

Using Food in the Classroom

By Lisa Murphy, M.Ed.
www.ooeygoeey.com

I use food in the classroom. Not to be a rebel (Lisa Murphy, *the food user!*) but because I value the sensorial experiences the materials provide; touching things that are smooth and rough, feeling things that are dry and wet, smelling different aromas, listening to the squishes and the crunches, noticing physical attributes of a wide variety of materials and yes, the occasional taste test! Through the years I have used dried beans of many sizes, varieties, colors and shapes; used both colored and plain rice, cornmeal, cooked spaghetti, popcorn kernels, flax seed, uncooked oatmeal, flour, knox gelatin molds... the list goes on!

We use dyed pasta for collage art and for stringing necklaces and sometimes add colored rice to flour in the sensory tub. We do splatter painting using knee-hi nylons and un-popped popcorn kernels and use raw spaghetti and froot-loops for stacking. We occasionally utilize corn syrup for edible finger paint and have made peanut butter playdough. We watch what happens when certain materials are mixed together and how they change and react together, such as baking soda with vinegar, soda with certain candies and also cornstarch with water! I have been known to paint with pudding. With my toes. But every point has a counter point and every rule has an exception. The intention of this article is to share with you what I believe and why. Like any controversial topic, discussion of food usage in the classroom cannot be limited to oversimplified statements such as "I use food" or "I don't use food." We all have a responsibility to know *why* we have chosen one side or the other. We also need to realize that there could very well be a time when we find ourselves on the other side of the fence. Are we ready for when that time comes? Have we examined all sides of the issue or are we just doing what we were told to do without ever actually thinking about it?

Here are the general comments I've heard along the way:

- It's disrespectful to certain cultures and populations
- The parents say it's wasteful
- My professor told us not to
- Children are starving in some parts of the world
- ECERS-3 ITERS-3 FCCERS-3 Licensing Accreditation My Co-Worker My Boss (pick your poison!) says we aren't allowed to use it

Let the unpacking begin!

One of my first student teaching assignments was in a child care center located in one of the housing projects in inner city Chicago. Out of respect for the drastic poverty most of these children lived in (some of the families slept in the abandoned cars in the parking lot) we didn't use food in the classroom. As I have gotten older and, dare I say, wiser? I like to think that courtesy and common sense, not a policy, would guide us to make a program choice such as this. And sidebar: we must remember to not make assumptions about individual family situations based on the zip code we work in, but that's another workshop. If we know, and I mean *know*, that families in the program might not know where their next meal is coming from, then playing with beans and rice in the sensory tub is not a respectful choice. *But knowing is different than assuming.* And if there are families in this situation I would pose the following challenge: Are we assisting the families in getting the services and assistance they require? Or is our level of involvement making sure they aren't "offended" by the contents of our sensory tub?

If you choose to not use food in the classroom because that's what your professor preached from the podium 15 years ago we need to talk. As a professional you have a responsibility to make decisions that

are in the best interest of the children in your *current* class. Not running on auto-pilot with information you were given years ago! Children are always growing and changing and we should be too. If you have a child who is incredibly tactile and, as an example, you aren't willing to make ooblick because five years ago your CDA mentor told you it's never okay to use cornstarch, I'd invite you to seriously consider the legitimacy of a good/bad yes/no black/white rationale. Take what you learned from past mentors and teachers, then make it your own. Add to it. Modify it. Adapt it. Change your mind. Remember that flexibility is our favorite "F" word! In our work with children and families we will (hopefully) never stop learning and growing! Our own growth and development doesn't stop once we get that diploma.

The metaphorical wagon that is the Child Care Industry will forever have a squeaky wheel. There will always be someone who *doesn't like* any or some or all of the things happening in the program. And this is just a personality style numbers game; when you have many folks interacting together, regardless of their formal role in the group, it is still a group and groups love dynamics! It's par for the course. I'm not here to say your squeaky wheel is right or wrong, I'm here to say that "*not liking it*" is not enough reason to warrant continuous program adjustments in an effort to accommodate a revolving door of personal preferences, likes and dislikes. So whether the squeaky wheel is one of the dads, a mom, a visitor, a grandma, the new-hire... it doesn't matter! To cease using cornmeal & corks in the sensory bin or having cotton balls & pinto beans mixed together in the sensory tub *because they don't like it* is not a strong enough reason for me to abandon the practice. If we go around changing everything that the squeaky wheel doesn't *like*, we are going to be at their beck and call on a daily basis because if it's not the flour or cornmeal it'll be the brand of sunscreen or the color of the paint or what's on the breakfast menu or the time we close... and so on and so on. And more importantly, it will make us look wishy-washy; too easily swayed by the slightest bit of blustery breeze. What do we stand for? Believe in? What are our values? Tom Bedard reminds us that we must identify our values before we can reflect on our practice. I started this piece by stating what I believe in; the opportunity for children to have many sensorial experiences, therefore, it makes sense that using food might be a part of my practice. So, what do you believe in? What does your program believe in? What are the values? How does a visitor know? What is the overarching goal of the program? What is your philosophical orientation? We need to know what our non-negotiable lines in the sand are while realizing that with other matters there might be more wiggle room for flexibility and compromise. Changing our mind and position is one thing. Having it constantly changed for us is another. A more long-term solution is to provide opportunities for frequent conversations about the intention behind *all* of the experiences offered at the program, not just the using of flour & rice in the sensory tub.

If we are going to adopt a "No Food" policy, we also need to consider how far we are going to take it. Case in point: *Are you going to make play dough?* Think this through before you answer. Seriously. If you tell me that you don't use food because it's rude and disrespectful for children to play with it when someone somewhere is hungry but when I ask about making play dough you laugh, like, What a silly question! Of course we make play dough! I am going to gently and lovingly point out that you can make a loaf of bread with the ingredients needed for play dough. Are we sending inconsistent messages? Are some food items acceptable while others are not? Who decided what was okay and what was not okay? How were these items chosen? Is everyone clear as to not only what is allowed and not allowed, but the reason(s) why or why not too? Is everyone on staff able to articulate a clear and consistent statement about the program's "No Food" policy? Make it a priority to make informed decisions, not knee-jerk ones.

Let us continue! There are also common sense exceptions to any rule. Examples:

Allergies: Maybe Kellie is so allergic to flour that not only can't she touch it, she can't be in the same room as it. In this case, we probably won't be putting flour in the sensory tub this year. No worries, we will find something else to use instead! Ask some questions! What *can* she touch? Does this mean no play dough too? What about wheat-paste? Is it all flour? Or just wheat flour? We have plenty of alternative options when we are willing to look hard enough! It also means that while flour might not be OK this year, it might be just fine next year. Resist the urge to institute a "no more flour ever" policy.

Religious Reasons: Many faiths have food restrictions. Do your homework! Don't make assumptions! Ask questions, be respectful and be prepared! Do your investigating and inquiring *before* you show up to avoid potential embarrassment and unintentional offenses.

Cultural Issues: Years ago I worked in an upper-middle class child care center where food scarcity was not a front-line concern. It was a tight-knit neighborhood center and we served many families of Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese and Chinese decent. Along with the typical program offerings like books, blocks, easel painting, lego, we freely explored various food material, such as dried beans & rice in the sensory tub too. A few weeks into the school year some of the mothers came to me with concern regarding the children playing with rice which was considered culturally unacceptable. No worries! We made a midstream adjustment. Pivot! We didn't use rice in the sensory tub that year and I was more informed for the future.

Ages and Stages: Sure, your program might have a very flexible policy for using food, but you still must make appropriate choices for your kids. Just because the program allows baking soda and vinegar explorations, doesn't mean we are doing it on Wednesday with the babies! And while the storage closet might be filled with every color and kind of finger paint, we are still going to use something edible when offering sensory experiences for children who are still putting everything in their mouths!

At this point even if you are on the "we don't use food" side of the fence I am still going to insist that you locate and offer various non-food materials for exploration. If cornmeal is a no-no, what else can you use that is soft and grainy? No lima beans? No worries, but what other small, smooth materials are being offered instead? Please don't use the No Food policy as an excuse to be lazy! What else can be used besides food?? Corks! Packing Peanuts! Cotton! Yarn! Fabric Scraps! Pinecones! Snow! Leaves! Shells! Duplos! Plain old water will keep kids exploring for hours! What about clean mud (TP, ivory soap and water!) and regular mud too!?! Be on the lookout for various grades of sand, different textured and colored dirt and, did you know there are dozens and dozens different kinds of rocks??
<https://outforia.com/types-of-rock/>

Home and Garden stores are great resources! Have you tried mulch in the sensory tub? What about planting grass in the sensory tub and then cutting it with scissors as it grows?? The list is endless! Be sure that the sensory tub is not neglected just because we've said No Food. Occasionally folks are very quick to say, "We can't do that!" when I think what they really mean is, "I don't *want* to do that." Regardless, I am going to encourage you to brainstorm what you *can* do, instead of immediately shutting an idea down. Right now I'm thinking specifically about Nylon Splat Art. Many of you are familiar! You make these super cool splat tools using knee-hi nylons and un-popped popcorn kernels. So let's say that for whatever reason you can't use the popcorn, fine! Not the hill I'm going to die on! I'm more interested in your willingness to figure out what part of it you can say YES to, instead of being so quick with the NO. Traditionally the nylon is filled with popcorn kernels, but what else might make a deliciously satisfying SPLAT sound!?!? Could we use sand? Absolutely! How about dirt? Sure can! Some soft gravel bits? Of course! Aquarium rock? Why not?! There are always other options, be willing to locate them!

And last but not least... we'll tackle these one by one! If you have been told that **licensing** says you can't use food, it is your responsibility to be familiar enough with the regulations that you know whether this is fact or fiction! Where is the rule actually stated in the regs? What page is it on? And if no one can show you what page it's on, you need to have a conversation with someone and figure out what's going on. Are we being held accountable to personal preferences? Or licensing regulations? Take the time to figure it out.

If you are told you can't use food because of **accreditation** requirements, you are going to pretty much follow the same suggestions that I offered in the previous paragraph. Much like licensing regulations that

vary from state to state, accreditation standards can vary from system to system to commission to commission depending on what accreditation process you are aligned with. Once more we find ourselves asking, *what page is it on?* And if the program is aligned with an accreditation system that specifically states, No Food, then each individual employee has a choice to make. You are either going to be willing and able to comply, or not. I encourage you to not make a bigger deal out of this than necessary. It's choice time! We either say No Thanks, and move on, or we say Yes, and get on with it. Saying Yes and then complaining and moaning about the policy is a waste of time and energy. Both of which would be better spent sourcing materials that you *can* use and getting on with your day!

If a **boss or supervisor** says using food is not allowed then there are a few paths we need to explore. First off, why not? Why can't we use it? Second, is this a new rule? Has it been around and maybe I just didn't know about it? Is it on the books but it's just never been enforced? Third, any and all program prohibitions (The No-Nos) need to be provided to all prospective employees before they are offered a job. This helps make sure that we are all on the same page. If your boss or supervisor says it's a licensing rule, then please re-read the above paragraph. If they say it's because of a rating scale, then keep reading.

If you are aligned with the **ECERS-3** and you think you are not allowed to use food because of that alignment, I love you and, you need to read the book again. Other than Part 8 where the scoring system for Meals and Snacks is presented, there is no mention of food, or using food for art, or for sensory or otherwise, mentioned anywhere in the document.

If you are aligned with the **FCCERS-3** and your score is of importance to you or someone else, you are allowed to use food material for exploration, you just can't call it *art*. In past versions you could call it *sensory*, but that category has been eliminated. So do what you will with your dried pasta, your colored rice, your pudding and your cornstarch! Just don't call it *art*. And if you do decide to call it *art* when the evaluator shows up, just remember you will probably get a lower score, so either deal with it, or don't call it *art*. *Choosing to get* a low score because you intentionally are referring to a food based project as *art* is very very different than *being given* a low score just because you are not as familiar with the scale as your evaluator.

And finally, if you are aligned with the **ITERS-3** and your score is of importance to you or someone else, there are a couple of things worth pointing out. First, just like in the FCCERS-3 scale, you can use food material for exploration, but again, if your score is important, just don't call it *art*. So refer to the above paragraph if you need additional clarification. Second, in the ITERS-3 Nature and Science Category the Clarification Section implies that fine grained material like potting soil or millet bird seed can be used *in addition to* sand (and would still count towards a "good" score) but material like flour, beans, rice and cornmeal (all food) are not allowed to substitute for sand. It also clarifies that water play with a hose, a sensory tub, dishpans or sprinkler all count, but digging in a mud puddle or dirt or mulch on the playground does not count. So when it comes to sensory tubs and the materials in them, if you are aligned with the ITERS-3, I suggest that you think more AND instead of OR. If you have a sensory bin on the floor with cornmeal in it and a stand-up one with ooblick both available for exploration on the day the evaluator shows up, sadly, you are risking a lower score. But, and here is the important bit in regard to the FOOD topic at hand, this potentially lower score is **not** because you had food in the sensory tubs, but because there are no bins with "natural" materials like sand, millet bird seed, potting soil or water.

Confused yet?

How about a couple examples to assist in clearing things up?! If you are aligned with a rating scale and a high score is important to you (or someone else) and your evaluator comes in while...

- 1) Preschool aged children (ECERS) are *finger painting* with pudding, calm down because you are not doing anything wrong! Nothing here is going to ding your score! You can even call it *art* if you want! Jolly good!

- 2) Older infants to 3s (ITERS) are *finger painting* with pudding - you are fine! Just don't call it "pudding painting **art**"
- 3) Your family child care kids, regardless of age, (FCCRS) are *finger painting* with pudding, same thing! You're fine! Just don't call it today's **art** project!

One more for the road!

If you are aligned with a rating scale and a high score is important to you (or someone else) and your evaluator comes in while...

- 1) Preschool aged children (ECERS) are *scooping, pouring and mixing beans and rice* in the sensory tubs, again! Calm down! You are not doing anything wrong! Nothing here is going to ding your score! Nice work you!
- 2) Older infants to 3s (ITERS) are *splashing water in one sensory tub and scooping bird seed in another*, yahoo! You are just fine too! Fake BONUS points (if it's age appropriate) for having additional tubs to explore other materials such as flour, cornstarch, or colored pasta.
- 3) Your family child care kids, regardless of age, (FCCRS) are exploring any and all age appropriate materials, food or otherwise, in the sensory tubs. All good! No worries here!

Conclusion:

Nothing is ever so neat and tidy that it fits in a nice little box. Using food in the classroom is, and please forgive the pun, a sticky issue and has the capability of dividing a workshop room in 10 seconds flat with the YAYS firmly planted on one side and the NAYS just as rooted on the other.

Please please be gentle with yourself and remember that it is okay to change your mind and to change your position. Maybe you currently don't allow food to be used but you're considering changing your stance. Maybe you currently do use food but for various reason are thinking about changing sides. Either way my message is simple, THINK!!! Think it through, investigate all sides and beware of knee-jerk reactions. We want to encourage RE-flection, not RE-action. When it comes to making program changes (food related or otherwise) we must do so only after thinking about it, talking about it and making sure we are aware of the reasons behind the changes. As annoying as it sometimes might feel, we must always be asking why why why!!?? Even changes for the better need to be thought through and executed with intention.

To be brutally honest, and I know that is what many of you appreciate about my style, I honestly really don't care if you use food or not. (or do circle time.... or let them go UP the slide... whatever!) And I'm serious about this. I do, however, care deeply about you being able to talk about WHAT you are doing, WHY you are doing it and WHO it is for. Whether you hold the same position as me, or the opposite one, are you able to articulate clearly and confidently the intentions behind your choices. What matters to me is that everyone in our profession is able to talk about (not everything has to be a debate) what led us to adopt our positions. Being intentional, not just going through the motions, is how we all continue to be the best we can be for our children and families.

Lisa Murphy, M.Ed.
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