

## Can Children be Researchers? Moving Early Childhood from the Cute Curriculum toward Children's Questions

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In the last year of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we published a manuscript entitled, “Isn’t that cute? Transforming the cute curriculum into authentic learning” (Kirkland, Aldridge, & Kuby, 1999). The article was well received and republished in *Annual Editions of Early Childhood Education* (2000/2001), and again in the next year’s annual edition for 2001/2002 (Kirkland, Aldridge & Kuby, 2000/2001; Kirkland, Aldridge & Kuby, 2001/2002). The cute curriculum was defined as “pedagogical activities that teachers implement because of their mistaken notions of what children find appealing...These activities have no intrinsic connection to the topic being studied. The cute curriculum is most noted for its lack of content and process” (Kirkland, Aldridge, & Kuby, 2001/2002, p. 166). When a teacher of young children comments to a colleague about that colleague’s classroom or students saying, “Isn’t that cute?” most likely what is happening is not authentic learning nor does it challenge children to research the answers to the important questions they have about what they are learning.

Over 20 years later, many early childhood teachers are still using cute ideas in their classrooms without asking the question, “Of what value is this to the children and their learning?” For example, what is the purpose of using coloring sheets or coloring books? What is the reason for using rote counting or singing about the alphabet without looking at the letters they represent? Is that learning or is it just cute? These are the questions teachers must ask every day for each area of the curriculum to determine if students are engaged in authentic learning or just following the motions of a cute curriculum. As Jalongo (1996) suggested, “many of the noneducative and miseducative activities.... can be categorized in a single word—cute” (p. 67).

One of the main reasons why the cute curriculum has persisted is because many teachers do not comprehend what is wrong with this approach or do not see a need for moving beyond the common misconception that young children learn best when something is cute. Often, the same teachers do not see children as researchers, capable of asking their own questions and investigating their inquiries to find the answers. The purpose of this article is to assist teachers in moving from the cute curriculum toward using children’s questions as a salient basis for investigation and documentation. One of the best ways to accomplish this is through more in-depth study of a topic. One of the salient avenues for in-depth study of a topic is the project approach (Beneke, Ostrosky, & Katz, 2019; Chard, 1997; Katz & Chard, 1989; Katz, Chard, & Kogan, 2014).

Guidelines are important to help teachers move from the cute curriculum to authentic learning experiences. The following section provides these guidelines, followed by examples of a project-based research experiences using these guidelines for authentic learning.

### Guidelines for Authentic Learning Experiences:

1. **Children’s ideas and questions guide project development.** Children are more engaged in the learning process when they are part of the decision making related to the project (Katz & Chard, 1989). Children come to school with lots of stories and curiosities to share. When their thinking is shared and valued, children become risk takers and confident in their thinking. Every child is encouraged to provide their input.
2. **Problem solving and collaboration are used to engage children in the project.** Piaget teaches us that when children interact with each other and solve problems together, they move to a higher level of thinking (Piaget, 1954). When the children are problem solving about authentic, real-world questions, they develop or expand schema related to that particular knowledge base. Children develop cognitive strategies that they use when problem solving. Some of these strategies might include how information will be compiled and shared with others, how well do I work with others on a common outcome (social-emotional development) and developing a sense of community of cooperation.

3. **Independent and collaborative work are utilized through the project.** In the real world, we work both independently and collaboratively, depending on the task. Authentic learning experiences are built on both modes of working. One of the top characteristics needed by 21st century jobs includes self-initiated work and teamwork (Conte & Landy, 2019). Thus, our classrooms need to move away from too many teacher directed activities to more student centered and authentic work.
4. **Children engage in thinking about the resources and equipment needed to work on a project.** Based on prior knowledge and the project work, children decide and adjust the resources and equipment that will be needed to answer their questions (Beneke, Ostrosky & Katz, 2019).
5. **Interaction with real objects and people facilitates the gathering, compiling, and documenting of information.** Just as scientists work in their contexts, children need to work with real objects and data. Through the process, children learn that information gathered throughout the project cannot be used unless it is compiled, put in a friendly format, and shared with others (Beneke, Ostrosky & Katz, 2019).
6. **Project based experiences promote the cognitive construction of new relationships.** Children are keen observers of their community, neighborhood, and school. Using a project approach that relates to their world helps children use their prior knowledge as a foundation for new learning (Katz & Chard, 1989).
7. **The information gained from the project is shared with others.** When children share and revisit what they have learned with their peers, families, and friends, they become confident learners. There are numerous modalities that can be used for presenting what a child has learned. Therefore, introverted or extroverted children can be accommodated by their choice of presentation venues. Whether an individualized or team approach to documentation of learning, children see the importance of the learning process (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001).

#### **Example of a Project Based Science Experience based on the guidelines for authentic learning experiences:**

##### **Garden to Table**

This project emerged in the spring of the year as children noticed on their daily neighborhood walk that several neighbors in our community were working on planting gardens. Some children had parents or extended family members who grew vegetables in a garden or in containers. The teacher invited a local urban gardener to come and talk with the class about her job and gardening.

##### **1. Questions the children asked:**

- How long does it take to grow the plants?
- Do some plants grow faster than others?
- Are some plants bigger than others?
- What do the plants need to grow?
- Where will our garden be?
- Can we cook our plants?

##### **2. Problem Solving and Collaboration**

- The children made flyers to place in mailboxes or handout during the daily walk, asking if anyone owned a tiller and could till the soil for us. Children also noticed that some neighbors used raised beds for gardening.
- Children worked in groups in the garden according to a schedule they created.
- Children first pulled gardening books from our classroom library and then enlisted the help of our school media specialist to gather books related to gardening. They used a non-fiction resource pocket chart in the classroom, based on the Dewey Decimal system used by the school media center, to locate and review books for use in the classroom. The teacher brought in books from her home related to gardening and asked parents to send in any books, magazines, etc. that they might have related to gardening.
- The class kept a record of temperature and rainfall each day over an eight-week period.
- Children researched plants, listed as possibilities to grow in the garden, to see how it helped their bodies. (lettuce, radishes, carrots, peas, etc). The information was compiled and documented on a large mural chart in the classroom.

##### **3. Independent and Collaborative Work**

- The children devised a schedule related to small group work in the garden during outdoor recess time. Each day of the week, four children worked in the garden.
- Children journaled after they worked in the garden documenting their work and what they noticed about the garden. They dated each journal entry with a date stamp.
- The children worked on a flyer about the garden to go home to the class parents initially, and then all parents within the school, advertising the farmer's market dates, products, and prices.
- Children planted one seed/plant in their own small decorated clay pots to take home to show how plants can be grown in containers also.

#### **4. Resources and Equipment**

- The teacher secured approval from the principal for a designated area within the school yard where the garden would be installed.
- After the visit from the local urban gardener, the class made a chart of the equipment needed to plant and maintain our garden. i.e., garden hose, garden dirt, small wheelbarrow, small shovels, packets of seeds, etc. Letters were sent home asking for any tools that could be borrowed with the assurance that the tools would be labeled, so they could be returned.
- Notes from a field trip to a local farmer's market, pictures from an online farmer's market, or virtual tour of a farmer's market <https://youtu.be/E1GrO6UbaXY> were used as resources for the project. Depending on the time of year, the class could visit a farm to pick strawberries, pumpkins, cotton, etc.
- Experts from a local urban or rural farm and a local nursery served as guest speakers to the class. These local experts, as well as some parents, helped the children to plan the garden.
- The children established a farmer's market to sell the grown vegetables once they discovered that we had more vegetables than we could use.
- Books were gathered from our classroom and school library related to plants and gardening.
- The class looked for poems/Songs/fingerplays related to gardening in various genres.
- The children designed the flyers for requesting tools and equipment for the garden. The flyer also notified parents about our project, so they might contribute financially or physically in some way.

#### **5. Interaction with real objects and people:**

- At the beginning of the project, a local urban farm representative was asked to visit our classroom and talk about gardening. She brought tools, seeds, plants, fertilizer and pictures to show the children about gardening. She made suggestions related to plants that would grow well in the garden. After she left the classroom, a second chart was created of more questions and a list of things we needed to plant the garden.
- Children used real tools in planting the selected seeds and/or plants.

#### **6. Cognitive construction of new relationships:**

- Before the visit from the gardener, prior knowledge was checked about gardening. An anchor chart was created documenting what the children already knew about gardening. A list of questions was made to ask our gardening expert when she visited our classroom. Each child had their own clipboard, paper, and pencil to take notes from the expert gardener. Some children drew pictures, while others used temporary spellings, to remember the information.
- Children used photographs they took with disposable cameras, magazines, pictures from internet searches, and personal drawings to depict their learning in the journals.
- Toward the end of the project, the class took a field trip to the local urban garden to show the children how communities worked together in the urban gardens and participated in the harvest of the plantings to cook for their families and friends.

#### **7. Documentation**

- The class snack for one day a week was a salad using the vegetables grown in the garden.
- Each child kept a Garden to Table journal that documented the class questions and any additional questions they might have.
- A class mural of the garden was created for the hallway, labeling each plant.

- A farmer's market was offered one day a week to sell the produce from our garden. The reading buddies from a fourth grade class helped the kindergarten children to collect money that would be used to purchase books for the school library. They also helped the children to visit classrooms to advertise the farmer's market.

### Discussion

Can children be researchers? The answer is yes if children are given the opportunity to ask questions and provided with the tools of research and support to answer these inquiries. The project approach provides teachers with the opportunity to help children inquire about and investigate real world problems and issues that can be studied and then the information gathered can be shared with others (Beneke, Ostrosky, & Katz, 2019). Teachers who promote problem solving and collaboration most likely will see the value of authentic learning and transform their classroom practices from a reliance on the cute curriculum to experiences that value the questions children ask. This undoubtedly will help teachers develop the belief that young children can indeed, be researchers (Katz, Chard, & Kogan, 2014).

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