

The Grocery Store Project

**A Project in a Multi-age Classroom of 3-, 4-, and 5-Year-Old Children, three with special needs,
at Bright Beginnings Pre-K At-Risk Program, Eureka, Illinois**
Length of Project: 2 months Teachers: Pam Scranton, Angie Wells

Phase One

Beginning the Project

This topic was chosen by the teacher because the local IGA grocery store was only a few blocks away from the classroom and could be visited frequently during the project. We spent a few days walking to the IGA and talking about the children's experiences at the store. The children had lots of prior knowledge about this topic and focused rather quickly on what they wanted to explore and what they wanted to see on their field visits. Lists of questions and preliminary webs were generated easily because of the familiarity of the topic. The children narrowed their focus to investigating the cash register, the scanner, and the different departments, voicing at once their intentions to build their own IGA when they returned from the field experience. I was hoping that they actually would be able to focus their investigations in such a big store, that they wouldn't be distracted in their fieldwork on site, and that they would come away with some solid information to begin their constructions.

Phase Two

Developing the Project

As I had hoped, the children became really interested in the scanner and cash register. They were able to actually use both and "ring up" a customer on the field experience! A parent volunteer who was an employee of IGA was our site expert for the morning, and she was able to give the children some experiences that they would not have had otherwise. One child meticulously sketched the IGA sign and spent several days back in the classroom representing the sign using many different types of materials. The other children most interested in constructing the store divided themselves into a scanner group and a cash register group. Children who were not constructing painted signs, labeled shelves, and made money for the cash register. *All* the children brought in supplies to "stock the shelves"; even the kids who were not really involved in the project were very driven to save empty boxes for the grocery store. The construction took 2 weeks with drawing, painting, and journaling happening in other parts of the classroom, but the core project group was champing at the bit to start playing in their construction. The dramatic play was intense at first, and the children had to decide together to limit the number allowed in the store. One child had the idea to form a list, keeping track of who had a turn and who had not. As this high-quality play progressed, one 4-year-old boy kept up his work on the scanner. He kept experimenting with new materials for the surface of the scanner, wanting that transparent effect, and he kept trying to find a way to get the scanner to "light up." This little boy would work on the scanner with dramatic play going on all around him, a definite change for a child who was distracted easily before this project. Our parents helped out by saving empty boxes, bringing in sacks for bagging the groceries, and volunteering their time in the grocery store to interact with the children.

Phase Three

Concluding the Project

As the dramatic play lessened and the constructions slowed, the project group met again and discussed taking apart their grocery store. Because our school year was coming to a close and the children took part each year in putting the classroom away for the summer, the taking apart of the grocery store could coincide with these other end-of-the-year activities. More importantly, the project group and I began discussing ways they could share what they had learned with others. They decided to make and display large story cards, with some of the children describing the pictures and photos on each card. Because our program's annual ice cream social was fast approaching, they decided to try and have the story cards and their dialogues ready for that evening parent activity. For the next week, the project group worked furiously sorting photos and taping them, dictating their descriptions, and practicing for the ice cream social. The parents were impressed that night with their children's knowledge of how a grocery store works and of their intense feelings about what they had learned during this project. After school was over for the year, their story cards were displayed inside the IGA, and the children took great delight in looking at their own work displayed so prominently in their local grocery store that summer!

Comments

As a teacher who has been doing projects with children for several years, it still amazes me how much I learn with every new project. With the grocery store topic, my children had lots of prior knowledge, and we did not have to spend much time developing the topic. It was a very easy start to our project, and I think I'll try to steer towards more familiar topics like the grocery store in the future. But because of the very nature of the Project Approach, one never knows what kinds of interests will develop! I saw children I've had for two years develop new kinds of learning behaviors. What a joy it is to watch children become more confident in their own abilities to investigate and discover what interests them.

