

Focus  
On

## Pre-K &amp; K

ages 4-6

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**Book Review**

*Designs for Living and Learning:  
Transforming Early  
Childhood Environments*  
By Deb Curtis and Margie Carter.  
2003. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf  
Press. 227 pages, softcover.

With this book, the authors offer a thought-provoking challenge to the way in which we set up classrooms. In their view, classrooms have become homogenized and sterile. For typically developing preschoolers, therefore, the authors call for the reader to remember both early pioneers (Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, Caroline Pratt, Patty Smith Hill, Rudolph Steiner, and others) and contemporary pioneers (Elizabeth Prescott, Elizabeth Jones, Diane Trister Dodge, Leslie Williams, and Yvonne DeGaetano). These pioneers describe using materials that are hands-on and that promote discovery and learning in engaging environments. With this backdrop, the authors offer values and elements to consider when planning environments for young children. Throughout the eight chapters, the authors use words and glorious full-color pictures, showing real classrooms and engaged children, to demonstrate classrooms that are not humdrum.

Chapter One, "Laying a Foundation for Living and Learning," considers the following elements: connections and a sense of belonging; flexible space and open-ended materials; natural

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**Wacky Wednesday**

*Bobbie Gibson Warash,  
Professor, Child Development and Family Studies,  
West Virginia University,  
Morgantown, West Virginia*

It all started with the request by several children who were dictating stories in their scrapbooks. The scrapbook project (Warash & Kingsbury, 1988) at the West Virginia University Child Development Laboratory was implemented many years ago as a means to encourage children to create stories that are further used in other ways. The teacher plans various ways to encourage children to invent stories that include certain story elements. Children often perform their dictated stories in an impromptu play and become the director of their own work. When children have the opportunity to elaborate on their original stories, whether it is through editing or acting, the composition of their stories and their involvement becomes more complex. Children appear to have a stronger commitment to their endeavors when they know it will be used in subsequent activities.

On this day, the scrapbook activity inspired "switch day." The idea originated with the children and was expanded into a project. On this particular day, near the end of the school year, the teacher asked the children to respond to this statement in their scrapbooks: "If I were the boss of the Lab School. . . ." The heading was printed at the top of each child's scrapbook page. The theme provoked many responses, some of them very silly; yet one group of children began discussing seriously what they would do if they were the teachers in the Lab School and the teachers were the children. Their enthusiasm soon became contagious and other children joined the conversation. Thus began the project known as "Wacky Wednesday."

To clarify the logistics, the Laboratory School is a small preschool with one morning and one afternoon classroom, one director, one teacher, and numerous student teachers. It is an easy and perfect setting in which to switch roles because of the number of student teachers available to play the roles of children. The three-hour afternoon program is designed for 4- and

young 5-year-olds. Nineteen children are enrolled in the program, and all participated in preparing for Wacky Wednesday.

The Lab School philosophy promotes a democratic environment in which children have many choices. For example, to help children make informed and good decisions, a pictorial contract system was designed for the children to use each day to help them choose center time activities. The contracts give children a visual reference to the available centers to reinforce the teacher's verbal cues. Children make decisions as to which center to do, based on the information they have and the availability of centers.

It has been found that offering children daily pictorial contracts gives them the information they need to make purposeful decisions. The child carries his/her contract to the centers of choice and upon completion of each chosen center, the teacher writes a short summary of the child's accomplishments. The contracts are taken home each day for parents to read and inquire about with their children (Warash, 2001).

The idea of playing the roles of a teacher coincided with the program's efforts to provide numerous opportunities for children to be involved in imaginary play. The Lab School has implemented Vygotsky's ideas (1978) on play for several years and has emphasized its importance to student teachers as they complete the field experiences at the Lab School. Student teachers are required to set up pretend scenarios with simple props, to allow children to be involved in role taking. These pretend situations vary throughout the year, allowing the student teachers to witness the value of quality play. This year, however, the best teaching tool for the student teachers was the children's innovative idea of playing teacher on Wacky Wednesday.

The lead teacher accepted the children's proposal of becoming the teachers in their play and began the process of investigating the roles of a teacher with the children at circle time. Children decided to plan the entire three-hour program, which includes snack, circle time, free-play time, and centers. The event would involve a complete switch of roles. The activity would take place on a Wednesday, when seven student teachers, the lead

teacher, a graduate assistant, and the director were available. If students were not available, we would ask parents to help with the role of being a 4-year-old.

Children made many decisions about the day. They decided that as the adult "children" arrived, they would help them write in their play plans. Play plans are used at the Lab School on a daily basis. Upon arrival, children get their play plans and dictate what they plan to do at school during free play. The teacher draws a line for each word that the child says and then goes back to print the words on the lines. By the end of the year, children are making their own lines and printing much of their own text. On Wacky Wednesday, all the children would help the adult children with the play plans.

At circle time, they decided to pick an adult child's name out of a box to be the helper of the day. Circle time would include singing two of Jean Feldman's songs, reading the sentence of the day, passing out contracts, and then dismissing the adult children to go to the centers of their choice.

The teacher worked with children individually and in small groups to decide the center they wanted to teach. When the teacher first asked the children what they wanted to teach, the children were stumped as to how to answer. The teacher reviewed typical centers on the contracts to give them ideas. It was interesting to note that the children picked topics and centers to teach that they also chose to do on a regular basis during center time.

### Children's Choices of Centers

Daniel and Chanya wanted to do snack, and decided on pizza. Snack at the Lab School is typically one of the five to six centers during the 45-60 minutes allotted for the various center activities. Daniel would take the drink orders and pass out the plates for pizza. Chanya would make sure the adult children washed their hands. Madeline would design a math activity involving printed numbers for the adult children. Nate and Kristen wanted to be in charge of scrapbooks. Nate, who is fascinated with war stories and flags, immediately said that the adult children would write a war

story. He would find some pictures of cannons and flags to use in the center. Kristen would hold up the array of various pictures to be used for creating a story. Cannon, who loves the Letterland program (Wendon, 1998), wanted to teach this center. Letterland has had such an impact on Cannon that he would let the adult children draw their favorite Letterland character. Laily wanted to teach creative movement and would wear her dance costume to school on Wacky Wednesday. Phoebe wanted to do puppets and theater activities in which the adult children would act out

impromptu stories. Andrew, Ray, and Nicky wanted to design a sandbox activity. They titled it "Dinotopia." Andrew would give instructions while Ray and Nicky would write on the adult children's contract. Lauren and Aaron decided to use pattern blocks at their center. The adult children would have to follow the pattern they made. Michael and Chloe volunteered to do a play dough station.

Several children worked together to draw eight small pictures to represent the available centers on the contracts. They cut the pictures out and pasted them onto one page

so the teacher could make multiple copies for Wacky Wednesday. The children are accustomed to receiving mail each day in their personal mailboxes, so they made mail for each of the adult children. The children were hesitant about writing on the adult children's contracts; it is a long and tedious process for young children to print a lot of words. The teacher suggested that they instead put a sticker or draw a happy face on the contract when someone finished their activity, and the children agreed.

For several weeks, the teacher and student teachers helped

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materials that engage the senses, wonder, curiosity, and intellectual engagement, and symbolic representations, literacy, and the visual arts. The reader is invited to think first about a personal, existing floor plan and then is guided through a consideration of the elements. In Chapter Two, "Creating Connections and a Sense of Belonging," the reader can explore the socio-emotional climate of the classroom through the metaphor of "inviting living." Architectural features, furnishings, multi-level floor space, color, texture, living things, lighting, bathrooms, outdoor spaces, message and materials and activities are discussed and illustrated. Chapter Three, "Keeping Space Flexible and Materials Open-ended," tempts the reader to think beyond the traditional uses of space, materials, and activities, and includes a discussion of recyclable materials. Chapter Four, "Designing Natural Environments That Engage Our Senses," focuses on aromas, water, and other natural elements—shells, twigs, flour, rice, etc. Chapter Five, "Evolving Wonder, Curiosity and Intellectual Engagement," invites consideration of light and color, sound, motion, and treasures—materials that tempt children to explore them because of their textures, smells, colors, patterns, etc.

Chapter Six, "Engaging Children in Symbolic Representation: Literacy and the Visual Arts," offers a fairly conventional discussion of an approach to literacy-rich environment, although the inexperienced teacher will find the pictures to be powerful. Chapter Seven, "Enhancing Children's Use of the Environment," offers techniques to help children focus and learn to use materials. In the final chapter, "Facing Barriers and Negotiating Change," the authors provide concrete actions for readers to use when trying to enact the bright, new vision of classroom environment based on the authors' vision. The Appendix contains thoughtful suggestions for further reading, Web sites, selected commercial vendors, sources for recyclables, and tools for assessing a classroom environment.

Since each chapter is richly illustrated with full-color photos showing children at work in various preschool settings, the reader can see the principles of best practice in action. It is the photos that make the book both coffee-table exquisite and intellectually stimulating for preschool teachers striving for an authentic child-centered experience for the children they serve.

Reviewed by Gayle Mindes, Professor, School of Education, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

*This year, the  
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children to plan Wacky Wednesday. The teacher recorded the children's plans so that they could be reviewed, revised, or edited. Often, they would elaborate on their ideas to include more substance to their plans. The teachers asked open-ended questions so the children could respond more elaborately.

As the days followed and the excitement built, parents began commenting on their children's anticipation of the day. One parent told the teachers that her child was absolutely "crazed" by the fact that the children were going to be the teachers. In fact, this particular child counted the days down and was worried that his mother would not get him to school on time. Wacky Wednesday became the talk around the school. It was a play scenario that lasted for several weeks and culminated in the actual day of changing roles. With the assistance of the lead teacher, they were practicing new skills, thinking about the roles, and preparing for the day. They were taking this assignment very seriously.

As the children arrived at the Lab School on the special day, they immediately took their posts. They helped the adult children write in their play plans. One of Madeline's students dictated this statement: "I want to play in the block room." Madeline drew seven lines on the page and had the teacher fill in the words. Madeline even reminded the adult children about using a period at the end of a sentence.

Another child "teacher" helped to check the adult "children" into school by finding their names on the roll sheet. The director helped the child look for the names as the child made the mark to indicate the child's presence. Free play was supervised by the children. It was not unusual to hear the children saying, "Use your inside voices" or "Make sure you are using your walking feet." Another child told Lauren that she was needed in the block room where two adult children were playing without supervision. One adult child got a paper cut, but Andrew was quick to get a bandage. He first gave her instructions on how to wash her hands, and then he applied the bandage.

During center time, Madeline printed numbers for her adult children to add. For example, she printed  $2 + 2$  and expected the adult child to add the numbers. She gave hints, such as, "The number comes after three." Laily was fanatical in her creative movement center. Completely decked out in her dance attire, she instructed the adult children to go "toe-heel, toe-heel." Laily also told her students that they needed to dance faster and demonstrated the proper technique. Cannon wanted the adult children to print their names as soon as they got to Letterland. In scrapbook, where Kristen and Nate were helping the adult children to write military stories, Nate commented to the adult children, "It is really hard being a teacher."

At the conclusion of Wacky Wednesday, everyone met at circle time to discuss the day's events. This was a time to reflect on what happened during the event. Reflection is an important part of the process, whereby children and teacher analyze the experience. The adult children mentioned one thing they learned at each center. The children eagerly raised their hands to indicate they were the teacher for the center being mentioned. They glowed with pride when their names were mentioned and when they received credit for teaching an activity. The head teacher congratulated everyone for a successful day.

Parents had many positive comments about the day. Nate's mother said that prior to the day's

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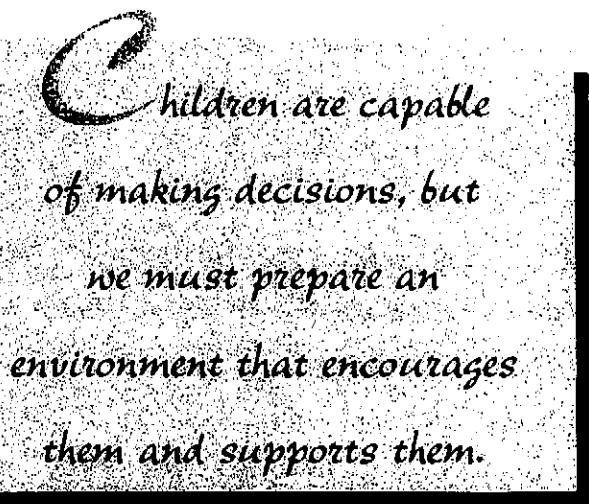
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events, Nate had pondered over the activity he was planning to do. He told his mom that he was disappointed that the "little kids" did not get to do his activity also. He said he spent a lot of time preparing his activity and wanted everyone to participate. Other parents had similarly positive remarks.

Children are capable of making decisions, but we must prepare an environment that encourages them and supports them. As early childhood professionals, we need to give children the opportunity to take on challenges and use their abilities to solve problems. Planning and reflection promote the development of thinking and reasoning. Planning is making choices with intentions (Epstein, 2003). What better way of giving children this opportunity than by play and expanding on their own ideas? When children were deciding what to teach in a center, they were not only making choices but they had a purpose in mind. If they chose math, they had to go a step further and decide what would constitute a math activity. In addition, they had to decide what kind of math activity they were capable of teaching. As the teacher helped the children to elaborate on their plans for the day, they expanded the children's thinking through rich language. The teacher was providing scaffolding by helping children to expand their ideas and giving them an opportunity to take on the roles of a teacher.

Make-believe play is essential, allowing children to develop an understanding of roles and learn adult expectations for behaviors. This is the mechanism through which they are going to develop social norms. Planning and carrying out such a day is the type of play that facilitates advanced mental activities and self-regulation. Play encourages interpersonal relations, stimulates creativity, and advances learning (Caplan & Caplan, 1973). Play is respectful of an individual's learning style and pace. Because of all the negative content that children see through the media, providing for quality play is important. Let's also not forget that play is fun.

The excellent job these children did in planning for Wacky Wednesday can be attributed to several



factors. Children are encouraged to play at the Lab School, as it is embedded in the school's philosophy. Many make-believe opportunities are provided. Children have numerous opportunities to make choices. For example, the choices on their contracts are reviewed at circle time so they can make decisions about which center to attend, based on the information the teacher has supplied about each center. The choices are reviewed at the end of the day by the teacher and the parents. Parents play an important part in this process with their comments about the centers the children have chosen. These children have had many opportunities to practice making good decisions throughout the year with their contracts.

Wacky Wednesday was preserved by the documentation panels that were completed by the children and the teacher. The panels, which included the process of preparing for the day through pictures, children's work, and quotes, were displayed for families so they could review the children's work and the process of learning.

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