

Dinosaur Models

A Project by 3- through 4-Year-Old Children
at Preschool for the Arts, Madison, Wisconsin
Length of Project: Not yet completed
Teachers: Nancy Donahue & Joan Kerman

Phase One

Beginning the Project

Our investigation began in mid-January after a few children brought toy dinosaurs and dinosaur books to school. We were hesitant to explore this interest for two reasons: (1) we saw a potential for aggressive play in a classroom with a large ratio of “active” boys and (2) dinosaurs are not a part of our everyday experience in the real world. However, interest continued to grow as evidenced by the children’s choosing activities with dinosaurs and books brought from home on a daily basis. They also made dinosaurs the subject of artwork and searched for dinosaur fossils on our playground. It seemed as though we would be ignoring what was a very strong interest if we did not explore the topic.

Phase Two

Developing the Project

We began by collecting some toy dinosaurs and putting them in the classroom to see how the children used them. Over the next week or so, we put some dinosaur fact books and storybooks in the classroom. The children frequently asked to have them read to them and chose them to look at during their rest time. We also added some natural materials—large pieces of tree bark, rocks, and artificial greenery to the block area. The children quickly combined these materials with the toy dinosaurs. This activity led to the construction of a dinosaur habitat that was large enough for a couple of children to sit in while playing with dinosaurs. We also asked the children what they knew about dinosaurs and what they wondered about them during the first week. One child wanted to know how they lived, and another asked what they did all day. So we focused on dinosaur “life”—dinosaur families, specifically nesting habits, eggs and development, and where they lived (habitats). Many of the books and videos we have looked at show volcanoes, so we took a little side trip to explore volcanoes, and we made a volcano model out of papier-mâché. We also talked about paleontology and pretended to be paleontologists by finding fossils and bones (processed chicken bones and plastic T-Rex model bones) in sand and dirt and using tools to clean them. When we were well into the project, a guest speaker (who spends his summer at dinosaur digs) came to our classroom to share experiences, present a slide show, and show us fossils and some T-Rex bones he had found. We also went on a field trip to the geology museum on the University of Wisconsin at Madison campus.

Phase Three

Concluding the Project

Over a four-week period, the children made a large papier-mâché dinosaur model with our art specialist in the art studio. Because it was too big to put in our classroom, we decided to put it out in the piazza and make a museum exhibit out of it. The children reflected on the trip to the geology museum and other museum experiences to help them design and build their dinosaur exhibit. They also made a book that contained drawings and information about dinosaurs (so we revisited what we know about dinosaurs). The project culminated with the unveiling of our exhibit and a tea party in the piazza.

Comments

At the time of writing, this project has not been completed. Reflecting back on what we have done so far, we would have liked to have allowed the children to spend more time with each other theorizing about dinosaurs before we provided information through books and videos. We did spend some time talking about theories about dinosaur extinction, but two of the children already knew about the theory of a meteor hitting earth and insisted that this is what happened to them. Although we were initially hesitant to go into this topic, it has held the children's interest, and they have taken their curiosity and enthusiasm home. At the beginning of the project, a student had said that she hated dinosaurs and did not want to talk about them. A month into the project, she drew a picture and wrote "love dinosaurs" on it. Even though dinosaurs are not a part of their everyday life in the real world, they are definitely a big part of many young children's lives.

