

The Bird Project

A Project by Kindergarten Students

at Glencliff Elementary School, Niskayuna Central School District, Rexford, New York

Length of Project: 8 weeks Teacher: Abby Weber

Phase One

Beginning the Project

The project on birds was initiated by the kindergartners' great interest in the birds observed at our feeders outside our classroom window. This interest was further heightened in January, when we made bird seed treats for the winter birds, as illustrated in the book *The Night Tree*, by Eve Bunting. One of the teacher's ongoing goals is to plan hands-on experiences to increase the kindergartners' awareness of the natural environment surrounding Glencliff School. A project on birds seemed like a good way to meet this goal. During phase one, the children and teacher shared past experiences and prior knowledge about birds. From our group discussions, we created a web and recorded the information (and misconceptions) we had gathered. The children were then given a variety of materials to work with to represent what they already knew. Finally, using our web and representations, we developed five questions to investigate during phase two of our project.

Phase Two

Developing the Project

Phase two of our Bird Project began by having children select which of our five formulated questions they were most interested in researching. Based on prior project work, the teacher purposely asked each child privately to select a question to try and ensure that investigation groups were created on a real interest and not just on the other members of the group. We ended up with between four and eight children in each of the groups. The five questions were: (1) What kinds of birds come to our bird feeders? (2) What bird feeder do the birds eat from the most? (3) What kind of food do birds like to eat? (4) How do you identify a bird? and (5) What do birds use to build nests? Throughout phase two, the teacher provided opportunities to increase the children's knowledge about birds by reading books, bird guides, and magazines, and by exploring several wonderful Web sites on birds. The class participated in special events with several bird experts, which included programs on owls (which included seeing three types of live owls and a wildlife artist's drawing), and bird nest building, as well as several bird-watching walks with a parent who is a birding expert. Prior to beginning their fieldwork, the children had the skilled help of several parents and grandparents to help them build several different types of feeders. We ended up with seven different feeders hanging outside our windows. The children did a great deal of sketching and labeled drawings throughout the project. Although we focused on the birds in our area, we did have a pet parrot spend the day in the classroom to give the children the opportunity to observe and sketch a bird up close. Each child had a "Bird Watching Observation Field Book" to take home and record the birds seen in their yards. The parents had fun participating. The children worked enthusiastically doing fieldwork to learn more about their questions. Each of the groups' fieldwork, data collection, and representations took on different forms that included tally and pictograph charts, sketching, sculpting, designing feeders, and making nests.

Phase Three

Concluding the Project

The children decided to conclude their bird project by inviting families and other classes to a "Bird Fair" open house to share what they had learned about birds. The teacher worked with each group to help the children decide on the best way to represent what they had learned and how to display it. The children made invitations to the Bird Fair and decided on the best way to distribute them. Next, the children worked with their groups to create displays that represented what had been investigated, how the investigation was done, and what was learned.

Comments

This project was one of the most exciting and profound experiences this teacher has ever had with a class of kindergartners in 24 years of teaching. Doing an in-depth project on birds provided the children with an extremely meaningful and powerful learning experience in which many cross-curricular concepts and skills were naturally integrated. The children did not want to stop the project, even after 8 weeks. In fact, one little boy who had been very hesitant about participating in class activities became one of the most positive leaders in this fieldwork group. During the end-of-the-year conference with this child's parents, they shared that the child felt the teacher was "confused." The child stated: "We study birds in kindergarten, that's what we do! What does she think she is doing bringing in tadpoles!"

