

Remember to Include Art and Crafts in Your Integrated Curriculum

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Upon entering an elementary school, one way a knowledgeable observer can begin to get a sense of how teaching and learning are viewed in that school is to note what is displayed on the walls and bulletin boards. All too often, one observes artifacts created during *art time* by children who have been taught to carefully follow directions—that is, each creation reflects the same idea, usually a resource book author's idea, sometimes the teacher's, and each looks very similar to the others.

For example, during the month of November, "handprint turkeys" are fairly standard in elementary schools. Harmful or not, these structured experiences fail to acknowledge the value that art and crafts have within the curriculum as both a process and a product. The *process* of making art engages children in a creative endeavor and provides them with an opportunity to manipulate and learn about art materials, while the *product* can be enjoyed by the children and others and serves as a means of communication, a vehicle for expressing what they know.

Here is an example of the integration of art and crafts with content learning. This is not an in-depth project, an extended web, or a model of excellence. It is an easy-to-envision *doing* example of the type of subject-integrated education going on in many classrooms from coast to coast.

Our kindergarten was engaged in a unit about animals in winter, a fairly conventional subject. The primary goals of the unit were quite conventional, too: (1) connect the children to their world by enhancing their understanding of how animals behave during the winter season, and (2) to meaningfully integrate art and crafts with other curricular areas.

Learning about animals in winter

Knowing that young children learn best when school experiences build on what is familiar to them, the teacher read *The Snowy Day* (Keats 1962) to her group. It provided a perfect point of departure for the unit. In this story, young Peter enjoys the new snow as he creates footprints, goes sledding, and does other things familiar to kindergarten children who live in climates where there is snow. After reading the story, the children and their teacher bundled up and went outside to play in the snow, just as Peter had done.

After sledding, making snow angels, and creating various imprints in the snow, the children returned to the classroom to talk about their outdoor experience. As they talked excitedly about going down the hill "fast," the teacher asked them to think about how they had put on warm, waterproof clothing in order to comfortably play outside and about how their homes and school provide a refuge from the cold and snow. Then the teacher wondered aloud about how animals survive in the winter without the benefit of warm, waterproof shelters and clothing.

By expressing a personal sense of wonder about the world, the teacher invited the children to think about and share their curiosities. Thus began our inquiry into how animals live during the winter season.

Inquiry learning is a generative process that encourages children to view life experiences as a continual process and build new understandings from their experiences (Watson, Burke, & Harste 1989). The teacher's role is to provide many and varied experiences through primary and secondary resources and to provide ways for children to share what they have learned. Primary resources provide learners with a direct experience as they observe, interact, or manipulate something of interest. For example, a visit to the zoo constitutes a primary resource, as children have the opportunity to observe and perhaps even interact with some of the animals. Secondary resources, which provide indirect experiences, include literature, storytellers, videos, and so on. So while the visit to the zoo is a primary resource, a story or video about the zoo would be a secondary resource.

A local shed provided a primary resource for this group of kindergartners, who were able to observe and touch sheep sporting their winter wool coats, an example of the way nature cares for some animals when cold weather descends upon the environment. Several children provided another primary resource as they shared their observations on how their pet dogs grew thicker fur as the weather got colder, only to shed it in the warmer spring.

The teacher made content-rich literature available at the book center as a secondary resource. *How Animals Behave* (Bendick 1976) and *Animals in Winter* (Bancroft & Van Gelder 1963) took the children to caves and underground burrows where bears, bats, groundhogs, and other animals hibernate during the winter. The children also learned about birds that migrate to warmer climates to escape the cold temperatures, and the fictional account of *Charlie the Caterpillar* (DeLuise 1990) highlighted how caterpillars spend the winter in their warm cocoons.

The children explored the books on their own or in small groups where an adult read the books aloud. The reading led to discussions and more questions, which took the children on a quest for information that would further satisfy their growing curiosities. For example, from reading *How Animals Behave*, the children learned that birds fluff up their feathers to help them stay warm. The book *Bird* (Burnie 1988) provided additional information and pictures of birds' down feathers, which insulate them against the cold. This raised a question in Josh's mind about how birds find food during the winter. Continued investigation of literature revealed that owls and other birds of prey feed on small mammals and fish and are thus able to find food all year. However, many seed and insect eaters migrate to warmer climates to keep warm and find food. In addition, people in a cold climate often make bird feeders for the benefit of birds who remain.

Integrating art and crafts

As the children began finding answers to their questions, their dialogue and journal entries reflected their interests and developing understandings of animals in winter. In addition, art and crafts naturally integrated into the curriculum as the children used various art media to express their ideas. To accommodate the needs of diverse learners, teachers made sure that children had an opportunity to select from a variety of interest centers; those that incorporated art experiences are explained below.

Other centers included a library corner containing a variety of fiction and nonfiction books about animals in winter, an area in the school library where stuffed animals were available for inspection, and a dramatic-play center where "hibernating bears" and "reindeer" were favorite play themes. The dramatic-play center was structured to resemble a forest, complete with a cave, and was available to the children at various times of the day, including a 30-minute daily choice period. Various play animal noses, ears, and antlers (most were purchased, while others were created by the children) were available to encourage children to engage in pretend animal play. A supply of notepads, writing implements, binoculars, hard hats, and tape measures encouraged the children to play scientist. Occasionally the teacher participated in the play to model various behaviors. For example, as some children were curled up like hibernating bears in the cave, the teacher put on the hard hat, entered the cave, and began taking notes regarding the bears' behavior. She noted that the bears were hardly breathing and did not wake up to eat.

Several centers focused on art and crafts. First, building on the bird feeder theme, two centers contained materials for creating bird feeders. The book *Bird* (Burnie 1988) provides pictures of a variety of bird feeders, which ignited the children's interest. At the art center children crafted feeders by decoratively covering pine cones with peanut butter and bird seeds, while other children cut "bird doors" in milk cartons, decorated them, and filled them with seeds. At the woodworking center children sanded wood and then pounded nails into the wood pieces for perches. The completed crafts were hung outside the classroom window, and each day the children excitedly watched for hungry birds.

In the puppet center, the children created animal puppets from fabrics and paper of different colors and thicknesses, using a variety of materials, including scissors, crayons, markers, and glue. With their unique puppets the children negotiated and developed stories that reflected their new understandings and enacted them at the puppet stage. For example, one child, talking for her bird puppet, asked her playmate (also holding a bird puppet) if she was going to fly south for the winter. "No, I'm an owl. I'm going to eat mice," was the response.

At the paint center, children shared their new knowledge by creating a large, painted wall mural. This activity began with a brainstorming session, during which the teacher helped the children chart their knowledge about winter and animals. Initially the list reflected the children's own winter experiences, and as the list was being created, a minilesson evolved when Sara noted that "all of the words begin with *s*." Sure enough, to that point the list included *snowman*, *snowmobiles*, *sledding*, and *snow*. Sara's observation provided an opportunity for the class to talk about beginning, middle, and ending sounds. As the group continued to chart ideas, the teacher circled *h* at the beginning of *hibernate* and helped the children note that *fur* and *fly* both begin with *f*.

When the children were satisfied that their list contained all of the elements they wanted to include in their painted mural, they negotiated and divided the tasks involved in creating a work of art that expressed their ideas. Using mixtures of watercolors the children created a mural showing children hurling snowballs and snowmobiles racing across snowy terrain, a reflection of the activities in which children had participated with their families. A large corner of the mural detailed a cave in which three bears lay curled in a state of sleep, while a V-shaped configuration of birds migrated overhead, a reflection of the children's learning.

When each contributor was satisfied that the work of art was complete, the teacher suggested that adding some text would further explain the creation to an observer. The children dictated the following, simply titled "Winter":

Once upon a time, there were three bears who hibernated 'cause it was winter. There were also some birds flying away and snowmen and snowwomen.

Assessing what we did

For this unit, secondary (literature) and primary resources served as vehicles for acquiring new knowledge, while art and crafts provided a way for children to use their developing skills and share their ideas. For example, the teacher

did not just decide, one day, that the class should make bird feeders; rather, this craft provided an opportunity for the children to respond to their learning about birds and how they survive in the winter. Similarly, creating a mural and animal puppets were not isolated activities but a means by which the children expressed their new knowledge.

In addition to supporting the children's learning about animals, art and crafts activities engaged them in using their emerging oral and print literacy skills. Children's oral language and sense of story provided substantive content as they told animal stories with their puppet creations, and the children transformed their ideas into print during the painted mural activity.

While the art and craft activities served as an expressive medium and a means of advancing the children's understanding of content, there was an additional benefit. As the children actively engaged with the art materials, they made discoveries about what they could do with the materials. For example, during the mural activity the children enjoyed creating unique shades as they mixed various colors of paint. In doing this, they discovered that colors created with crayons do not mix in the same way as do colors created with paint and that markers mix differently than either crayon or paint. They also discovered that paint bubbles when applied over crayon and that fabric and paper come in a variety of textures and thicknesses and do not feel the same when they are being cut.

Conclusion

Early childhood educators and the professional organization representing them—the National Association for the Education of Young Children—suggest that high-quality early childhood education must address the whole developing child. Art, crafts, and other fine arts should be integrated into a curriculum for young children in ways that encourage them to express their ideas and feelings. Such activities provide children with the opportunity to experiment with various art materials as well as to express their ideas aesthetically (Bredekamp 1987).

The art activities integrated into this unit benefited the learners in two ways. First, art gave children the opportunity to think about what they were learning as they created representations and products that reflected their new understandings. Second, as the children manipulated the art materials, they learned about the characteristics of the materials as well as what could be done with them. For this group of kindergarten children, art time was not isolated from other subjects; rather, art and craft creations were purposefully integrated into the curriculum, providing support for developing skills and for learning about the world in which children live.

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