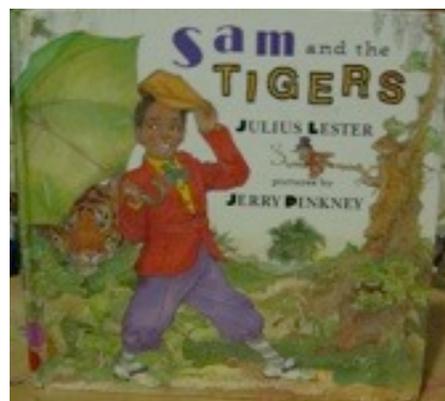


Example of Project Work

Sam and the Tigers Play, Big Garden, 14 children ages 4.6 – 5.2 in September 2008

This project example tells the story of how the simple act of reading a storybook, in response to some tiger growls from the children, turned into a year-long study and endeavor to put on a theater production. This example highlights several big moments, turning points, or launching points that propelled the project through the course of the year. It is important to note that many details have been left out. If you are interested in reading the full summary this project, please see our publication, “The Big Garden Presents Sam and the Tigers: A Year-long project in a five-year-old preschool classroom devoted to a play”.



Most of the Big Garden children had already turned five years old by September. Two of the children had identified special needs. Knowing that they would be a very aware group, ready to take on roles and responsibilities in the classroom, teachers set a goal to create an empowered, learner-centered classroom community; to give children a sense of ownership of classroom organizations and processes, and in turn, expect that they take care of each other and their environment and solve problems through negotiations and discussions. Challenging and interesting new tools and projects motivated this group to collaborate; for instance, they investigated the tools and materials of the wood working porch, wrote safety guidelines for the area, and even visited the Presidio Trust to submit a proposal for a tree house construction.



At the start of the fall semester, children showed interest in putting on plays. Sam and the Tigers emerged as an important story for reenactment when a teacher spied two children acting like tigers, growling and showing each other their tiger claws. As the children moved onto their circle rug for story time, she quickly retrieved the book, to connect to the children's actions. Sam and the Tigers is a well-loved story at our school due to its bright illustrations, interesting vocabulary, and humorous and imaginative story line about a little boy, Sam, who decides to pick out his own clothes for school. He chooses very bright, snazzy items, puts them on before school, and walks out the door, only to meet five tigers along the way. He ends up giving each one an item of his new clothes in exchange for not being eaten.

elaborate masks and costumes. Children looked at images from the book for inspiration as they created the representation of their chosen character.

After being read the book, the children made a plan to act out the story. In addition to deciding on characters, children devised



When masks and Sam's clothing were finished, the entire group, along with a teaching parent, trekked to Lion and Tiger Land for the first time (a special place in the Presidio named by CHS children because it resembles a land where tigers would roam around due to its expansive fields and clusters of palm trees).



When the group arrived, children put on their masks.

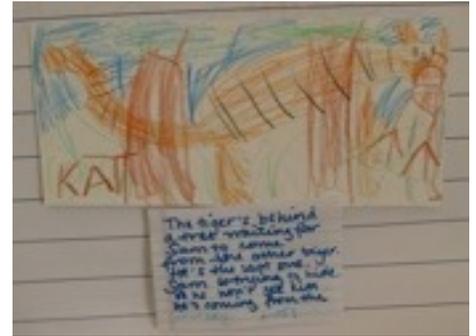
The children excitedly explored the stands of palm trees, climbing and taking on their respective animal roles. The teacher helped the children organize themselves for putting on the play while she read the story. This initial performance produced some confusing moments and problems; we soon realized it was too soon for us to perform our play when we had not yet explored the space, the story, and our characters thoroughly.

The problems we experienced gave rise to a perfect opportunity for reflecting and problem solving as a group. Before leaving Lion and Tiger Land, we all sat in a circle and discussed the problems we noticed “this first time” and what we might want to change for next time. The following day we revisited this discussion, giving time for other ideas to be added. The children agreed that they

needed time to explore Lion and Tiger Land further in small groups. One child suggested that we spend “all day there, and have snack there.” Another child wondered aloud, could we “have the play again and invite our parents to see it.”

Our experience at Lion and Tiger Land was a catalyst for taking the Sam and the Tigers toward a longer-term, more in-depth investigation of storytelling, sequencing, and other theatrical elements (stage management, costumes, props) the children had shown interest in based on their early ventures in the center room. Thus the plans were set for “slowing down the process.” Rather than fixing our initial problems and rushing into another whole group performance, we allowed time for going further in-depth with investigation of each problem – starting with the first obvious one - our character list did not match that of the book’s, therefore, our story had to change too.

To explore the concept of story sequencing, we invited the children to make a storyboard of *our Sam and the Tigers*. Children illustrated on 5x7 cards a scene of the story (typically choosing their character’s scene), dictating what happens in that scene. Their storyboard was displayed on the wall for all to see and refer to during discussions, play enactments, and dramatic play as tiger families.



The children contributed new ideas for revisions, such as introducing face paint as a solution for the problematic masks. Also, children decided to make full costumes for their story characters. Children drew patterns and sewed fur paws, ears, tails and tunics for their animal characters. These costumes remained on a clothing rack in the classroom, accessible to the children to put on whenever they wanted during classroom exploration time.



Children developed an ongoing, intimate relationship with Lion & Tiger Land as we incorporated small group walks to allow them time and repeated encounters for exploring and gaining a real sense of place. This became a spot where families gathered for picnics and playtime before or after school. To represent and reflect on their sense of place, we invited a group of children to paint a mural of Lion & Tiger Land.



Returning from winter break in January, teachers decided it was time to move the project in a new direction. Since we had fully investigated the story elements such as characters, setting, and events, we wondered if it was time to move into a study of the production elements of putting on a play.

We prompted the children by asking if they had had experiences with seeing theater, dance, or other performances (drawing on their rich and varied previous knowledge as a tool for informing and transforming teaching and learning). We had also e-mailed the families a couple days before class began so many children were prepared to talk about their theater experiences. Some had tickets or programs to share with the group. Many children shared detailed descriptions and anecdotes of their encounters with movies, plays, or the ballet. They discussed characters, the lights, the singing, the music, scary parts, the costumes, fake snow falling from the ceiling, fake poison, the emotions of the actors, and settings and props. Through all of this sharing it only took a couple of prompts from teachers before children were excitedly making connections to our Sam and the Tigers play.



We definitely had extensive data and examples to help us build our own sets and props! We also had a program a child brought in from Snow White. We read aloud its list of Production Crews. This inspired the children to form our own committees. Teachers helped to organize the children into committees for each of the three sets needed for Sam and the Tigers. Also a few children



were particularly struck with being Sound Engineers and formed a Sound Crew, with the purpose of amplifying roars and growls so the audience can hear and feel the scary presence of the tigers.

Similar to the process of the other prop committees, the Tree Committee started by drawing designs for the important tree in the story that the tigers run around. One child pointed out that the tree needed to resemble a tree found in a jungle, where tigers live. The group ventured outside to make some observational drawings of the palm tree near the front yard, which influenced the group construction of the tree: each child designed, painted and cut out an elaborate palm leaf that was later attached to the trunk, a large column of heavyweight paper painted brown. This tree was an immense symbol of pride for the classroom community and became a symbol of our identity as a close-knit group of empowered, competent, collaborative learners.



While the committees continued their ongoing work, we had a special visitor, Blythe, come in to talk about being a part of a theater group.

Blythe was a caregiver of one of our children and had recently starred in a production of *MacBeth*. She brought many photos and discussed the processes of her theater group, from make up and special effects to the control panel.

Discussions about our Sam and the Tigers play became an ongoing part of our meeting times. We posted a to-do list and jotted down ideas and questions as they arose, so that we wouldn't forget. One such idea was that we needed tickets. The children identified seat numbers, cost of admission, names of those invited, name of play, palm tree design as our logo, and location. A child made a critical realization just then and said, "we need to decide on our location before we make our tickets."



To choose a location the children conducted research of three possible sites: Lion & Tiger Land, the Center Room, and the Stage on the schoolyard. While teachers had decided that the best place for the performance would be inside the school in the Center room, giving enough space for onstage, audience, and backstage areas, as well as shelter from the weather, the teachers trusted that the children would come to that conclusion on their own through their research of spaces.



As part of this research we visited the Gumption Theater, the theater space inside the Urban School, a high school a bus ride away. Frances Evans, the schools theater advisor, welcomed us to the Gumption Theater, showed us many of their tools such as the lights, the gels that change the color of the lights, the fog machine, and the sounds coming from the tiny control room up above in the corner.

By this time, back at school, we had also started work on our script. While the storyboard scenes clearly illustrated each event in the play, the actions and words of each character were unknown. Children met in small groups with the characters in their scenes to dictate their parts in the play, thus each child's voice contributed to the script.

Knowing that the children were still connected to their sound machine concept, and not wanting to lose that connection, we decided to bridge the children to already existing "machines" that amplify sounds (such as amplifiers and speakers). We contacted our neighbor, The Bay School Band director Colin

Williams, to ask if we could come learn from his jazz band about incorporating sounds in our production. It was there that a couple children spied the amplifier, microphones and speakers connected via cords to the students' instruments.



Once the location decision was made, the children signed up for new committees: Advertising committee took on the task of making beautiful posters and invitations. A new Props committee set to work fixing the tree which included adding sand bags to the inside bottom of the trunk to weigh it down for stability (something we learned at the Gumption Theater – they use sandbags to keep props in place). A new Sound Committee gathered to record tiger roars and growls as well as many jungle animal sounds to



create a jungle ambience, played on the “mini amplifiers,” as one child named the set of small speakers plugged into the recorder. A parent helped head the Curtain committee, since the children had decided that they would need a curtain. The children were very excited for rehearsals.

We set a date for our big performance, deciding on a Saturday, a child's idea, so that all family members could attend. Parents, siblings, caregivers and extended family members were in attendance for a total of more than fifty people! A special Program was created with the children's input; they shared their acting experience, their involvement in the production, and what they liked about their characters.

The play was a huge success! All adults, parents and teachers alike, were amazed at what the children put together.



Since we are so passionate, as a school community, about the benefits to children's learning when teachers emphasize process over product, it is not normal for us to guide children to performing on stage at such a young age. However, at no point in the project did we feel that we were pushing an adult agenda onto the children. Our goals were only to allow time for in-depth investigations and authentic research, connect to real places and people who could serve as models for the children, to inspire them to achieve their own levels of brilliance. We were blown away. A project that began by chance, a tiny moment of spontaneity and childhood play, that was witnessed, validated, extended, and projected, meandered its way through an entire year of play and learning experiences.

All children, with various learning styles, differing comfort levels with approaching writing, language, social interactions, building, risk taking, theorizing, mathematics, drawing, or public speaking, were engaged and relied upon. Every single child with their unique set of rights, intelligences, and interests was an integral part of the project, and through their participation in their learning community, through the manner in which they cared about each other and became so fully invested in the group endeavor, all of them learned more about themselves as learners, as individuals among a group, and all of them completed the year with a sense of accomplishment, with a sense of expertise. Through this project the children received the message that they matter, that they have influence, and that they can likely do anything.

