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Larry Bell
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Myrtle Beach, South Carolina

Dimensions
Brain Research and Childhood Education: Implications for Educators (Summer 2002).
Circle of Influence: Implementing Shared Decision Making and Participative Management (Winter 2002).
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Picture This: Digital and Instant Photography Activities for Early Childhood Learning (Spring 2002).
Read It Again! Revisiting Shared Reading (Spring 2002).

Child Development
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Family Partnerships
Using Family Literacy Bags to Enhance Family Involvement, (1), 16-20.

Inclusion

Professionalism
Staff Development for Early Literacy Teachers: Changing to Guided Reading, (4), 5-9.

Southern Early Childhood Association
Editor - Janet Brown McCracken
Cover photo by Michele Lucia Brener

Dimensions of Early Childhood
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Annual SECA Business Meeting Scheduled
The annual Business Meeting of the Southern Early Childhood Association will be held on Saturday, March 15, 2003 from 11:15 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. at the Myrtle Beach Convention Center, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.
A revision in the SECA By-Laws will be considered. The text of the proposed By-Laws change is found on page 20 of this issue of Dimensions of Early Childhood.

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**Strategies to Support Children**

**Helium Balloons on the Ceiling**

Nancy P. Alexander

Two floating helium-filled silvery Mylar® balloons, leftovers from a birthday celebration earlier in the day, fascinated children in an early childhood classroom. Resting lightly and motionless against the ceiling, they would dance, spin, and bob as if by magic whenever the air-conditioning fan switched on. Their biscuit-like shapes made them even more responsive to the air currents than ordinary balloons might have been.

As the children observed the balloons’ movements, the teacher immediately recognized the motivational value of this unexpected event. Her questioning helped children to understand why the balloons were dancing. She helped children put their thoughts into words with open-ended inquiries. The teacher further built upon the chance occurrence by postponing her carefully planned art and science projects. Instead, she substituted a pinwheel-making activity and other related experiments with moving air. The seed planting and crayon relief listed in her plan book could wait until tomorrow—the children’s interests this day were on something else and she wanted to take full advantage of that interest.

A carefully planned day is crucial to a successful early childhood program, but so is spontaneity and responding to children’s interests. Because of her years of integrated curriculum planning that relied on a vast mental resource of activities, this teacher was able to respond to the unexpected event. She could adapt spontaneously and incorporate it successfully into the day’s learning experiences. Because she was a careful observer, she noticed the children’s interest and took full advantage of it.

Teachers can often pre-stage motivating events. But how many unanticipated opportunities for wonderful discoveries occur daily in life with children? A well-organized classroom, a flexible schedule, and a ready resource of learning opportunities help teachers respond to and expand upon children’s curiosity. With sufficient experience, teachers can and should make the most of the teachable moments—planned and spontaneous!

**Projects generated by these balloons continued for more than a week. Children painted, made collages, and created flags, balloons, and other items related to their interest in moving air.**

When did you last rethink your teaching practices? This Montessori kindergarten teacher describes how the Reggio Emilia approach influenced his classroom.

**Hundred Language Zoo**

Josh Thompson

Many books and stories, articles, and new ideas come across a teacher’s desk each year. Sometimes, an idea catches the eye, looks interesting and promising. More often, it gets filed away for future reference. Once in a while a new idea comes along just when a teacher and class are ready. Teachers seize the moment, implement the new strategy and, voilà, extraordinary learning takes place.

That’s just how it happened when one Montessori kindergarten explored the Dallas Zoo with a hundred languages, the Reggio Emilia way.

The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998) was picked up on a booktable at an early childhood education conference. The book was attractive because of the overt emphasis on community, team teaching, and collaboration, all in an effort to serve the child. This resonated with the author’s preferred type of classroom, where multiple adults participate in the active life of a large, diverse classroom, surrounded within a supportive school. Community involvement is central and core to the Reggio Emilia approach, but there was much, much more.

**What Is Reggio Emilia?**

Reggio Emilia is a city of 130,000 people in northern Italy. For more than half a century, beginning within days after the end of World War II, this community has united behind its schools to communally care for young children in a system of high-quality early childhood learning environments. The founder and visionary of this approach, Loris Malaguzzi, attributed the success of this approach to the commitment of the community infrastructure: “Relationship is the primary connecting dimension of our system, however, understood not merely as a warm, protective envelope, but rather as a dynamic conjunction of forces and elements interacting toward a common purpose” (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 68).

This dependence upon relationships at a political level inspired the success, through relationships, of each successive layer of the program: child with parent, parent with teachers, teachers with child, child with child, teachers with teachers, and parents with parents. “As a result, children discovered that, in a top-down organizational structure, the form to dictate the communication, creating a linearity that may be efficient, though wholly ineffective. In contrast, the Reggio Emilia community promotes multiple forms of communication. This creates a multiplicity of means to say the same thing, or, in some cases, the discovery that there is, in fact, one and only one way to express something; hence the hundred languages (see the poem by Loris Malaguzzi).”

The process of discovery becomes the communal property of the individual and the group. Like the formation of synapses in the developing brain, this road of discovery and communication may be used again. Many books and stories, articles, and new ideas come across a teacher’s desk each year. Sometimes, an idea catches the eye, looks interesting and promising. More often, it gets filed away for future reference. Once in a while a new idea comes along just when a teacher and class are ready. Teachers seize the moment, implement the new strategy and, voilà, extraordinary learning takes place.

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The value placed on communication is clearly high-lighted in the relationship between the school and the home. Parents are primary educators of young children, and the Reggio community builds upon this primacy by promoting communication between parents and every element of the school.

**Projects generated by these balloons continued for more than a week. Children painted, made collages, and created flags, balloons, and other items related to their interest in moving air.**

Nancy P. Alexander is Executive Director of Northwestern State University Child and Family Network, in Shreveport, Louisiana. She is the author of Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998) was picked up on a booktable at an early childhood education conference. The book was attractive because of the overt emphasis on community, team teaching, and collaboration, all in an effort to serve the child. This resonated with the author’s preferred type of classroom, where multiple adults participate in the active life of a large, diverse classroom, surrounded within a supportive school. Community involvement is central and core to the Reggio Emilia approach, but there was much, much more.

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Josh Thompson, Ph.D., is Lecturer, Early Childhood Education, University of Texas at Arlington. He holds an Ele-

Share your Strategies to Support Children with state and local leaders! Submit practical articles, or requests for topics to be addressed in this column, to SECA.

Photograph courtesy of Nancy P. Alexander

Once in a while a new idea comes along just when a teacher and class are ready. When did you last rethink your teaching practices? This Montessori kindergarten teacher describes how the Reggio Emilia approach influenced his classroom.
Within the school, the communication grid again reflects multiple avenues rather than a hierarchical structure. Reggio classrooms are run by teams of teachers, two teachers in every classroom. They are co-equal partners in running the classroom and are equally responsible for its operation, inside and out, including conversations with parents. The teachers run the school, in collaboration with other teams of teachers, parents, and the municipal board.

Two specially trained resource people assist the teachers and the children, the pedagogista and the atelierista. Somewhat like a mentor teacher, the pedagogista circulates between classrooms, and through different schools. This resource person confers with teachers, models inquiry and reflection, and focuses documentation of the children’s work. The pedagogista serves as a resource for teachers in much the same way that the teachers are to serve as a resource to the children.

An atelierista manages the atelier. The U.S. concept of an art teacher falls far short in describing the atelierista, who is trained in many artistic media. This person is also prepared to cultivate children’s use of symbolic languages (New, 1993). The atelierista promotes a multiplicity of means of expression to facilitate the children’s exploration of a topic or project. The atelier is a resource room within each school, facilitating the multiple media the children need to explore their expressions.

Montessori and Reggio Meet in Kindergarten

These multiple forms of communication became the vehicle for a Montessori Reggio kindergarten, deep in the heart of Texas, to integrate Reggio Emilia concepts. For a long time, this classroom had unwritten and unincorporated some Reggio principles. Its teaching team works closely together, each adult caring about each child, while maintaining clearly defined areas of expertise. Clear lines of responsibility are drawn and redrawn, based on constant communication about observations of children and their work.

Parents were already integral to the classroom, because they are of primary importance to the children. Teachers invite parents to work in the classroom, to read with children, assist in snack preparation, and to interact with their own children and their children’s friends. Children are trusted to be responsible for their own learning experience. Teachers intervene only to prevent harm or assist children in evaluating their mastery of skills required to pursue their line of inquiry.

How the Zoo Trip Emerged

Planning for a field trip to the Dallas Zoo began during a language experience session. The 5- and 6-year-old kindergartners gathered around the easel with large poster paper and markers. The main objective of this group time was simply to

snails help the environment? Where can we learn more? Pick up on children’s interests, and direct the questions accordingly.

It is also important to encourage children to ask questions. Support them as they seek answers through observation, experimentation (when appropriate), and by research, such as interviewing “experts” and searching through resource materials. Suggest that they record their findings in drawings, photographs, recordings, and/or dictations for adults to write.

President’s Message

(continued from page 2)

The group could track the success rate of the children as well as the retention rate of teachers in the area. Everyone from across the nation would want to see these programs and the results of their data. This community would become a model for the country! Wow, I hope someone takes that challenge and runs with it!

Early childhood education is being talked about more now than ever. We must push for major initiatives such as W.A.G.E. and T.E.A.C.H. along with funding from federal, state, and local government while the focus is still on our lead to extraordinary discovery centers. Others rely on teacher choices. However the curriculum is structured, a much richer learning environment will emerge when teachers capitalize on children’s interests. Listen to what they talk about. Observe what they find on the playground. See what themes are common in their pretend play. Stay aware of community events, seasonal changes, holidays, and news reports. Table 1 lists a few topics and materials that are absorbing for most young children.

In all, discovery centers accomplish two goals:

They initiate curiosity within children to learn more about scientific and social concepts and they extend knowledge at a level children are able to comprehend. Discovery areas in classrooms enhance children’s awareness and inquiry. These skills eventually lead children to transfer and apply their knowledge. Teaching strategies such as let’s find out centers assure experiential learning as children develop and expand their knowledge and concepts. Best of all, children and adults find pleasure in them.

References


Photographers Needed

SECA is currently looking for creative photographers to submit high-quality multicultural prints of young children at play. Selected photos may be published in SECA’s journal, Dimensions of Early Childhood, for which photographers will be paid.

For more information on this as well as our photography guidelines, please contact SECA directly at (501) 212-1648 or (800) 305-7322. Photos may be sent to SECA at the following address:

Southern Early Childhood Association
8000 W. Markham, Ste. 105
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Office: (501) 221-1648
Fax: (501) 227-5297
Toll Free: (800) 305-7322
info@socenternchychild.org

Let the Curriculum Emerge

Teachers always have a wealth of topics from which to choose for let’s find out centers. Many schools have prescribed curriculum themes that capitalize on children’s interests.
Table 1. Topics that often appeal to young children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Materials to Explore</th>
<th>Related Children's Books</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plants and Flowers</td>
<td>Potted plants; watering cans; child-size gardening tools; seed catalogues; seed packets; plastic and real plants, flowers, fruits, and vegetables; florist's clay; plastic vases and containers; sterilized potting soil</td>
<td><em>Flower Garden</em> (Bunting, 1994) <em>Growing Vegetable Soup</em> (Eliert, 1987) <em>Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf</em> (Eliert, 1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ponds</td>
<td>Pond water; microscope and slides; tadpoles; turtles; algae; water lilies; magnifying glasses; replicas of pond life</td>
<td><em>I Wonder Why Crocodiles Float Like Logs?</em> (Donati, 1999) <em>Life in a Pond</em> (Fowler, 1996) <em>In the Rain With Baby Duck</em> (Hest, 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mammals</td>
<td>Stuffed mammals; <em>ViewMaster</em>® and slides; mammal puppets; mammal bones; wildlife pictures available from state parks and wildlife agencies; posters; zoo photos; pictures of children with their pets; classroom pets</td>
<td><em>Mammals</em> (Burnie, 1993) <em>Animals Animals</em> (Carle, 1989) <em>Swimming Mammals</em> (Harris, 1977)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nighttime</td>
<td>Pajamas and nightgowns; house slippers; pillows; blankets; sleeping bag; lullaby recordings and player; posters with night scenes; pictures of nocturnal animals; flashlights; stuffed animals; nightlights; stars hanging from the ceiling</td>
<td><em>Time for Bed</em> (Fox, 1993) <em>Just Me in the Tub</em> (Mayer, 1994) <em>Where's My Dreidel?</em> (Schwarz, 1999) <em>10 Minutes Till Bedtime</em> (Rathman, 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sky</td>
<td>Telescope; binoculars; kites; toy airplanes and space ships; sky puzzles; umbrella; pictures of comets, meteors, lightning, eclipses, galaxies; parachute; moon phase photos; photos of constellations; pictures of sunrises and sunsets; gold and silver star stickers; large stars hanging from ceiling</td>
<td><em>Little Cloud</em> (Carle, 1996) <em>The Rainbow Goblins</em> (DeRico, 2001) <em>The Moon in My Room</em> (Wallen, 2002) <em>Sun, Stars, and Planets</em> (Stacy, 1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buses and Trucks</td>
<td>Transportation toys; safe recycled parts of a bus or truck (steering wheel, hubcap, nuts and bolts); license plates from various states; keys; maps; traffic light replica; outdated driver's license; seats out of a truck or bus; photographs of buses and trucks</td>
<td><em>Wheels!</em> (Cobb, 1996) <em>The Flying School Bus</em> (Reit, 1990) <em>School Bus Driver</em> (Ready, 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insects</td>
<td>Ant farm; butterfly kit; insect puzzles; crickets in a plastic tub with a wire mesh cover; magnifying glasses; spider web; specimens</td>
<td><em>It's a Good Thing There Are Insects</em> (Fowler, 1990) <em>The Very Quiet Cricket</em> (Carle, 1990) <em>A Picture Book of Insects</em> (Mattern, 1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reptiles</td>
<td>Skins of reptiles, if available; turtle in an aquarium; lizard in an appropriate cage; pictures of reptiles; plastic reptile toys; picture cards to classify</td>
<td><em>Snakes, Salamanders, and Lizards</em> (Burns, 1995) <em>Reptiles</em> (McCarthy, 1991) <em>Wonderful World of Animals: Reptiles</em> (MacLeod, 1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sounds and Music</td>
<td>Recordings and player; sound jars; pictures of musical groups; felt musical staff with various musical symbols to place on it; rhythm instruments; tone bells or xylophone; keyboard; drums</td>
<td><em>The Little Band</em> (Sage, 1991) <em>The Old Man and the Fiddle</em> (McCurdy, 1992) <em>Musical Max</em> (Kraus, 1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bakery</td>
<td>Cookbook; recipe books and cards; chef's hat; aprons; oven mittens; pot holders; dish towels and dish clothes; wooden spoon; spatula, egg beater; wire whisk; rolling pin; sifter; measuring cups and spoons; smell jars; pots; pans; timer; flour and other ingredients, as needed</td>
<td><em>The Cookie Store Cat</em> (Rylant, 1999) <em>Ruth's Bake Shop</em> (Spohn, 1990) <em>Sophie's Role</em> (Heath, 1992)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. List of project ideas generated by 5- and 6-year-old Texans

- Valentine play
- about working together
- make hearts
- Christmas
- singing play
- birthday
- *Chicka Chicka, Boom Boom* (Martin & Archambault, 1991)
- *Tikki Tikki Tembo* (Mosel, 1968)
- *Rock in (sic) roll* (Schwartz, 1999)
- *Chines (sic) restaurant* (Martin & Archambault, 1991)
- *Cici's Pizza*
- *Swimming Mammals* (Harris, 1977)
- *The Rainbow Goblins* (DeRico, 2001)
- *The Moon in My Room* (Wallen, 2002)
- *Sun, Stars, and Planets* (Stacy, 1994)
- *The Very Quiet Cricket* (Carle, 1990)
- *A Picture Book of Insects* (Mattern, 1991)
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- *The Cookie Store Cat* (Rylant, 1999)
- *Ruth's Bake Shop* (Spohn, 1990)
- *Sophie's Role* (Heath, 1992)
Finally, among all the interesting field trips, the zoo trip seemed interesting to most children, both in and of itself, and for all the potential activities that could be generated in the revolving topics: dramatic play, books, class activities, and class research (Figure 3). These ideas were generated from many seasons of inquiry and research with this Montessori classroom. Many of the children had been in the same classroom, with the same adults, since they were 3 years old. They were accustomed to owning their own learning and creating an emerging curriculum.

The class chose to search for information about zoos in general on the Internet, using Yahooligans (this child-friendly search engine is available online at www.yahooligans.com). The Dallas Zoo Web site (www.dallas-zoo.org) intrigued everyone with maps, facts about the animals, schedules, and links to other interesting Web sites. The trip was scheduled and children began individual research about animals and zoos.

The links to other Web sites produced a collection of animal stories and graphics that were printed and collected in a class book. Many of the photos were printed as line drawings. Most were printed in full color, which were cut out and pasted into their hand-written stories. Other sources of photographs included magazines and old books. A few original drawings were volunteered during this early preparation stage, but nothing like the explosion of original art work that came later, after the zoo trip.

At the Zoo

The trip to the Dallas Zoo happened like so many other field trips with 5- and 6-year-olds. Subdividing the 25 children among the adults (two teachers and five parents) provided for low maintenance, quick roll calls, and plenty of cooperative learning as the adults asked prompt questions and led small-group discussions.

The parents were familiar with the children’s preparations, having been involved as classroom volunteers and as readily-available resources for the children’s questions at home. The children carried maps of the zoo, and scheduled their trip around their interests: large animals, carnivores, the children’s petting zoo, and then, finally, the monorail over the Wilds of Africa exhibit.

The children were interested in looking at the animals for physical similarities to the photos and drawings they had made. They also were looking for animals from different places. A few children had prepared a list of continents, and wanted to see if they could find at least one animal from each continent. A different group of children were interested in animal families: they counted how many mothers with babies they found, and noted the youngest animals there.

After the Zoo

The debriefing after the field trip started as usual with language-experience group activities around the easel. That’s when the hundred languages emerged. We were discussing and recording the variety of tools available to express our experience when the children began talking faster than the scribe could write. They recorded a long list of activities that they could do with materials on hand. They wanted to paint, draw, make labels, create puzzles, construct cages with blocks, design maps, create charades, and make an animal-sounds tape. The classroom bilities. The timely addition of new materials when interest appears to be waning may spark more curiosity or move children to a higher level of understanding.

Ask Children to Contribute Items

Encouraging children to bring intriguing materials to share in the discovery center fosters enthusiasm for the topic. This strategy naturally invites parents to join in the investigation. When children bring in objects of interest to them, teachers have a better sense about how to plan for upcoming topics. An adult’s introduction of dinosaurs is greatly enhanced when children bring in model dinosaurs, request books about them, wear dinosaur clothing, or dig for dinosaurs in the sand—all clear messages that the time is right for dinosaur study.

Be sure to talk with children and families about the possibility that items brought to school may be lost or misplaced. Children’s contributions to the discovery area should be marked with their names if the items need to be returned. Expect and fragile objects should be examined and discussed only with attentive adult supervision, then promptly returned to their owners.

Children’s Books


Encourage Questions

Discovery centers increase children’s awareness about new materials and concepts. Their understanding is further enhanced when teachers ask children about what they are observing or experiencing (Katz & Chard, 2000), because questions advance children’s ability to discover, organize, and internalize information.

Marcus, mentioned at the beginning of this article, had no experience with or knowledge about snails. Among the questions a teacher might ask him and others who join in this conversation might be: “What do you think is inside the shell? How would you describe its shape? How does the small shell feel? How do you think snails move? What do they do all day? Why are snails important? How can we find out where they live? Can we ever most easily find snails? How do...
Frequent walks, children’s art, simple graphs prepared by the class, photographs contributed by families, or a mural of magazine cutouts of homes and businesses can also help children demonstrate their growing understanding of the neighborhood.

Photos courtesy of the author

A few original drawings were volunteered during the early preparation stage, but nothing like the explosion of original art work that came later, after the zoo trip.

Display Children’s Books

One critical element that supports the educational value of a discovery area is the availability of literature designed to provide additional knowledge for curious children. Find books related to children’s explorations at the library to assure that content expands beyond a surface level of discussion. Books such as *Uncle Jed’s Barbershop* (Mitchell & Ransome, 1993), *New Kid on the Block* (Prelutsky, 1984) or *The Paperboy* (Pilkey, 1996) extend the neighborhood theme, for example. Nature magazines often contain close-up photographs of plants, animals, and insects coupled with stories appropriate for the age level. *Ranger Rick* and *Your Big Backyard* are popular in early childhood classrooms. Children’s encyclopedias, Web sites, newspaper clippings, and museum brochures are some of the other options for broadening children’s horizons.

Appeal to Children’s Senses

High-quality discovery centers are designed with the five senses in mind, to ensure investigation and discovery leading to sensory learning (Piaget, 1978). Children should be able to touch, smell, taste (when safe), listen, and observe an array of items. Supervision for these hands-on experiences is, of course, essential to keep children safe and focused on their findings.

Listening to seashells, for example, heightens children’s interest in related objects and activities. Soon children are pouring sand from pail to pail as if they were at the beach. Smell jars, sound jars, or materials that change over time (a scientific demonstration showing erosion, for instance) appeal to children’s natural curiosity. Providing ocean water for children to smell and seafood for children to taste extends their learning about oceans.

As children become increasingly aware of the possibilities with any topic, they begin to ask more, and ever-deeper, questions. They become able to research answers for themselves, such as interviewing others.

From these discussions, teachers and children generate ideas for future projects and investigations (Katz & Chard, 2000).

**Engage and Challenge Children**

Discovery centers are dynamic. They support children’s broadening understandings about their world. Objects placed out for children’s explorations are intended to generate new concepts and questions. Journals, notepads, or logs, along with markers, invite children to record what they observe. Graphs and child-made charts can show changes in a plant or in the growth of a caterpillar. When children observe and record what they are learning, they are better able to consolidate their knowledge.

When construction materials are available, children can build miniature bridges, machines, or other replicas that represent what they know and are learning. Hands-on experiences are essential for preschoolers because of the personal nature of early learning (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Katz & Chard, 2000). Puzzles and games are suitable in these centers as well, because they challenge learners. Games or sets of picture cards to classify can extend children’s knowledge.

**How to Make Sound and Smell Jars**

**Sound Jars**

Fill pairs of recycled film canisters (small ones are fine) with equal portions of sand, pebbles, pennies, metal nuts, anything that, when shaken, will produce sound. Replace the caps, glue them on, air dry, and challenge children to find the two sounds which match.

**Smell Jars**

Place cotton balls dipped in cologne, rubbing alcohol, prepared coffee, or other odors into film canisters. Or cover cinnamon sticks, teaspoons of nutmeg, ginger, rosemary, and other herbs or spices with cotton balls or fabric to hide their identity. Children name the scents, or match the odors if provided pairs of jars. Replacing lids is not essential with smell jars.

Often, just asking children to talk about what they are observing and experiencing helps them better conceptualize facts and processes. Hendrick (2003) refers to this strategy as an excellent avenue for stretching the learner’s mental capa-

How to Make Sound and Smell Jars

**Ask children what they are observing and experiencing.**

Children should
Children built on their knowledge with new applications.

Understanding What Happens With Reggio

To better understand what was happening in the classroom, and how to participate in and contribute to its future growth, teachers sought more information about the Reggio Emilia approach. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education (http://ericccee.org), spon-

One group of 4-year-olds brought in hundreds of acorns from their playground during the fall season. These were used to count, form sets, classify, and discover the place-value system. Explorations such as these are a backdrop for mathematics learning as recommended by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and described in *The Young Child and Mathematics*, a joint publication by NCTM and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Coplay, 2000). The acorns also led children to make artistic creations and discuss the life cycle of plants.

Discovery centers provide opportunities for children to explore and investigate natural and cultural phenomena, both familiar and new. During Fire Prevention Week, for example, offering firefighters’ hats, vests, boots, and other fire-resistant clothing calls attention to the theme and promotes dramatic play.

Carpet samples, corrugated cardboard, ceiling and floor tiles, bricks, and tree bark increase children’s curiosity about textures in their natural environments. Children’s knowledge with new applications related to class projects and curriculum goals. Keep curiosity fresh by adding a new item or two, daily or weekly. Take away those that have outlasted their discussion value. The strength of any topic builds when children are able to delve deeply into information and resources.

When textures are introduced, teachers might want to start with rough textures. Add softer items later (such as foam pillows, fabric swatches, ribbon, cotton batting, and baby blankets) to extend the textures study. This provides a foundation for comparisons, a critical component of Piaget’s concept development theory (Charlesworth & Lind, 1999).

Ask children to feel the various textures and record their comments (either orally with a recorder or by writing them on a chart). As their vocabulary expands, they strengthen their mental representations of rough, smooth, soft, and hard concepts.

Create a Related Bulletin Board

Through this encounter with a project and the children’s active inquiry, the hundred languages exploded throughout the classroom. There is no convincing this class that there is any other way to learn, or to “do school.”

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Create a Related Bulletin Board

Learning about “My Neighborhood” is typical in early childhood classrooms. What might children find in a discovery area on this topic? A display of photographs of their homes and familiar businesses is a good place to start. Provide materials (recycled boxes, blocks, plastic bricks, markers, modeling dough) that they can use to build a replica of, or draw, their own neighborhood, too.

A bulletin board with a simple map could show the relationship of the school to the neighborhood or to children’s homes. Encourage early mapping skills by asking children to draw their ideas about where they live and the route they take to school.
Planning Effective Classroom Discovery Centers

Laverne Warner, Ph.D., is Coordinator and Professor of Early Childhood Education, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas. She is currently serving as the Texas Representative to the SECA Board of Directors.

“Hey, teacher, what’s this?” queried Marcus in an excited voice.

“It’s a snail I found in my backyard last night,” replied his teacher. “Have you seen one before? I’ll bet you have snails in your backyard, too.”

“Hey, Rosa,” says Marcus to his classmate. “This is a snail.”

“I’ve put out a book that tells more about snails. Would you like to look at it?” asks the teacher. “Our discovery table helps us find all kinds of information about our world, doesn’t it?”

Discovery tables (or let’s find out centers) are common in early childhood learning environments (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Hendrick, 2003). Their availability in classrooms enables children to explore materials and objects that relate to a planned study. Or they may spontaneously emerge as Mother Nature presents her seasonal gifts (holly sprigs during winter or fresh dandelions in spring).

The purpose of discovery centers is to provide naturally-occurring phenomena from nature for children to observe and explore. They may also include commercial items for projects that could go on for days, with interaction of adults, other children, outside resources, and time to think and feel, and to unify thinking and feeling into a more coherent expression.

• The children had experienced animal studies from many angles before. The class menagerie included three finches, a turtle, a... the classroom for a day, then released. These nurturing environs invited many stages of reflection and perspective taking.

• The children had experienced numerous group projects before, and were familiar with the give-and-take required for team effort. The gain that came through self-sacrifice became evident as partnerships and cooperation increased their sources of ideas and inspirations, interpretations and implementations.

This Montessori classroom in Texas resembled New’s description of a Reggio Emilia classroom, where teachers place a high value on their ability to improvise and respond to children’s predispositions to enjoy the unexpected. Regardless of their origins, successful projects are those that generate a sufficient amount of interest and uncertainty to provoke children’s creative thinking and problem-solving and are open to different avenues of exploration (New, 1993, p. 4).

Various competing philosophies, worldviews, and ideologies exist in early childhood education. Laverne Warner is part of the team that has contributed significantly to this field through her research and publications. Her work has emphasized the importance of discovery centers in fostering children’s curiosity and creativity. By providing opportunities for children to explore and investigate natural and cultural phenomena, discovery centers support children’s learning and development in multiple domains.

**Bibliography of Related Readings**


early childhood education today. One prevalent approach views the child as a learner who is on a trajectory toward adulthood. This perspective empowers the adult to dominate and control the life of children and schools, "for their own good."

An alternate motive emerges from the image of the child as a unique individual, with rights rather than with needs, as espoused by the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education. Carlotta Rinaldi, in The Hundred Languages of Children (Edwards et al., 1998), articulates seven characteristics of this young child. The young child has potential, and is plastic (malleable). She is growing and is curious, and she retains the ability to be amazed. Finally, she seeks relationships and desires to communicate.

These components of childhood surfaced in many ways as the children in one Montessori classroom explored the Dallas Zoo with their hundred languages.

References


SECA Proposes By-Laws Amendment

As an organization that is governed by and for its members and state affiliates, SECA is committed to ensuring that the selection of the SECA President represents all states and members. The SECA Board of Directors is proposing a by-laws amendment that will ensure that the SECA leadership represents the will and desires of its membership.

The proposed by-laws amendment changes the election of the SECA President from direct member ballot to a certified election by the states. The by-laws amendment is designed to enhance the participation of state members and affiliates in the election process, to enhance the nomination process to allow for wider input and nomination of diverse candidates and to ensure equity among the SECA states.

The proposed by-laws amendment will be considered at the annual SECA business meeting to be held during the annual conference, Saturday, March 15, 2003. The meeting is scheduled for 11:15 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. at the Myrtle Beach Convention Center.

As required, the text of the By-Laws Amendment is published for membership consideration. If you would like to receive a copy of the proposed SECA Policy and Procedures that will be implemented with an approved by-laws change, contact the SECA office at 1-800-305-7322 or by e-mail at gbean@southernearlychildhood.org.

Proposed By-Laws Amendment

Article VIII

Section D: Election of the President-Elect shall be by certified ballot and shall occur in a formally recognized meeting of the SECA Board of Directors. Each state shall have one vote and must conduct a selection process, certified according to SECA policy, to determine the candidate that will receive the state’s vote. The duly elected state affiliate representative on the SECA Board of Directors will submit that state’s vote to the SECA President.

Members-at-Large of the SECA Board of Directors shall represent SECA non-affiliate members. The Members-at-Large will cast one vote for President-Elect on behalf of the SECA non-affiliate members. Non-affiliate members will receive a mailed ballot and return that ballot to an independent audit firm. The audit firm will certify the vote tally of the non-affiliate ballots.

The SECA President will cast a vote only in the event of a tie. The Immediate Past President will not vote.

SECA presents three new professional development retreats to take you "Beyond the Basics." In a retreat environment, you’ll have the opportunity to network, relax, and learn. Each retreat will have its own unique focus and the locations we’ve chosen will provide the ultimate in destination locales. Each retreat is designed to allow you to enjoy your destination, including visits to Nashville’s famed music venues, the Biltmore Estate in Asheville and the River Walk in San Antonio.

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