

All about the West Room Hens

A Project by 3-, 4-, and 5-Year-Old Children
at Bing Nursery School, Stanford University, Stanford, California
Length of Project: 10 weeks Teachers: Jane Farish, Mark Mabry

Phase One

Beginning the Project

In September, our class inherited two chickens that had hatched in April. Interestingly, children displayed little curiosity in them. Then in November, to their surprise, they found a brown egg! We observed children studying the hens closely as they collected and counted the eggs. They asked questions and initiated discussions. We recorded these and also noted misconceptions to help draw up research questions. We were intrigued to find that children were not applying their knowledge about birds to the hens, so one goal was to develop more understanding of "birdness."

Phase Two

Developing the Project

Children wanted to find out whether hens can fly. They encouraged the hens to explore the climbing equipment and observed, "they hop and flap but they don't fly." After many discussions, one hen was lifted high into a tree, and she did fly down! "Do hens have ears?" was also investigated. Observational drawing, clay modeling, photographs, and library research helped children study hens' anatomy and learn names of body parts. When a visiting expert came with a Light Brahma hen, the hens' similarities and differences intrigued the children. A focus became studying pictures of different breeds, and children used pictures to make a matching game and block play accessories.

Investigation of the eggs started with the question "why are their eggs brown?" Cooking was a natural progression from cracking eggs open to examine them. Eggs were boiled, poached, scrambled, fried, and made into omelets, pancakes, and French toast. Results were tasted, tested, and recorded at snack time. A parent provided quails' eggs to compare with hens' eggs. Groups ate snack outside, attended by the hens, to test theories about what hens eat. They tested food from their snack as well as corn and rabbit food. Observing the hens scratching in the yard developed the children's knowledge, and a final list included grass, worms, and snails.

One child asked the question: "Why don't the hens have names?" as a solution to the dilemma of telling the hens apart. We had been reading hen stories, so another child immediately responded, "Let's call them Henny and Penny," and after charting everyone's suggestions, the children ultimately did vote for these names!

Phase Three

Concluding the Project

By March, although there was still unabated enthusiasm for egg cookery and encouraging the hens to fly, the research questions were answered, and the teachers decided it was time to conclude the project. We gathered pictures and words from the ongoing documentation, and the children made a book about Henny and Penny as a culminating event.

Comments

This project generated schoolwide interest and involvement. Children from other rooms visited with worms for the hens and to collect eggs for their cooking. The topic resonated with parents who made time to join their children in observing Henny and Penny. We found the children's enthusiasm contagious. From the "crystallizing moment" of discovering the first egg, the children were talking to each other, discussing ideas, and working carefully. We noted them developing analytical skills and observed the value of observational drawing as a tool for children's research and reflection.

