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Young Children 52(6), 78-81.

Reading Description Disclaimer:
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"What Do You Wonder?"

Involving Children in Curriculum Planning

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I looked up at Paul and noticed that many of his four-year-old classmates were looking at him, too. I wrote his response on the side of the Outdoor Jobs chart and, as I had done with all of the other children’s responses, asked Paul to tell me about his suggested career. Other children asked him questions, too.

As Paul was talking, I thought back to when we were making a play mat of a town to put in the block area. The children were constructing buildings to place on the mat to show kinds of jobs that people have in a community. Paul had insisted that we paint half of the poster board blue. He wanted to make a store that sold boats. Soon, half of the children were asking for materials with which to construct boats. They placed the boats on the water portion of the play mat. Now the mat had buildings, plastic cars, and boats.

Each day new things appeared and the children’s play became richer. The water table became a testing center for the boats the children created. So many children were interested that we spent a whole group time experimenting with materials, shapes, depths, and weights of boats.

Now, again following Paul’s lead, I said to the children, “I notice that many of you are interested in boats and water. Would you like to learn about the ocean next? What do you wonder?”

Children as a source of curriculum

Observing children and taking their interests into consideration when developing curriculum allows teachers to focus on the “individually appropriate” portion of developmentally appropriate curriculum (Bredekamp & Copple 1997). But truly respecting what children have to offer and making them equal partners in the process of curriculum planning takes commitment and conscious effort. Educators have been writing about this, and practicing it, during most of this century, but to many teachers it is a new approach. Some of you may be interested in my way of including children in project planning.

When I begin a teaching year, I don’t have all of the themes for the year decided and lesson plans ready. How can I?—I haven’t met the children yet. I spend the first few weeks really getting to know the children and their families. Talking with children at orientation, or making home visits to allow ample time to talk with and observe the children in a familiar and comfortable setting, yields wonderful ideas for possible themes. Parent surveys also help me know what individual children are interested in and like to play.

Most teachers would not want to create all their curriculum this way, but doesn’t it make sense to create some of it from children’s interests?
with. I also find out about parents' interests and areas of expertise. During the first few weeks of school, I set up the environment and plan activities that help the children get to know me and each other. I keep anecdotal records of children's favorite materials, learning centers, activities, books, and friends. I write down their specific comments or questions. I think about how my personal interests (such as travel) can complement things the children are interested in, or how they might enhance children's learning. All of these avenues give me ideas of possible topics to explore with the children. So do instances like Paul's contributions.

Planning with children: A four-step process

Once I have these potential topics in mind, the children and I sit down together and jointly plan our project. The planning is a four-step process.

What do you wonder?

The first step is to ask children, "What do you wonder? What do you want to know about the ocean (or any other topic)?" This allows each child to express ideas and gives a teacher insight into the child's level of development. It also helps teachers determine what the children may already know. Record each child's question on chart paper. With young children I often record each child's question in a different color or put her name beside it so the child can come back and find what she contributed. It also allows me to go back at the end of the day and add to my anecdotal records. I learn a lot about children's language development, thinking processes, and misconceptions. All children are free to raise as many questions as they have, and all children are encouraged (but not forced) to contribute.

For the ocean theme, some wonderful questions were raised:

- Do fish sleep with their eyes closed?
- How can fish breathe under water, but I have to hold my breath?
- What makes waves?
- How deep is the ocean? I can walk in, but then it gets deep.
- What do fish eat?
- Why is ocean water salty?
- Where do mermaids live?
- Do only fish and sharks live in the ocean?
- I've never seen an ocean. Why isn't there an ocean in Wyoming?

The questions keep pouring out, and from time to time I add a question of my own. I'm part of the class, too, and part of my role is to add things I'd like to explore with the children.

What can we do to find out?

The second step is to ask, "What can we do to find out?" The we is very important. Learning is a social process, and I want to give the children the message that their ideas matter and that we can work together to find answers. On another piece of chart paper, hanging next to the first, we write possible ways to find out the answer to each question raised. No pressure is put on the children, however. If no responses come, we skip that question and come back to it later. Then, if there is still no response, I tell the children that I'll think about what we could do and that they can come to me with ideas anytime. That's one reason for leaving the chart paper up throughout the unit. Some units may take as long as six or eight weeks! More questions keep coming up.

For this unit, children suggested that we go to an ocean, which was absolutely the most logical and best idea! Unfortunately, Wyoming is landlocked, so I had to look for alternatives. As a former resident of North Carolina and California, I was able to bring in my collections of shells, starfish, sand dollars, shark's teeth, seahorses, and driftwood. I also brought in surf fishing equipment, and we compared it to the fly fishing equipment that is more common in Wyoming. We watched a movie of a family's trip to the beach. We set up a reading corner full of nonfiction and fiction books on the ocean. We explored a nearby lake and looked for things that were similar to or different from what we had seen in the movie and in my collections.

One child, who had been to the local fish hatchery, suggested we go there to see fish and...
find out what they eat. Another child said we should go to the pet store because she got fish for her aquarium there. Making a beach in our classroom was another suggestion; we used the sandbox outdoors and the sand and water tables plus some plastic wading pools. Children saw that once we identified their questions, they could come up with ideas about how to find answers and could use creative problem solving to help design activities.

What materials do we need?

Step three is to ask, “What materials do we need?” On a third piece of chart paper we listed such responses as shells, fish, sand, water, whales, books, boats, scales, pictures and photographs, fishing poles, bathing suits, pails, shovels, sifters, and nets. The children are encouraged to make a link between what methods they want to use to answer their questions and what materials will be necessary to accomplish their goals. If the materials they suggest don’t seem directly related to their initial questions, I ask them to explain what we could do with the materials and what they might help us learn. The responses also help me understand their thinking. For example, a child might say we need soap, and I might assume that she is not following the discussion or is off track. By asking further questions, however, I discover that the child wants soap to wash the sand off of our bathing suits and the seashells! I enthusiastically add it to the list and to the child’s anecdotal record.

What will you bring? What would you like me to bring?

The fourth and last step is to ask, “What will you bring (do)? What would you like me to bring (do)?” For the ocean project, many children wanted to bring in plastic or stuffed animals (and lots of mermaids, thanks to Disney’s The Little Mermaid). A few had been to the beach with their families and volunteered to bring shells, photos, and beach towels. Others offered such items as a ship in a bottle, fishing poles, books about the ocean or ocean life, and toy boats. As parents came to pick up the children, I talked with volunteer parents to be sure their contributions would be OK.

In the newsletter, families were invited to send items in or to come in and share materials or activities with the group. I also put in the concepts to be explored, along with the children’s ideas. In addition, I went back to information I’d collected in the beginning of the year to see if the topic matched any of the parents’ interests or expertise. The process was coming full circle.

Putting it all together

When children are allowed to plan curriculum with teachers, everyone is liberated and energized. The teachers can do a planning web, alone or at another session with the children. Practicum students, apprentices, student teachers, work-study students, or teacher’s aides can be included in the process as well.

The result is a richness that does not exist if the teacher plans alone. The teacher is not bored or burned out because it’s September and time to do the Community Helper unit once again. The children are more engaged in learning because they are exploring their own questions based on their interests. They are not frustrated because the one-week unit on dinosaurs is over and they have to switch gears and do this week’s unit on magnets. Parents feel more involved and have a better idea what skills and concepts their children are learning.

Everyone wins when children are involved in curriculum planning. It is the perfect vehicle for implementing developmentally appropriate practice and the 20 guidelines for appropriate curriculum (Bredekamp & Rosegrant 1992).

References


For further reading


Back To Sleep for Infants... Are You Aware?

A recent survey of licensed child care centers found that staff in almost half (43%) of the centers were unaware of the association between sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and an infant’s sleep position. Of the centers whose staff were aware of the recommendation regarding infant sleep position, 75% did not have a written policy.

Since 1992 the American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended that healthy infants born at term be placed down for sleep on their backs or sides. This recommendation is based, in part, on an international panel’s finding of a 50% reduction in the rate of SIDS in countries advocating the Back To Sleep position. (Of course, any specific concerns about the appropriate sleep position for a child in your care should be discussed with the infant’s health care provider.)

Centers with staff aware of the sleep position recommendation, but not consistently following this practice, gave “parent direction” as the most frequently stated reason for their practice. Information is available to help parents and caregivers make the Back To Sleep position a consistent practice by calling 800-505-CRIB. Among the materials callers may want to request are a parent brochure Reduce the Risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) that is available in English and Spanish, a videotape, posters, and stickers.