

Our School Bus Project

A Project by 4- and 5-Year-Old Children
at Timothy Christian Preschool, Elmhurst, Illinois

Length of Project: 6 weeks Teachers: Ruth Harkema, Deb Lanenga

Phase One

Beginning the Project

We chose school buses as our topic because we see buses from our playground, the mechanic and bus drivers are accessible, and especially because we felt that preschoolers look forward to riding in buses. We began the bus project by asking children to share their experiences riding in buses, to list what they knew about buses, and to shape their memories into stories, drawings, and clay sculptures. Children then chose a bus part to investigate and dictated questions they had about buses. We hoped children would develop skill representing what they saw, asking research questions, learning bus safety rules, and solving problems together.

Phase Two

Developing the Project

During our first field visit, the bus mechanic gave us a bus ride around campus; demonstrated the stop sign, safety bar, and flashing lights on the bus; and answered our questions. Parents and sixth-grade students facilitated the preschoolers' investigations by recording answers to questions, carrying equipment, and pointing out details for sketching.

After a second visit for repeated sketching, the children began construction of a play bus, each child choosing to build the part she or he had sketched. Children encountered and solved problems in making the bus sides equal in length, matching the height of the driver's seat and steering column, and constructing a three-dimensional bus front instead of a flat drawing on a small box.

As construction continued, children's questions became more complicated: "What are bus parts made of?" "Why?" "How do bus parts work?" "Does the bus have 'electric'?" The bus mechanic supplied answers and a tire and rim for closer study, a bus driver brought her bus to our sidewalk to demonstrate the insides and outsides of the bus, and a high school carpentry student demonstrated how to nail the cardboard sections to the wood bus frame. Children cooperated to create, paint, and nail together a 10-foot long, 4-foot high, yellow, open-windowed bus.

Phase Three

Concluding the Project

The children planned a celebration to share what they had accomplished. They wrote invitations and counted the number of moms and dads and brothers and sisters planning to attend.

The children felt important as their parents viewed bulletin board displays, watched the videotape, listened to their new verse of the "Wheels on the Bus," boarded their bus, praised their contributions, and enjoyed the wheel cookies that the children had decorated with six chocolate chip lug nuts.

Comments

Things we found most impressive:

- how focused children are during fieldwork as they look for answers to their own questions;
- how repeated sketching helped children's perceptual growth and understanding;
- how important it is to allow children to brainstorm their own solutions;
- how teacher reflection during the documentation process uncovered children's growth and needs;
- how willingly fellow teachers, local experts, parents, and upper-grade students helped.

We were delighted by the persistence of two children who were uninvolved last year in daily activities. They worked together everyday, painting, designing the bus front, and suggesting additions to the bus.

