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An Arts-Based Action Research on Integrating Loose Parts Into Preschool Environmental Art Curriculum: Using an Urban School as an Example

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Summary

Loose parts are heterogeneous, low-structured and flexible, and are commonly used as learning area materials in preschools. Outdoor use facilitates environmental teaching. Since open-ended materials are an important medium for contemporary art creation, with time, how to infuse new meanings to the pedagogical application of loose parts and to expand the content of children's learning is worth exploring. For these reasons, this study develops a curriculum that integrates loose parts into the environmental art courses of a preschool located in an urban area, using art-based action research methods to implement the courses. The study investigates the teaching contents and its revision process, the teaching strategies and the implementation process, as well as children's learning responses related to the integrations of loose parts into environmental art courses. Based on the data analysis and discussion, this study obtained these findings.

The creation of this emergent curriculum and exchanges in implementation.

Thematic courses Gentle Reminders of the Earth were developed to meet our research purposes. Teaching activities have been designed with the specific learning characteristics of loose parts in mind and with respect for the spirit of art-based action research. In application, based on the principles of emergent curriculum, the teaching was stimulated by the teacher-student

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interaction and reflective discussions, and operated with dynamic revision according to children's learning responses. In addition to the adjustments due to weather and other unavoidable factors, other modifications were made, for instance, adding the number of teaching units, adjusting the sequence of activities, increasing the number of art creation and appreciation activities, and the community visits. Therefore, the curriculum became more responsive to the children's learning interests and needs. The research results showed that guiding children to explore loose parts through multi-sensory play can help them get close to the natural environment. Through appropriate contemporary art appreciation instruction on relevant topics, children can perceive the different facets of materials and their relationship with the environment and artistic creation. After gradually developing the caring consciousness for the environment and ecology, children can use the low structural and high imaginative property of loose parts to create artwork to express their personal environmental awareness, thereby establishing a starting point to develop their aesthetic literacy and environmental awareness.

Interweaving teaching strategies: multi-sensory play, art appreciation, creation of artwork, and community visits.

Four types of teaching strategies were applied: multi-sensory play, art appreciation, artwork creation, and community visits. Multi-sensory play stimulates children's experiences with materials, not only visually. Through imagination, role-playing, and narration in the multi-sensory play, children proved to be able to develop interest and a sense of closeness to exploring the materials, and, hence, learn to pay attention to the natural environment in which the materials exist. The aim of art appreciation teaching is to deepen children's understanding of the relationship between the materials and environmental issues. We noticed that through the perceptual artist's belief in using natural materials to express environmental awareness, children can become more conscious to observe the material's singularities, and pay more attention to ecological issues, and further accrue ideas for artistic creation. The goal of teaching art creation is to guide children to try to use materials to express their caring consciousness for the environment and ecology. Through diverse creation methods and complementing with art appreciation teaching, children understand better the process of creation and to use the materials in solving the problems encountered in creative activities, and to finish their environmental awareness artwork. The objective of the community visits is to introduce children to environmental issues in real-life settings. We saw that the interactions with community members and the random reverse cases deepen children's thinking and discussion on related issues.

The creative expression of feelings and the empathetic environmental awareness.

The study showed that the children had rich learning experiences during the courses. Particularly noteworthy are obvious improvement in their artistic expression and their concern for environmental ecology. Namely in artistic creative expression, children were more motivated to create art and made progress in creating and sharing. Also, they demonstrated an awareness of the characteristics of materials and an introspection of the definition of beauty. In environmental awareness, we observed that children became more aware of the environment and ecological issues, were able to think about the impact of human activities on the environment, and were also more willing to interact with natural surroundings and attempt to modify their behaviors. The key reason for these responses was that the teaching strategies were able to stimulate children's multi-sensory competence during the learning activities, which led to very impressive first-hand experiences. In the course of this study, children were very willing to join in teaching activities. When they could feel something about creative issues, they had no hesitation in expressing their artistic creations; when they empathized with ecological issues, their environmental awareness was also enhanced, and they demonstrated environmentally friendly behaviors, forming a positive teaching cycle.

This study also demonstrated that since children have little access to natural materials, guiding children to pay attention to their relationship to the environment while acknowledging the specific attributes of different materials, and to create artwork that expresses their own environmental awareness, is both the challenge and the interesting part in the teaching process. In recent years, the environment and ecology have become global issues of concern. Inviting children to think and play with loose parts through art creation is a way to realize the contemporary thinking of considering the human and non-human material worlds as an interdependent life community. At the same time, the blurry boundary between art and non-art creations of loose parts provides children with the opportunity to engage in subtle borderline activities between themselves and the adult world. This study uses art-based learning experiences to motivate children's understanding and application of loose parts, while inspiring their artistic creativity through the boundary characteristic of these materials. After young children enter the symbolic world framed by artificial order, they are gradually incorporated into the educational system that emphasizes standardization. Through open and abundant art activities, we hope to provide children with a space where their creativity can roam freely, and their flexibility of thinking lasts, so to adapt to the future or to create the future.