Our Snake Project

A Project by 3-, 4-, and 5-Year-Old Children (multi-age class)
at Timothy Christian Preschool, Elmhurst, Illinois
Length of Project: 5 weeks
Teachers: Ruth Harkema & Deb Lanenga

Phase One

Beginning the Project

Four-year-old Max was fascinated by a snake during our fall field trip and suggested we study snakes. We previewed Brookfield Zoo's reptile house, gathered books from libraries and bookstores, discovered a pet store willing to let us borrow a desert king snake, and asked children to represent snakes with paint, colored markers, or Model Magic™. They wanted to find out how snakes move and climb without falling, how they use their tongues, whether all snakes are poisonous, and what they eat. We hoped the children would develop a sense of wonder about a misunderstood member of God's creation that would dispel their fear and create a desire to touch a snake.

Phase Two

Developing the Project

We showed clips from the video *The Ultimate Guide: Snakes.* Children checked out snake books, book-marking favorite information and pictures with their parents to share with the class. They touched snake skins and skeletons brought by our high school biology teacher, asked him questions, observed and touched the desert king snake, and, with parent volunteers, sketched snakes and looked for answers to questions at Brookfield Zoo. After comparing their zoo sketches to photographs of their snakes, the children made pen and liquid watercolor drawings to illustrate their dictated stories in our *Snake Book—e*ven Hope who came from China with no English 20 months before this project. She started by painting a black-line snake and, when asked what she wanted to learn at the zoo, announced to the class, "**Do not open cage.**" At the end, after her hands had reached out to touch four different snakes, she painted a complicated scale-covered snake and sounded out and wrote her own story words. During their research, children discovered that a reticulated python could be 33 feet long or as long as a school bus, so they measured a 33-foot length of paper, painted a python, and marched it out to the parking lot where 24 proud hands stretched it alongside bus #20. To complete our study, the children made 3D snakes using tubing, piping, wood, or Model Magic™, and they wrote snake party invitations to their families.

Phase Three

Concluding the Project

Our celebration began with a Snake Ram-Sam-Sam nonsense rhyme. Then each child took the stage and with a paper tube "microphone" told what he or she learned about snakes. Parents created a caring celebration as they clapped equally loud and long for each child. Children showed their parents their snakes, photographs of themselves at work, our almost-school-bus-length python; ate snake cookies; and took home copies of our *Snake Book.*

Comments

We were pleased with the children's enthusiasm during the project and the quality of the work, but we underestimated the power of the project for families until parent reflection questionnaires were returned. Parents appreciated that their children were allowed to study what interested them. They listed as benefits of this long-term study their children's excitement, depth of focus, increased love of learning, eagerness to do research, and their competent sharing of what they had learned. A year later, parents are reporting that their children still ask to check out snake books, want to report findings to their former classmates, and, when visiting the zoo, ask to visit the reptile house first.