

What Happens at McDonald's?

A Project by 3- through 6-Year-Old Children
at Illinois State University Child Care Center, Normal, Illinois
Length of Project: September through November 2002
Teachers: Pam Morbitzer, Lisa Lee, & Barb Gallick

Phase One

Beginning the Project

The children in our program pretended to play restaurant in the dramatic play area regularly. During morning meeting, the teachers and children began to discuss restaurants everyone had visited. Small groups of children interviewed the class and created graphs showing our favorite restaurants. Because there was a McDonald's on our campus, we took a walk to visit this restaurant. The children made some initial sketches of the restaurant. The children expressed interest in learning more about how the kitchen was run and what was behind the counter. They asked many questions about how the counter area machines operated.

Phase Two

Developing the Project

After visiting the McDonald's on campus, the children formed groups that would investigate the following areas: (1) eating, (2) kitchen, (3) counter, (4) play, and (5) office/storage. Each group of children formulated questions related to their area of interest. The play area group visited a McDonald's in Bloomington. The other groups visited the campus McDonald's. At each McDonald's, one of the managers answered the children's questions and gave them a tour. During each field visit, the children sketched the areas they were investigating.

The children decided they wanted to create a McDonald's restaurant in the dramatic play area of our classroom. They sent a letter home requesting items to be used in the restaurant. Various small groups worked to create an ice cream machine, a drink machine, a juice machine, menus that would be posted on the wall, and food items made from hard-drying modeling clay. Many families contributed drink cups, sacks, Happy Meal toys, fry bags, and other paper products from visits to McDonald's. Once the machines were completed and other items collected, the children rearranged the dramatic play area. They spent some time discussing the layout of the kitchen, office, and eating and counter areas. Some children created labels for various bins and shelves that were used to store food and paper items in the restaurant.

Phase Three

Concluding the Project

A group of children painted a sign for the dramatic play area McDonald's. Once this sign was hung and the restaurant opened for business, the children were able to apply, in their dramatic play, the knowledge gained during fieldwork. The children shared the project with their parents by giving them tours of the McDonald's as well as serving them "meals." The process of setting up the McDonald's involved the use of organizational skills, brainstorming, problem solving, and teamwork. The children gained an understanding of what is involved in the daily operation of a restaurant.

Comments

Because of the age and inexperience with project work of a majority of the children, the teachers found themselves taking more of a leadership role than in previous projects. The McDonald's restaurant project progressed at a slower pace than other projects, but the teachers felt that it was still a valuable experience for the children. The "behind the scenes" investigation expanded the children and teacher's knowledge base as well as provided opportunities for social interactions and language development. Restaurant operations served as a good topic for the children who were new to project work as well as an interesting topic for the children who had prior project experience.

