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Art Play: Stories of Engaging Families, Inspiring Learning, and Exploring Emotions

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Preschool Through **Grade 3**

Art Play: Stories of Engaging Families, Inspiring Learning, and Exploring Emotions

Collage is the ultimate playful technique. . . . When you put it all together, you create something new. It is really about trial and error . . . about trying things and making mistakes. It's about forgiving yourself when you make mistakes, and playfulness lets you do that.

—Hanoch Piven, *“Living in a Playful Collage”*

HANOCH PIVEN, AN INTERNATIONALLY known collage-caricature artist, visited Omaha, Nebraska, to conduct arts-based workshops for families, teachers, and children. The workshops were organized by the Omaha Family Literacy Partnership (OFLP). The

partnership promotes literacy learning among children and their families through community activities such as author and illustrator visits, family book celebrations, storytelling events, book distributions, and puppet shows. The OFLP invited Piven, an author and illustrator of children's books, because of his connection to literacy. Playful explorations with objects are his method of creating art, and this method was the focus of the workshops.

The weeklong project engaged more than 2,000 children, teachers, and family members at a number of locations: a children's museum, a nonprofit center for immigrant families, the University of Nebraska Omaha, a public library branch, and local schools that serve pre-K

Photos courtesy of the authors

through grade 6 children from families with low incomes. Its success was due in part to the excitement of the teachers, families, and community partners. Success was also contingent on thorough preparation and, of course, on the talent, energy, and communication skills of the visiting artist.

Art play

The project focused on literacy, with the theme of play's strong presence in art creation running through the workshops. One result was that participating educators gained a newfound respect for playful art explorations as a strategy for developing literacy learning. Overall, the surprise discovery was that the artwork itself was not the most important outcome of the events. Instead, the true value of the experience was in the interactions and stories that flowed from the playful exploration of materials and process of creating. Three educators tell their stories in this article.

Like make-believe play, narratives, and other meaning-making activities, producing art is a way children make sense of their worlds.

Although project participants were not intentionally aligned with the Reggio Emilia experience in early childhood education, we found overlapping areas between the practices of some OFLP partners and several Reggio components. For example, the collages in Piven's children's books brought to mind the Reggio Emilia School project "L'importanza di rivedersi/The importance of seeing yourself again" (Malaguzzi & Musatti 1996). The Hundred Languages of Children exhibit demonstrated how children explored "identity" through a project focused on revisiting the concept of oneself using collage as a mode of expression (or "language" in Reggio terms). Strikingly similar to Piven's art were faces that children in Reggio programs created with recyclable materials. Old fountain pen tips (nibs) became eyes, while noses were symbolized by spoons, forks, and a pair of scissors. A leaf represented a mouth, and feathers made eyebrows.

The term *art play* describes the multiple dimensions and levels of play that occur when children create art. Like make-believe play, narratives, and other meaning-making

To learn more about Hanoch Piven and his concepts about creating art, watch his engaging TED presentation, "Hanoch Piven: Living in a Playful Collage," at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6e99DuPQ6j8>.

activities, producing art is a way children make sense of their worlds (Anning & Ring 2005; Kolbe 2005, 2007; Ahn & Filipenko 2007; Bhroin 2007; Bentley 2013). Freedom to take risks during play is pivotal to the art as well as the play experience—"children in play can be free to experiment and take risks that they might not take in other circumstances" (Ostroff 2012, 26). Taking risks in art play is part of Hanoch Piven's process.

Art play takes place in a risk-safe classroom culture that supports playful learning. In such classrooms, teachers encourage trial and error, value exploration, and respect children's individual perspectives. Mistakes are an accepted and necessary part of the playing and learning processes. On a play continuum with free play at one end and teacher-guided play at the other, art play with children spans the entire range. Specific adult-imposed goals or agendas are not part of art play found on the free play end of the continuum. Alternatively, at the other end of the continuum—guided play—teachers are integral to the art-play process and learning.

Art play also exists in guided yet playful learning experiences. Art play in OFLP's family events relied mostly on collaboration with workshop leaders and the visiting artist, Hanoch Piven. We observed families consulting with each other as well as asking Mr. Piven for advice as they participated in workshops.

Engaging families

The Learning Community Center of South Omaha helps new immigrant families with English language learning and connects them with services and resources. The center follows a family literacy model to increase education and literacy levels for both children and their families, and center staff work to establish strong relationships with families. The center offered a family art exploration workshop facilitated by Hanoch Piven.

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One hallmark of the Reggio Emilia experience is the importance of family participation in the programs and in the education of their young children. In interviews with Loris Malaguzzi (between 1989 and 1992), Gandini (2012) quotes the founder of the Reggio Emilia experience: “Teachers must possess a habit of questioning their certainties; a growth of sensitivity, awareness, and availability . . . an enriched evaluation of parental roles; and skills to talk, listen, and learn from parents” (46).

Although roles and approaches of the Learning Community Center differ from those of Reggio Emilia schools in many ways, Anne O’Hara, director of the center, and her staff have meaningful working relationships with families. In the following section, Anne describes a parent and teacher effort to promote and implement a workshop engaging Spanish-speaking families with art and literature.

Engaging families in art play [Anne O’Hara]

One month before the workshop with Hanoch Piven, the staff began creating buzz about the project—talking about Piven and sharing his website with participating families. Isaura, mother of 5-year-old Eduardo, created a one-page flyer to ask families to help us collect materials such as buttons, screws, and hairpins for the workshop.

Isaura used the task as an opportunity to practice her English. Families donated items to the center over the course of several weeks, and the center supplemented the materials with more recyclables and art supplies.

More than 115 people showed up for this workshop. Entire families arrived, with children ranging in age from infants to teens. (Children under the age of 3 were cared for by staff in



Flyer by Isaura Ramirez



About Hanoch Piven

The colorful and witty portraits of Israeli artist Hanoch Piven have appeared throughout the last 20 years on both sides of the Atlantic—in most major American magazines and newspapers such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Rolling Stone*, and in many European publications from the *London Times* to the Swiss *Die WeltWoche*. In Israel, Piven has gained great visibility due to his longtime collaboration with the daily *Haaretz* and through his TV shows for young children.

His art is about communicating through fun and playfulness by reinventing the meaning of regular objects and inviting viewers to participate. His books have been used in many kindergartens and schools in Israel to teach children to develop creativity and to use art as a means of nonverbal communication.

Piven has published over 10 children’s books in the United States and Israel. The most recent is *Creating with Piven—A Workshop Book*, published in 2011 in Israel. He conducts workshops in many countries, following the principles of his collage technique and encouraging children and adults to create using just common objects from the world around them. Art therapists embrace Piven’s work as an effective tool for raising literacy issues through play and creativity.

Books

Let’s Make Faces. 2013. New York: Simon & Schuster.

My Best Friend Is as Sharp as a Pencil—And Other Funny Classroom Portraits. 2010. New York: Random House.

My Dog Is as Smelly as Dirty Socks—And Other Funny Family Portraits. 2012. New York: Random House.

The Perfect Purple Feather. 2002. Boston: Little, Brown.

What Athletes Are Made Of. 2006. New York: Simon & Schuster.

What Cats Are Made Of. 2009. New York: Simon & Schuster.

What Presidents Are Made Of. 2004. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Website

www.pivenworld.com

Applications

Faces iMake ABC

Faces iMake



the playroom.) Piven spoke to the crowd in fluent Spanish, putting everyone at ease as he flipped through a slide show of his illustrations and of workshops he had conducted at schools and community centers worldwide. After the presentation, participants headed to a second room for the art workshop.

In the hallway between the two rooms, a long table was covered with the collected materials. Families walked along both sides of this colorful buffet and selected items to use in creating family portraits. Some worked at small tables, and others found space on the hallway floor when the room was full. With poster board, a cool-melt glue gun, and their collected items, families began their portraits. Piven wove through the room, discussing the emerging creations. Parents and children enjoyed being creative together—using coins for eyes, magnifying glasses for eyeglasses, soft drink tabs for braces, combs for mustaches, and drinking straws for hair. Parents had quality interactions with their children, and children had the rare opportunity to watch their parents become playful and childlike.

Considerations

Anne leads a family program that builds on parents' strengths, interests, and needs—key goals for family engagement programming (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez 2006; Halgunseth et al. 2009). Isaura's handmade flyer, which was copied, distributed, and posted at the center, was pivotal in the success of the project. Because the Learning Community Center's programming includes reciprocity and co-ownership of projects, the flyer moved families to contribute to the collage-materials buffet and to attend the event. An important part of the staff's work is building relationships. A successful family engagement program promotes strengths, emphasizes reciprocity, includes authentic relationships, and builds on the interests and skills of families (Halgunseth et al. 2009).

In the collaborative family workshop environment, the director and staff interacted with families through art play, helped find materials and glue guns, and served as collaborators when asked. The art-play experience offered the staff

a relaxed venue for talking to, listening to, and learning from families.

Art play in the classroom

Art play as a teaching strategy is contingent on teachers' planning. For the art and play to truly come from the child, teachers prepare environments with materials and an objective for both the art product and goal, guiding children in learning through interactions while children explore, play, and create with art materials. Reed, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff (2012) advocate strong curricular approaches that are crucial for successful preschool education, and they argue for guided play as an effective approach to meet learning objectives. Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff (2013) define *guided play* as being “midway between direct instruction and free play, presenting a learning goal, and scaffolding the environment while allowing children to maintain a large degree of control over their own learning” (104).

Piven-inspired portrait work includes meeting curricular goals through art play. For a collage portrait process to include playfulness with learning, a risk-safe classroom culture is at the foundation while symbolization is at its core. In the collage portrait, symbolic representation is part of the art process. For young children, symbolic representation happens when a child transforms a birthday candle into an eyebrow while constructing a face. The symbolic representation in the collage technique is part of the creative play scenario—playful exploration of materials, trial and error, and the use of flexible thinking are at work. Using symbolic representation in art play is an important step toward moving children's thinking from the concrete to the abstract representation of words.

In the art process, children move from the concept of a real face (the concrete) to a work of art that symbolizes the real thing (iconic representation). This process lays the groundwork for children to reach higher levels of symbolization—for example, when the word *face* (the abstract) represents a real face. Art offers children an important experiential bridge, helping them move from the concrete

to the abstract world of words. For preschoolers, the playful collage technique with peer interactions and teacher guidance opens up multiple opportunities for symbolic representation and language development.

Like Malaguzzi and Musatti (1996), Pelo (2007) believes that self-portraiture is deeply connected to children's identity perceptions and thus to the stories children tell in their portraits.

A self-portrait is an intimate, bold declaration of identity. In her self-portrait, a child offers herself as both subject and artist. When we look at her self-portrait, we see a child as she sees herself. The story of self-portrait work is a tender story to tell. (95)

Loretta Novotny teaches a Head Start class in which most children are African American and from families with low incomes. She engaged the children in a study of faces as part of a larger "All About Me" project.

Art play and learning [Loretta Novotny]

In a study of faces, the children observed facial features, described their functions, and explored the five senses. To show the concept of symmetry, I cut apart an apple, a kiwi, and a bear-shaped graham cracker to demonstrate that the two halves looked the same. By folding a large photograph of each child's face in half, then opening it up, children discovered symmetry in their faces. They observed where the eyes, nose, ears, and mouth are located on the face.

The children draw their self-portraits during center time. I ask them to describe a make-believe function of the parts on their faces.

Mrs. Novotny: What if a body part, like your hair, could do something else?

Tyrell: Oh, like superpowers?

Mrs. Novotny: Sure.

Tyrell: I want them [my hair] to bump into bad guys.

Mrs. Novotny: What about your nose?

Tyrell: Blow fire out.

Mrs. Novotny: How about you, Karma?

Karma, 3 years old, doesn't catch on, and offers answers that match the function of the facial feature: the nose could get an earring, the mouth could spit out something. She takes a greater risk with hair.

Karma: I want my hair to be like beans, and my bean-hair can talk.

Mrs. Novotny: Well, what would the bean-hair say?

Karma: They'd do something cool—like say I love you.

We also read several children's books. *Let's Make Faces*, by Hanoch Piven, inspired the children to create their own faces using different materials. First, they made faces out of dough. They kneaded the dough and pressed it into the shapes of their faces.

Our recyclable and repurposed objects came from the classroom and the science room, homes, and outdoors. The children placed the objects they had collected on a big

plastic tray, then they sifted through them, exploring with their hands and describing them. After giving them time to explore, I suggested the children add facial features to their portraits.

Kenisha: (sifts through the objects) Ooh, something is spiky.

Tyrell: (picks up a pencil)

This is a pencil. (pokes holes in the clay to create hair)

Andrew: Can I have that for a minute, Tyrell? Can I have that for a minute? (points to the pencil)

Tyrell hands Andrew the pencil.

Mrs. Novotny: What are you going to use for your hair?

Karma: Kenisha, I found a barrette. (hands it to Kenisha)

Mrs. Novotny: You can use that if you want to, Kenisha.

Kenisha gives it back to Karma. Karma presses the barrette onto the dough face, then asks Mrs. Novotny to take it out of the dough.

Mrs. Novotny: Kenisha, what are you going to use for your hair?

Kenisha: I'm going to use . . . (before finishing the sentence, she picks up wood sticks and places them on the clay face as hair; next, she picks up counting bears) We have bears? (and puts the counting bear back down)

Tyrell: (sets a sponge on his dough face for hair, then takes it off) Can you glue this?

Mrs. Novotny: Can you press it into the clay? (helps Tyrell press the sponge into the clay)



Considerations

Loretta's teaching strategy includes art and guided play as she implements the class project on faces. She offers the children materials that can spark exploration, interaction, and interest. By posing questions, Loretta leads the children from exploration of the materials to achievement of curricular objectives such as developing language and conceptual understanding of facial features and placement. The conversation with 5-year-old Tyrell and 3-year-old Karma allows Tyrell to create superpowers for his facial features and model the game for Karma. After trying a few (safe) reality-based scenarios, she joins in by imagining new functions for her fantasy bean-hair. Teachers' playful interactions with children promote symbolic play, which is linked to proficiencies in literacy learning (Nicolopoulou, McDowell, & Brockmeyer 2006).

While meeting curricular objectives in a playful way, the project allows children to choose interesting materials that guide their creations. Art play is explorative, constructive, and flexible. Art play that incorporates guided play is similar to the art process described in the Reggio Emilia literature (Malaguzzi & Musatti 1996).



Art play introduces the language of emotions

Reggio-inspired projects can help young children learn the language of emotions—facial expressions, posture, and voice, for example, communicate how we feel—and we have many emotions to understand and communicate. One hallmark of the Reggio Emilia experience is revisiting concepts under study in multiple ways through many languages (modes of expression—for example, singing, dancing, acting, representing). In the Reggio Emilia project described earlier, children observed themselves using mirrors and photographs, then drew self-portraits. They explored facial expressions and artistically depicted concepts such as “a brain that is happy,” “sad hands are closed,” and “eyes are shaped like a puddle” (Malaguzzi & Musatti 1996, 50–51). When children explore facial expressions in self-portraits, they are introduced to the vocabulary of emotions such as *happy*, *sad*, and *angry*, and they begin to develop emotional literacy.

Emotional literacy is “the ability to identify, understand, and respond to emotions in oneself and others in a healthy manner” (Joseph, Strain, & Ostrosky 2005, 1). Encouraging children to discuss vocabulary related to emotions allows them to better communicate their feelings and aids in their emotional development because they may be able to understand their emotional experiences.

The absence of emotion words may lead to a child misinterpreting the actions of others. This can encourage

the child to act out until their peers no longer will engage with them (Joseph & Strain 2005). Thus, it is important for “early childhood teachers to plan lessons that include activities addressing the building of vocabulary, concepts, and social skills” (Figueroa-Sanchez 2008, 301).

Teachers’ playful interactions with children promote symbolic play, which is linked to proficiencies in literacy learning.

Similar to the Reggio Emilia project, *Let’s Make Faces* engages children in playful explorations with art materials by encouraging them to make faces. The book offers teachers a meaningful opportunity for conversations related to emotions. To illustrate how art play offers opportunities for teachers to introduce emotions and feeling words with young children, a project focused on creating faces and exploring emotions is described by Theodora Kyle, a prekindergarten teacher whose multilingual classroom includes children whose families are migrants and refugees from Burma, Nepal, and Bhutan. She engages the class in a study of body parts, and in the process introduces concepts of emotions.

Exploring the language of emotions through art play [Theodora Kyle]

Because the class I teach includes children with multiple home languages, a primary goal is to provide a positive, safe, and nurturing environment in which children feel free to explore and investigate. Such environments help children feel comfortable expressing their own physical and emotional issues. Helping children to identify their own body parts and emotions is an important teaching goal because children can learn to express their feelings in a healthy and positive way. Using picture books to teach vocabulary makes learning more visual, engaging, and meaningful.

I find Piven’s *Let’s Make Faces* very useful. Through this book, children learn to identify the eyes, nose, mouth, ears, and hair in English. As children learn about the parts of the face, they see that faces express feelings, which serves as an introduction to the vocabulary of emotions. We focus on happy, sad, and angry emotions by reading books about feelings and having discussions prompted by my questions, such as “How do you know when your friend is sad?” and “What can you do to help her out?”

I conclude the study of the parts of the face and the introduction to the concept that faces show emotions with the portrait collage project inspired by *Let’s Make Faces*. The collage workshop allows children who are dual language learners to use their knowledge and vocabulary for parts of the face and emotions in a nonthreatening and creative manner.

Memo to: All Families of Young Children
From: Diane E. Levin
Date: May 2014
Subject: **Advocating for Play at School and at Home**

Play is essential for children's optimal development and learning. Through play children use what they already know to help them figure out new things, see how they work, and master skills. As they do this, children add new social, emotional, and intellectual knowledge and skills to what they already know. They experience the satisfaction that comes from working things out and solving problems on their own. They think and sometimes say out loud, "I can do it!" This is the kind of learning through play that prepares children to feel confident in themselves as learners who see new information and ideas as interesting problems to be solved.

However, all play is not the same, and today several forces can endanger quality play. First, many of today's toys are linked to what children see in movies and on television. These media experiences channel children into imitating what they see on screens instead of creating their own play. Second, the use of electronic media takes young children away from play and can make their child-created play seem boring. Finally, growing pressure to teach academic skills at younger and younger ages takes time and resources away from the quality, teacher-facilitated play that young children need in preschool and kindergarten.

I encourage you to learn about the ways child-created active play supports learning and to advocate for play and encourage it at home. Play will give your children a foundation for positive social and emotional health as well as later academic success in school.

Diane E. Levin, PhD, is a professor of early childhood education at Wheelock College, in Boston. She is a cofounder of Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (www.truceteachers.org) and Defending the Early Years (www.deyproject.org). Diane is the author of *Beyond Remote-Controlled Childhood: Teaching Children in the Media Age*, from NAEYC.



I begin by scattering collage materials for the project on a table and allowing the children the time they need to explore and play with them. Examining the materials ahead of time sparks their curiosity and interest, prompts dialogue with peers, and allows them time to think about what pieces they might use to create their own self-portraits.

As the children create their portraits, I encourage the use of emotions vocabulary by suggesting they make a happy face, a sad face, or an angry face. To my surprise, only one child out of 16 draws an emotion on her portrait. This may be a result of the children's limited understanding of English vocabulary or of their focus on making sure they have included all the parts of the face in their portraits.

Later, many of the children draw faces during choice time, either in the writing center or in the art center. Anna brings her picture to me and points to a mouth. I say, "Oh, I see you made a face. I see two eyes and a mouth." Then I ask, "Is she happy or sad?" Anna replies, "Sad." I ask, "Why is she sad?" She says, "Because her mom is gone." Anna is able to answer my question, which means that she understands the emotional concept of *sad*.

Considerations

Theodora's story illustrates how playful explorations with art and creating faces helps teachers introduce vocabulary about emotions, an important aspect of promoting emotional literacy in young children. Although her experience may show that the children have a very basic understanding of emotions, Theodora views this as a starting point—it is where the children are at the moment. She is excited

Early Childhood Teacher Candidates' Self-Portraits Inspired by Hanoch Piven

In an introduction to the study of creativity in early childhood education, and as a way to introduce themselves to their classmates, teacher candidates at the University of Nebraska Omaha made collage self-portraits using repurposed and found materials. Indicative of Piven's art is the inclusion of objects that symbolize key dimensions of the students' lives.

Emma

I love exploring nature and being outdoors, so I chose to include bark in my hair, grass eyelashes, and a flower for my lips. I chose pennies for my eyes because although my eyes are brown and all of my features are dark, sometimes the light brings out copper flecks. Freckles are represented by coffee beans because my daily life sometimes demands caffeine. My nose is a peace sign because it is in the center of my portrait and in my life I strive for balance through kindness, peace, and being centered.



Sarah

My baby son was recently born with a congenital heart defect (why my cheeks are hearts). He currently lives in the neonatal intensive care unit at Children's Hospital. Since his birth, I feel all I do is pump (why milk storage bags serve as my hair). It is all I can do to help him at this point. Right now my life is a sterile environment (why the surgical mask serves as my mouth) where my hands are tied (why finger traps serve as my eyebrows). My days and weeks often feel like a yo-yo of emotion—there are many ups and downs. However, my son has many people all around the world praying for him (globe as nose). With their support, I will remember to focus on the positives (smile on the yo-yo face). My son is my life now.



to see that the children have begun to notice emotions in stories and are identifying them using the vocabulary they have learned. By engaging the children in art play and introducing the language of emotions, Theodora has sparked their development of emotional literacy.

Conclusion

The authors began a school- and community-based literacy project that brought an author/illustrator of children's books to conduct collage portrait workshops. The big difference between this and our past projects was the presence of art play in the workshop. Embedded in this project across the sites were exploration, symbolism, interaction, and engagement. Participants interacted and responded to collage materials, causing language and literacy development to flow in all three settings and making for a richer experience than in past OFLP author/illustrator projects, which predominantly centered on guest speakers' presentations.

While implementing the project, we observed children in preschool and kindergarten focusing on symbolic representation of facial features while older students (third-through sixth-graders) followed Piven's lead in symbolizing personality characteristics or special events in their

lives. Piven's art inspired storytelling when the stories were difficult to tell, for example, Sarah's self-portrait, in which she showed the hurt, fear, and pain she experienced as her newborn remained in the hospital with a heart condition. (See "Early Childhood Teacher Candidates Self-Portraits Inspired by Hanoch Piven.")

Experiencing the collage process in a family event and also in pre-K through grade 6 classrooms helps children and adults understand the illustrator's process. It made the OFLP planning group think differently about how to implement future family book celebrations with authors and illustrators. The workshop encouraged a playful spirit as families created self-portraits. Through art play, teachers can intentionally guide learning and introduce vocabulary using activities related to children's books.

Then I understood that it wasn't really about creating art. It was about telling stories. It was about communicating. Playfulness through the use of collage was allowing people to tell a story through art which perhaps would have been too difficult to say in words.

—Hanoch Piven, "Living in a Playful Collage"

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Muscle development	Activity and materials	Description
Whole arm	Under-the-Table Art Large sheet of drawing paper, tape, and crayons or chalk	Tape the paper to the underside of a table. Children lie on their backs under the table, extend the arm with crayon or chalk in hand, and draw on the paper.
	Ribbons and Rings Set of plastic bracelets and 12 inches of colored ribbon for each bracelet	Attach a ribbon to each bracelet using a simple slip-knot. Play music. Children wear or hold their bracelets and use their bracelet arms to make big circles, wave the ribbons high and low, and perform other creative movements.
	Stir It Up! Large pot, long wooden spoon, and pebbles	Put the dry ingredients and the spoon in the pot, and place it in the dramatic play area. Children stir the “soup” using a large circular arm motion.
Whole hand	Sponge Squeeze Small sponge, divided food dish, and water	Fill one side of the dish with water. Children transfer the water from side to side by dipping and squeezing the sponge.
	Lid Match Two baskets and a collection of plastic containers with matching lids (spice jars, margarine tubs, yogurt cups, shampoo containers, hand cream jars, and such)	Sort the containers and lids into separate baskets. Children match and attach the lids to the right containers.
	Cornmeal Sifting Crank-style sifter, large bowl, and fine sand	Place the empty sifter in the bowl. Children use two hands to pour the sand into the sifter, then turn the crank handle to sift the sand into the bowl.

Adapted with permission from Nell R. Carvell, Language Enrichment Activities Program (LEAP), vol. 1 (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University, 2006).

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