

Learning Story: Constructive Play in the Fairy Garden

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Introduction

The Fairy Garden is a school garden activity I have developed over two years at McNear Elementary School as an interactive play space for groups of children TK-2. It takes place in a 4 x 11 foot raised planter where children create a miniature landscape, consisting of landforms, water features, plants and constructed architectural features. Students visit the school garden every other week throughout the school year for 45 minutes. Because the logistics of the program make it difficult to observe and interact with children individually, I will base this learning story on my observations and interactions with a group of 6-8 Kindergarten children over two sessions at the fairy garden. I will also offer reflections on how I have extended the project with similar aged groups.

This activity combines constructive play, nature play, science play and imaginative play, so it is useful to begin with a general definition of play. According to



Fromberg and Bergen, (2015) “possibly the overriding attribute that is so gratifying and addictive about play is that it is intrinsically motivated, satisfying and empowering.” (p.4) Although the activities I will describe take place as a guided activity in an elementary school setting, I feel that Fromberg and Bergen’s definition applies and is a good way to introduce both phases of this learning process.

First, the question of whether a school activity can be truly intrinsically motivated. In this case, children are always given the opportunity not to participate, so I feel that it is safe to say that play at the fairy garden is motivated at least by a personal choice, albeit within the parameters of what is presented as acceptable in the school garden during the designated time. Satisfaction is another element that is influenced by the structure imposed by the children's experience within the school day. I know anecdotally that children enjoy the activity and wish to participate. This indicates that the experience must be enjoyable and by extension, satisfying. At the least, I have observed that the children think the fairy garden is fun and cool.

As to the idea of empowering, I find the fairy garden to fit well with this part of



Fromberg and Bergen's definition. The activity consists essentially of a miniature world that the children collectively create. Thus, they experience the full range of power, from creation to destruction to rebuilding. In keeping with Morgenthaler's (2015) premise, that play with miniature objects gives children a sense of dominion and control, I have observed that in building an environment for the fairies, the children demonstrate a degree of caring and

empathy that implies not only dominion but responsibility. I hope that caring for the

fairies will be the first step toward understanding the interrelationships between all living things in the garden ecosystem and beyond.

Fairy Garden Activity Stage 1:

I have introduced the students to the fairy garden activity in general terms. “I bet you didn’t know that there were fairies in this garden. What do you think they need to live and play in the garden?” This ties into a previous discussion of what animals need to survive (shelter, water, food.) According to the art educator George, Szekely (1983), “teachers’ ability to accept the fantastic, say the ridiculous and believe the unbelievable sets the stage for children’s playfulness. (p. 20)” It is my intention to simply get the play started, so the children can be as self-directed as possible, and I am aware that in presenting the premise that there are fairies in the garden, I have let the students know that I am willing to join them in this make-believe world.

In this, the first phase of the activity, the kindergarteners shape land and water forms by sculpting soil with shovels. Through digging, students form the soil as a river with the displaced material forming an island in the middle and mountain in the upper end of the garden bed. There are 8 students at the bed, 4 at each side causing two channels to be formed. There is quite a bit of attention paid to





the displaced soil from the river sliding down either side of the island which gets quite narrow at the top. The question of whose side the soil slides into becomes quickly heated as R becomes irritated at L who she accuses of “putting the dirt on our side”

The act of digging appeals to everyone, especially when critters and objects are found in the soil. During the digging children imagine how the water will react to the course they have

created. Tunnels are dug and predictions are made as to how the water will flow.

E: I'm making it so both sides of the river can go together like a little loop.

T: I'm trying to make boats go to the middle

J: I made a tunnel so the water can go under there. There's an underground part of it.

L: (tapping the soil with shovel) You have to push it down here

Me: Why?

L: So the water can move down to the end.



I observe lots of interest and excitement at finding buried loose parts in the soil, some of which become bridges.

Finally, water is introduced into the “landscape” through the garden hose. Students are able to observe the water moving through the course as it flows from high points. Shouts of excitement erupt as the water splashes and splashes through the course they have dug.

E: It's going down!



J: Our side is winning.

E: It's so cool! It's going around!

It's so cool!

L: It's reaching the other one.

C: Holy Smokes...It is cool how it (the water) zig-zags around.

The meeting of the two channels is cheered and celebrated.

In the various iterations I have done with this activity I have found that allowing the children to touch the water is essential. Including tools like shovels and extends the experience with water and keeps

hands from getting too dirty. Children are always excited to see how the water moves

through the course they have created, flowing down from high points, branching around the island and meeting up again.

What it Means

This activity focuses heavily on constructive play, as the children are manually forming the elements of the micro-world. The act of sculpting earth appeals to children in the most basic way. Soil allows for what Szkeley (1983) calls the "simple and spontaneous manipulation of materials (p 21)" and water demonstrates its affordances in a myriad of ways as it splashes through the trenches and creates mud as it seeps into the soil. Clearly, the materiality of the soil has a major influence on the type of play that is happening. Gibson's theory of affordances tells us that objects and materials influence the action placed upon them through the player's perception of what is possible. Here, the soil directs the children to subtractive and additive processes as they move it from one place to another with their shovels.

I believe that this activity falls primarily in the category of constructive play with overlaps in nature play, science play, and imaginative play. Due to the elemental qualities of the playscape (soil and water) as well as the conceptual discoveries that children make when natural systems are observed at the miniature level, I have included this activity in an arts-based ecological literacy curriculum. I am envisioning the activity as an interdisciplinary mixture of science and nature exploration with imaginative play as the binder. In fact, Wolfe et. al. (2015) cite a study that showed that imaginative play during science lessons at the early elementary level helped children make sense of the material. In this way I see imaginative play as the essential ingredient, which allows the children to enter fully into the experience.

Opportunities and Possibilities

In the next stage, I hope to expand on these three types of play. The introduction of loose parts such as wooden sticks and blocks, flowers, rocks, shells, corks and dried gourds will give the children opportunities to expand their creativity with a more diverse set of objects. These objects with their unique affordances will deepen the imaginative connection between children and the miniature playscape through more complex arrangements.

As I develop and refine the activity I have thought about possibilities for containing the water in order to accommodate boats and floating vessels. This would involve fitting plastic sheeting or pipe into the river bed. This would certainly extend the experience of water forms and their affordances, while following through on the natural instinct of the children to create and play with buoyant objects.



Stage 2

It is important to note that this stage was observed a few months later and plants have grown in various areas of the playscape. The river is still an important element and strips of bark have become bridges with corn cobs marking the entrance. I have suggested using rocks and shells to line the river bed to possibly contain the water.

Two girls, L and C, are gathering objects and placing them in the larger abalone shells - flowers, petals, smaller shells.

J: It's for the fairies to sit in.

Me: What will they do there?

C: They can eat and play with their toys.

J: Then they can go to sleep there.

C: (pointing to an area with flower petals) It's a soft bed.

At the other end of the fairy garden, N is interacting with a "house" which has been constructed from a dried gourd by a previous group. Students are allowed to change another person's construction and must



understand that others may change theirs. Thus the constructions have a collaborative element and the space is shifting and malleable. N has stacked a series of round blocks as steps in front of the house. As I approach, he has just stuck a stick in the soil.

N: It's a tall tower so the Fairies can get up high.

Me: Why do they need to get up high?

N: So they can see what is coming

Me: What might be coming?

N: A big rainstorm.

Me: Tell me more about that.

N. They need to hide from the rain. They need to go under the bridge or in their house.

N adds a popsicle stick through the center of one of the blocks and to the side

("They need a railing so they don't fall")

T is using a clothespin to attach a shell to the top of the gourd (a roof) and stacks another shell to the top of N's tower stick.

T: This is the umbrella for when it rains. They like to run in the rain and then get dry"

N: They can jump in the puddles!"

Me. That sounds fun. Do you think the fairies will come out of their house to jump in the puddles?

Both : Yes. Laughing and jumping. puddles are fun



What it Means

In unpacking the various layers of play in Phase 2, it's useful to consider the ways in which constructive play contributes to spatial and conceptual understanding. While nesting, stacking and affixing have been observed in the constructive play of infants and toddlers, (Marcinowski et. al., 2019) Kindergarteners are using these processes in more advanced ways as they represent complex objects and concepts. Both the girls' nesting and the boys' stacking and affixing are meant to represent real objects and spaces, which in turn relate to real-life experiences; playing, eating, sleeping and seeking shelter from the rain.

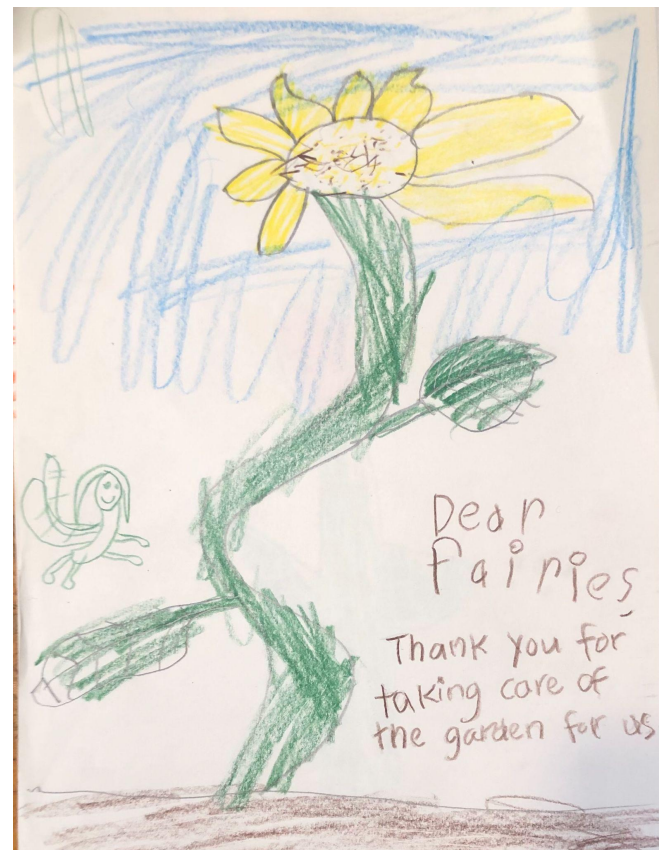
Additionally, the desire for safety as reflected in the boys' play, is integrated into the manual processes used to make the structures; railings, lookout towers and umbrellas. A big rain has been forecasted and it seems to me that this bit of play indicates that the children are processing their feelings about it. While N's initial play reflected the need for the fairies to be safe in the rain, he has responded to T's switching the tower to an umbrella and accessed a positive memory of his own, that of jumping in puddles.

The affordances of the natural loose parts have a powerful influence on the quality of the play, primarily in their open-endedness. For example, the large concave abalone shell is often used upside down for a shelter or dwelling, but in this case the girls have responded to the smooth colorful inside to represent a place for playing, eating and sleeping. Similarly, the shell which forms the platform for a lookout tower and then becomes an umbrella, does so through its flatness and ability to stack easily on a narrow stick.

Natural materials are a wonderful source for loose parts play and construction. They are plentiful, free, biodegradable and easily found. More importantly, they teach children about the patterns, textures, colors and shapes of the natural world. Fresh flowers are a great material for play and figure prominently in the fairy garden. Whether they are scaled up as a forest, or scaled down as a source of bedding, or simply used as decoration, flowers provide a multitude of sensory experiences, not the least of which is tasting, a favorite element of play in the fairy garden. Calendula and borage both have edible petals and produce a bounty of material. The act of picking fresh leaves or flowers and integrating them into constructive play provides a level of experience that is unattainable with manufactured toys. When children incorporate living plants into their play they are participating in the life cycle of the plant as they experience it grow and change.

Opportunities and Possibilities

At this point, the Fairy Garden has become a fixture in the school garden and has presented many opportunities for extension. One way has been to introduce a writing and drawing component. The letters to the fairies developed organically out of the children's desire to communicate their feelings and experiences related to the play in the fairy garden. Incorporating writing has many possibilities for



further exploration.

Drawing has also been a rich area for imaginative reflection. Pictures and maps of the fairy garden fit in well with the first grade curriculum and are currently being explored, especially with regard to the sculpted land and water forms. I feel that the immediacy of sculpting the river as well as watching the water flow from high to low points can help students grasp the concept of translating three dimensional



forms into a two dimensional format, which is a fundamental concept in mapping. Another practice has been for kindergarteners, who often wish to leave a picture for the fairies, to clothespin their drawings to the fencing on the end of the bed.

Conclusion

This has, in many ways, been my own learning story. Using Drummond's process loosely has provided me with an opportunity to reflect on the development and implementation of this activity.

Chronicling the childrens' experiences in the fairy garden has allowed me to learn from them and has provided valuable feedback and insight into the complexities of constructive play.

What compelled me to create this type of interactive playscape is my interest in interdisciplinarity. The intersection between art, nature, and science is a fertile ground for the type of learning I feel is most important. Through this multifaceted play, the boundaries between disciplines become blurred and a unique experience arises.

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