so on, but Ms. White used this time to guide their thinking by providing suggestions. She asked how they could use the money for something important and for something that would help someone. The children’s suggestions became more thoughtful and they soon came to talk about a student in the school who was sick and had been diagnosed with cancer. “Some of the children were aware of a second grade student who had cancer. They knew he was very sick and wanted to help. They wanted to send the money to him, so I suggested giving the money to a hospital that helps children who get sick like him. I told them about St. Jude and they all agreed that is where they wanted to send their money. I think this is significant because this is another type of learning that goes far beyond our content area learning. They really wanted to help and worked very hard to make this money. They were clearly proud of what they accomplished. It takes a great deal of work from first graders to make \$56 in quarters.”

Ms. White also shared her assessment strategies from this and other investigations. “I gather very valuable information about the children in all areas of their development during this work. As I move around the room, I listen carefully and make some notes. I watch the children interact with each other as well. I am as concerned about their social development as I am their academic development. I also believe that learning occurs in social contexts. I know that learning is taking place as I listen and hear the children use the new vocabulary of our investigation in their conversations and to see how they scaffold for each other. I like to take pictures to capture the learning as well. In all instances I use this information to plan further instruction and to scaffold for