

Using the School's Learning Center to Support Project Work

**30 Classes of Kindergarten and At-Risk Pre-kindergarten Students
at Donald C. Parker Early Education Center, Machesney Park, Illinois**

Length of Project: 1 time per week for 25 min. Teacher: Nancy Plate, Learning Center Teacher

Phase One

Beginning the Project

Projects have been initiated in the Learning Center in several ways. Some have begun with a teacher-planned catalyst such as bringing in an ant farm or displaying tools used by our custodian. Other projects have sprung from unexpected events such as having 20 young trees donated to the school or inheriting a very large gold fish.

Typically, I begin our work with whole-class webbing. Using these discussions, I note what areas individual classes show interest in and work to help the students expand their experience and knowledge in those areas.

Phase Two

Developing the Project

Even with time and space constraints, there are still ways to offer many types of project experiences to students. I do whole-group work with webbing, discussions, generating questions, and background reading. Centers that are set up around the room are used to accommodate small groups for observational drawings, first-hand explorations, interviews, surveys, detailed reading and research, and construction. At times, teachers have allowed me to take students out of their classrooms to do additional individual work. This experience is very rewarding for the student and often results in an "Ah ha!"

Resources for our projects vary. Naturally, books are always available from our Learning Center and the local library. We are fortunate to have classroom access to the Internet. I try to have artifacts or firsthand experiences for the students to investigate. Experts have been called upon and interviewed by both the students and me.

Because of timing and logistics, field visits must be confined to the school building and the immediate outside area. This limitation has not been a problem with the topics we have studied.

I try to document the students' work as the project progresses using space in the Learning Center for display. Often from viewing these displays, students from classes that are not involved with the project become interested in the material.

Phase Three

Concluding the Project

We conclude our projects by "publishing" the students' work in notebooks. These notebooks are processed as library materials and are available for the students to check out. This procedure enables students to share their individual contributions as well as the collective work of the class with their parents. When viewing these notebooks, students and parents see not only the result of student learning but, more importantly, the process of investigation. Readers see learning represented in the form of text, drawings, graphs, and photos showing constructions and problem-solving situations.

Comments

Each project brings its own unique challenges and learning. As a result, I consistently see growth in both the students and myself. There is always at least one student who shows a tremendous extension of self-confidence and learning during a project. One of the biggest hurdles I find is taking time for daily reflection. As difficult as finding this time is for me, I feel doing so is of the utmost importance for successful project work. Daily reflection helps me to stay focused on where the students are and where I might take them next.

Brianna copied these words from our ant web.



Constructing an ant colony.



Observing the ant farm.

Book Title ANTS

Author CATHERINE DUNN

This is what I learned from this book. queens, hills
strong, talk with heads,
sting, eggs.

Here is a drawing of something I found interesting.

Student's name DEANETTE B