

The Restaurant Project

A Project by 6- and 7-Year-Old Students
at Westmere Elementary School, Guilderland, New York

*Length of Project: 6 weeks Teachers: Dorine Phelan, Robert Whiteman,
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Phase One

Beginning the Project

The location of our school along a suburban shopping district and the generosity of a parent who owns several local restaurants made our topic selection easy. With two first-grade classes in adjoining rooms, we were certain that we could manage the many project groups that would inevitably stem from the topic by combining spaces, teaching assistants, and parent volunteers. The students and adults spent much time in this first phase sharing stories and experiences from restaurants and other locations where food is consumed (e.g., food courts, supermarkets). After this initial sharing, students were asked to sketch, from memory, a place where they had eaten out. These sketches were shared, and the teachers wrote the ideas on Post-it notes, without attempting to group ideas. Later in phase one, these notes were used, along with new ideas and questions, to create a class web. With the guidance of the teachers, the notes were easily moved around into categories, such as the kitchen, the menu, and the wait staff.

Phase Two

Developing the Project

The children suggested sites we could visit and experts we could interview for fieldwork. One child naturally suggested his father, who owns a restaurant and a bakery in a nearby shopping plaza. We also contacted a chain restaurant and a gourmet shop in the same plaza so we could make one trip but visit all four sites while we were there.

Guided by teachers, teaching assistants, and parent volunteers, groups visited the sites that would best answer their questions. Armed with clipboards, pencils, planned questions, and digital cameras, groups investigated each facility, interviewing chefs, managers, wait staff, and bakers. Children took notes, made observational sketches, and asked questions, while teachers took digital photos and asked further guiding questions.

Upon returning from the field sites, the children shared their sketches and notes with each other. They wrote captions for the digital photos and organized all that they had heard and seen. The children decided that the best way to represent what they had learned was to re-create a restaurant in our adjoining classrooms. Groups made models of food from clay; set up tables with place settings; set up a bar with its many glasses; built and stocked a wait station; made menus; created a cash register and hostess stand; and built the kitchen with its wood-fired pizza oven, prep stations, and dishwasher. The children frequently referred to their sketches and digital photos to guide their representations as they worked. Much productive talk showed how they were applying what they had learned on site to make their displays as realistic as possible.

Phase Three

Concluding the Project

It was only natural that once the restaurant and its kitchen were built we should have a grand opening and invite “customers.” It was the students’ idea to invite their fifth-grade buddy classes. With the restaurant opening looming, work intensified, and the students added missing elements. On opening day, the customers were greeted at the door, handed a menu, and shown to a seat. As their orders were taken and the kitchen worked away, the noise increased, and the ambiance created by the student singing in the corner was quickly lost. Workers got confused, and job descriptions were forgotten. After the initial visitation, both classes sat down to discuss some of the problems and their solutions, and they participated in a “rehearsal.” By the time the second group came, the restaurant was running more smoothly, and the customers seemed less frazzled. Parents and families visited the project during a “morning coffee.”

Comments

Some children who had not yet shown a great deal of confidence or a particular area of strength seemed to “come into their own” during this project. Also, the success of our fieldwork, which we needed to complete in limited time, was due to the parents who owned the businesses and the other businesspeople understanding what the children needed to accomplish during their visits. We had introduced parents to the Project Approach through weekly newsletters and parent workshops, and we had contacted the other businesspeople before our field trip to “educate” them with respect to project work. In retrospect, we wish the children had more of an opportunity to express the facts and information they learned in a more succinct way during the culminating event. The role playing of the restaurant in action was hectic at times, and some of the information was lost in the shuffle of the excitement of the visitors. We noticed that students demonstrated their knowledge and skills most prominently during phase two, as they worked cooperatively in groups to represent their learning.

