

# Active Learning in the Classroom: Classroom Organization

## Planning the Classroom Space

In planning how to organize a classroom, a number of considerations may be helpful. Individual teaching styles, children's learning needs and styles, and physical facility will have bearing on classroom arrangements. Involving the children in creating and maintaining the classroom environment helps them to develop planning skills, responsibility, and feelings of self-worth. The following is a list of planning suggestions:

- Provide a classroom arrangement that reflects the integrated nature of children's learning
- Involve children in planning how to organize the room
- Consider both safety and ease of access when placing furniture and storing materials and equipment
- Consider the best spot to place movable furniture so it can be moved when extra space is required
- Plan space for individual, small and large group activities
- Consider where quiet work areas might be used for conferencing or individual work
- Collaborate with other teachers to share space and/or equipment or even portable centers (sometimes this can be done with an intermediate teacher whose students are buddying with the primary children)
- Evaluate the learning environment continuously and adjust the arrangement if students' needs require it
- Place things to provide an attractive atmosphere
- Place a variety of examples of print at the students' level



*Some centers may be permanent...some may be portable, perhaps stored in bins, buckets or on a table and easily moved; and some may be temporary, used for a specific purpose for a short period of time.*

Schwartz & M. Pollishuke, 1991

## Classroom Arrangements: Facilitating Learning

Classroom arrangement is an important factor in facilitating children's learning. Even more crucial, however, is the way in which teachers interact with children. While this document includes a section on learning centers, it is recognized that learner-focused programs are not dependent on using the learning centers model. Having centers is not the key condition for active learning. The essential elements are flexibility, adaptability, and response to children's needs in a supportive climate of inquiry. Building a child-centered program requires more than arranging materials and furniture. It demands that we use our knowledge of children and how they learn to guide our decisions about what tasks we ask children to do.



## Classroom Arrangements: Learning Centers

Learning centers are one way to provide for individual differences in a classroom. The number of learning centers set up at any given time will vary according to the teacher's personal style and the children's learning needs. The following suggestions may be useful when planning a learning center:

- Allow children to contribute materials, ideas, questions, and tasks to the learning center.
- Position the center in a place that is complementary to the activities of other centers around it.
- Vary the complexity and difficulty of the tasks in the center.
- Provide a choice of activities and expectations that acknowledge a variety of learning styles.
- Consider tasks designed for independent learning or small group work.
- Consider current themes and projects.
- Choose tasks that are relevant and meaningful for the children.
- Allow for multiple ways for children to represent their learning.
- Model how materials can or should be used as they are introduced to a learning center

The number, kind, and content of the learning centers will vary and change during the year. To facilitate the successful use of learning centers, teachers may find the following ideas helpful:

- Introduce a new learning center to the children by explaining the features, points of interest, choices of activities, and any other significant aspects that need special attention. This can be done by the teacher, buddy, or an experienced peer. (One cannot assume that every child will understand what is expected in any given learning center or that every child will feel bold enough to solve the problem independently.)
- Elicit from children strategies for solving problems they may encounter when working in a learning center (for example, what to do if the directions are unclear or what to do if there is a problem in sharing equipment).

- Encourage children to assist in planning and organizing the learning center.
- Discuss with children expectations of appropriate behavior in the learning centers. Include their suggestions when clarifying these expectations.

Consideration should be given to where a learning center is located as well as to what materials it contains. Placement of learning centers is governed by awareness of safety, interference caused by noise, space available, and movement patterns. Locating learning centers so that materials and activities of a learning center facilitate, supplement, and complement those of another center supports integration and allows children to select from and adapt the environment to suit their needs. Children should be given the opportunity to discuss the spaces for the centers and assist in the acquisition and placement of materials. Some possibilities for learning centers are presented in the following section.



### **Group Meeting Area**

This is the place where new ideas and activities are introduced, where familiar activities are reviewed, and where field trips and other experiences are remembered and reflected upon. Parts of the program carried out in this area provide children with fresh input and ideas and with the opportunity to learn or try new things, to predict, to problem-solve, to listen to good literature, to review and enjoy the familiar, and to reflect, talk, and reason about their experiences.

### **Group Meeting Area**

#### **Suggested Activities**

- Opening and closing activities
- Class meetings
- Introducing books and sharing good literature
- Learning about food and nutrition
- Planning, discussing, developing language and thinking
- Music, movement, singing, dancing, drama, and appreciation of the arts
- Counting, graphing, grouping, comparing, estimating, problem-solving, and other mathematical activities
- Writing letters, reading recipes, charts, songs, and poems
- Sharing “news,” recording experiences, and other literacy related activities

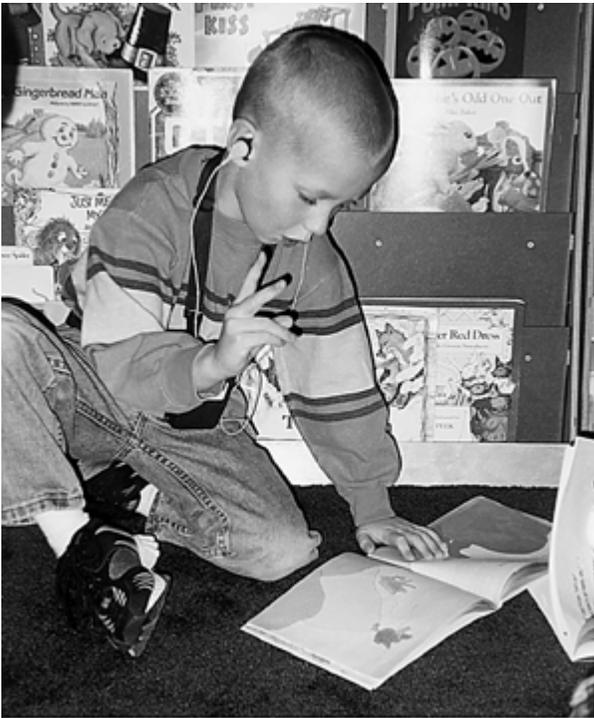
#### **Suggested Materials**

- Carpeted space
- Chart stand and paper, flannel board
- Chalkboard
- Magnetic board
- Big book easel
- Teacher chair or stool
- Record player
- Tape recorder
- Rhythm instruments (stored nearby)

## **Reading Area**

The reading area is intended to supplement the library resource center and provide opportunities for children to have daily access to familiar and favorite books, poetry, stories, and information. A special feature of the class collection is the child-authored books.

Concept books, pattern books, big books, and a wide variety of children's literature from the book center are read to children during story time and are available for rereading. Teachers may choose to tape record their story time readings so individual children can hear the stories again. Children are encouraged and given time to read at their stage of development. In this manner, emergent reading patterns can develop. Older primary children will enjoy independent reading activities at this center.



*Students beginning to work in centers need to learn routines, expectations and responsibilities, need to strengthen self direction and independence, and need to develop attitudes towards learning and working at centers.*

Schwartz & Pollishuke, 1991

### **Suggested Activities for the Reading Area:**

- Read and reread favorite stories
- Share observations and predictions, discuss, and answer questions about books, stories, and other print materials
- Retell favorite stories
- Role play characters of situations from stories

### **Suggested Materials for the Reading Area:**

- Big books with accompanying small books and tapes
- Selected variety of quality children's literature including non-fiction/informational text
- Class-made and child-authored books
- Research and resource books for a variety of topics related to themes, projects, seasons, field trips
- Class news board
- Reading logs/charts
- Poems and songs on charts
- Language experience charts
- Pictures with captions
- Calendar, graphs, helper charts
- Name tags
- Tape player and individual tapes
- Film strip/cassette
- Props for role playing

### ***Drawing, Writing, and Publishing Area***

Drawing provides the child with a way of saying things that cannot easily be said in words. This nonverbal representation of thought is closely linked to oral discussion, which can be extended to the written expression of those thoughts. This learning center provides a place where children can play with literacy materials and express themselves through print. This is a place where children explore the nature, purpose, and function of written language, each operating at his or her own level. The teacher responds to children's requests for information or help with the conventions of print

#### **Suggested Materials for the Drawing, Writing, and Publishing Area**

- Pencils and crayons
- Felt markers (broad and fine tip)
- Paper of different sizes, shapes, colors, and textures
- Envelopes
- Staplers and hole-punchers
- Homemade books in different shapes and sizes (a few pages with a variety of colored paper covers)
- Wallpaper books
- Hooks for storing words
- Word cards
- Pocket chart
- Sentence strips
- Typewriter
- Magnetic letters (upper and lower case) and numerals
- Labels from containers
- Computers and printer
- Small chalkboards
- Word lists
- Dictionaries and thesaurus
- Draft and date stamps

### ***Art Area***

Art materials should be easily accessible to encourage use. Materials and appropriate storage are provided, techniques and processes are explained and demonstrated so children have the opportunity to explore, experiment, and represent their feelings and ideas. Depending on the theme, project, interest, or topic of the moment, the teacher may introduce related materials and techniques.

#### **Suggested Materials for the Art Area**

- Crayons
- Oil pastels
- Chalk
- Finger paint
- Liquid paint
- Cake paint
- Screens
- Toothbrushes
- Cotton balls
- Brushes
- Straws
- Empty deodorant bottles for roll-on painting
- Sponges and cotton swabs
- Fabric and string
- Wood
- “Junk” boxes
- Tissue and crepe paper
- Various objects for printing
- Painting brushes (variety of shapes and sizes)
- Play dough and clay
- Modeling tools (cutters, garlic press, spoons, meat hammer)
- Leaves
- Wax, tape, glue, paste
- Staplers
- Felt pen

## **Painting Area**

Paints and paper are materials children need to use freely and creatively. They enjoy painting for its own sake and, although adult interest provides encouragement, painting is essentially a private activity. The opportunity to paint should be available every day for every child. Painting enables the child to experiment with color and technique, to explore the properties of the various media, to create and elaborate upon personal symbols, to create and respond to pictures, and to represent what is known from experience. The opportunity to try a variety of papers, paints, colors, and techniques is offered at the painting center.



### **Suggested Materials for the Painting Area**

- Powdered and liquid tempera
- Finger paints
- Liquid starch (to extend paints, use with chalk, make fingerpaint)
- Liquid soap (to fingerpaint with)
- Oil pastels
- Tempera blocks
- Watercolor paints
- Marking pens
- Fluorescent crayon or paints
- Variety of brushes
- Large painter's brush
- Tongue depressors or chopsticks for mixing paints
- Easels or table top space
- Drying rack or line
- Containers for paint
- Cotton swabs
- Sponges
- Straws
- Rollers
- Tooth brushes

## **Sand and Water Areas**

Sand and water may be part of the art area, together in one area or as separate areas, depending upon available space. As children explore the properties of sand and water through play, they gain new insights by interacting with each other and with the teacher, who provides suggestions or questions that enhance and extend the experiences. Children extend their scientific and mathematical knowledge as they engage in activities that utilize sand, water, and other materials.

### **Suggested Materials for Water Area**

- Water and water table
- Containers varying according to size, shape, and function
- Sponges
- Corks
- Cups
- Water can
- Eye dropper
- Bowls
- Measuring cups
- Straws
- Siphon
- Pouring spouts
- Egg beater
- Sieves and strainers
- Squeeze bottles
- Plastic tubing or hose
- Objects that sink or float
- Water wheel
- Water pump

### **Suggested Materials for Sand Area**

- Dry sand container
- Wet sand container
- Dust pans
- Brooms
- Cans
- Gelatin molds
- Cookie cutters
- Funnels
- Graduated measuring objects
- Watering can
- Bucket and shovel
- Spoons and scoops
- Sieves and strainers
- Salt and pepper shakers
- Cars and trucks
- Animals
- Fences
- Balance scales
- Egg timer
- Sand wheel
- Props supporting topics of study

### **Block Area**

As children play in the block area, they represent their thinking in three-dimensional form. Intellectual development occurs as children sort, classify, measure, evaluate, and solve problems. Concepts such as size, space and time develop. Children represent what they know from experience by constructing, planning, talking, and engaging in dramatic play. The conversation and cooperation necessary to plan work with others on construction projects and the satisfaction gained promotes social and emotional development. Children are encouraged to draw, paint, map, label, talk, or write about what they are doing as a further extension of their activities.

### **Suggested Materials for the Block Area**

- Block and toy shelves
- Wooden blocks
- Cardboard blocks and boxes
- Table blocks
- Hollow blocks
- Multilinks
- Cuisinaire rods
- Geometric shapes
- Attribute blocks
- Pattern blocks
- Vehicles and traffic signs
- Wooden people
- Animals
- Buildings
- Hats
- Masking tape
- Paper
- Roads
- Plastic cups
- Lids
- Fabric scraps
- Writing tools
- Paper cylinders
- Blankets or sheets



### ***Dramatic Play Area***

The dramatic play area allows children to interact, experience, and recreate real or imaginative situations, places, or roles. As individuals or groups, children can plan, rearrange, and make changes to the area which reproduce real life experiences. Spontaneous dramatic play accompanied by dialogue with the teacher can aid in solving problems and clarifying through language. Participation stimulates development as children become involved in detailed planning, sharing, and cooperating. Reading and writing (writing plans, making signs and labels) are encouraged whenever appropriate. Encouraging children to bring items from home to facilitate dramatic play promotes involvement.



It may be useful to store some items in separate “prop boxes” or small suitcases. An overabundance of materials can make cleanup difficult for children. Once the kinds of prop boxes have been determined and how items will be stored and labeled they can be sorted and enlarged. Children and parents will contribute items if a stimulating list is provided to get the process started. Other items can be “scrounged” from stores, repair shops, lumber yards, garages, and through newspaper advertisements.

### **Suggested Materials for the Dramatic Play Area**

- Child-size furniture
- Kitchen supplies
- Dolls and accessories
- Dress-up clothes and props (scarves, shoes, hats, ties)
- Full-length mirror
- Food models
- Child-size box
- Print materials (maps, phone books, coupons)
- Writing materials
- Steering wheel
- Keys
- Flowers and plants to arrange
- Theme props (hospital, space lab, camping, museum, rain forest, community helpers, grocery store, office)
- Puppet theatre/store front
- Puppets
- Commercial puppets
- Material for handmade puppets (socks, bags, sticks, paper, yardage, buttons); these might also be stored in the art area

## **Exploration Area**

The exploration area provides the opportunity to explore and experience a variety of materials in a systematic way. Materials which reveal natural phenomena encourage experimentation and inquiry.



While children experiment with using materials and equipment in this area, they are engaged in many processes. They observe, using their senses to perceive similarities, differences, and changes. They classify, organize, and sort. They quantify, comparing by length, area, volume, mass, temperature, force, and time. They communicate their understanding to others through oral language, charts, graphs, and language experience. Finally, they infer (based on past observations) and predict.

### **Suggested Materials for the Exploration Area**

- Water
- Magnets
- Magnetic board
- Magnifying glass
- Magnifying stool
- Weighing tools
- Microscope
- Measuring tapes/sticks
- Base ten blocks
- Tangrams
- Plants
- Clock
- Batteries and bulbs
- Thermometers
- Prisms
- Kaleidoscope
- Simple machines and gadgets (telephone, old radio, control boxes, circuit boxes, clocks)
- Tools (screwdrivers, pliers)
- Touch and feel box
- Textured materials
- Paper and writing tools for representing observations
- Safety glasses

### **Other Learning Centers**

The number and duration of learning centers will vary according to the interests, topics of study, and projects in which children are engaged. The list in this section does not exhaust the possibilities for types of centers or materials. Other learning centers which might be considered are:

- Music area
- Cooking area
- Quiet area
- Computer area
- Listening area

## **Ways to Facilitate Children’s Learning**

There are many ways to organize curriculum and classroom activities so that children are engaged in learning. Many teachers use projects and themes as organizational options. Regardless of the ways teachers choose to organize, there are some factors to keep in mind:

- Is this an intellectually worthwhile project?
- Is this topic, theme, project of interest to the children?
- Is the scope broad enough to allow for specific personal interests? For example, the topic of “Living Things” lets children choose their focus, while “Ants” may be of interest to a limited number of children.
- How much time should I allow for this? Some topics which excite the children need time for research and active involvement while others can be of a shorter duration.
- Are there resources available to support this study?
- Does this strategy facilitate the learning of skills and processes, knowledge, and the development of attitudes?
- Over the course of the year, does the theme, topic, or project provide balance and complement the other endeavors of the class?

### ***Active Learning Strategies***

Part of this document is devoted to planning projects and themes, including specific examples. In order to implement projects and themes effectively, teaching and learning strategies must reflect the principles of active learning. Some valid strategies include:

- Children’s news, for example, A child brings acorns which spark other children's interest in collecting and finding more about ...
- Teacher’s contributions, for example, The teacher is moving to a new house which precipitates a need to know more about ...
- Local events, for example, The town centennial celebration motivates learning about and representing past and present community events.
- World news, for example, A tornado warning is the starting point for a study of storms and safety procedures.
- Teaching strategies such as story telling; for example, stories in science, humanities, and fine arts.
- Broader strategies such as play-debrief-replay and plan-do-review. These are elaborated on the following pages.

## **Play-Debrief-Replay**

The use of play as an instructional approach is happening every day in classrooms everywhere. This model is explained clearly in Selma Wasserman’s book, *Serious Players in the Primary Classroom: Empowering Children Through Active Learning Experiences*, (2000). Many useful activity examples are cited in this book. The description given below is not comprehensive, but intended to create a desire for more information. The following excerpt describes the criteria for productive play activities that yield significant conceptual growth:

- Investigative play tasks are open-ended. They do not lead students to “the answers.”
- Play tasks call for the generation of ideas, rather than the recall of specific pieces of information.
- Play activities challenge students’ thinking; indeed, they require thinking. Higher order mental challenges are built into each play task.
- Play activities are “messy.” Children are, in fact, playing around.
- Play tasks focus on “big ideas”—the important concepts of the curriculum, rather than on trivial details.
- Each play task provides opportunities for children to grow in their conceptual understanding. When children carry out investigative play, they grow in their ability to understand larger concepts.
- Children are the players. They are actively involved in learning. They are talking to each other, sharing ideas, speculating, laughing, and getting excited about what they have found. They are not sitting quietly, passively, listening to the teacher’s talking.
- Children are working together in learning groups. Play is enhanced through cooperative investigation. Cooperation rather than competitive individual work is stressed.

### **The strategy looks like this:**

- Children are engaged in an activity which is designed to develop a bigger concept. For example, children may be challenged to observe a variety of seeds and plants. Open-ended questions such as “What can you find out about seeds?” are posed. The related “big idea” could be “living things grow and change.”
- Children are brought together for a debriefing. Questions are directed at articulating the children’s observations, ideas, and reasoning. Challenges are posed which go beyond the children’s observations, such as “Where do seeds come from?” or “What makes seeds grow?”
- Children return to the materials with new focus questions for their investigation.

The strategy can be repeated as time and interest allow. Materials may be used again for a different set of focus questions. The materials are included in an exploration center for further investigations.

## Plan-Do-Review

This strategy is a sequence which becomes part of the daily routine. As children carry out projects or investigations, they need time to anticipate what they will do, how they will proceed, and what materials they will use. Once the work session is over, they need time to reflect on how they did, what they will do next time, where they will store their project, and what they might want to do differently (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995).

For children to become responsible, independent learners, they must be provided the time and support to plan ahead and follow through. During planning time, children think about what they will do. Children may represent, describe, or otherwise indicate to another child or adult what their plan is. Review incorporates the same strategies, only in reverse, and may involve sharing products with another person.

Specific strategies for planning and reviewing include:

**Modeling**—As children are working, the teacher describes what they are doing. “I see you have planned to glue scraps of paper to the larger piece of paper. Will you tell us about your work at review time?”

**Oral**—Adults and children spend a few minutes before the work begins as each explains what they are going to do. By including where the work will be done and which materials will be needed to begin, children are better able to focus and begin independently.

**Group**—Adults and children plan together using chants, “mystery bags,” classroom maps, chalkboard graphs of centers, or other group techniques. Each child has a turn to represent his or her plan within the larger group.

**Written**—Children represent their plans and reviews on paper. Adults may write dictation, children may draw and/or write, or there may be a planning form the child uses each day. Whatever the medium, a written plan provides a record of the child’s work from day to day and is a valuable source of information.

**Pantomime**—Children act out their plan or review while others participate in pretending as well. Everyone is involved in imagining the action. This often results in motivating children to try some of the imagined work.

## Project Planning

Projects as part of the primary program are highly recommended as a way to make sense of information in children’s lives. Projects involve the investigation of a topic, but differ from *traditional* thematic units because they are fully integrated. In project planning, the disciplines are naturally combined; there is no need to provide distinctions or to weigh the number of “activities” in each discipline. The goal is to learn about something, using all the available resources, incorporating the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to accomplish that goal.

The project approach is firmly grounded in the principles and ideology of the Primary Program, and should be part of a balanced curriculum. The skills, knowledge, and dispositions acquired by formal instruction are better learned and remembered when applied in a real context. Using projects with children is an opportunity for application and consolidation of the learning we value (Katz & Chard, 2000).

The types of activities involved in a project reflect the principles of active learning. Children are decision-makers and planners throughout the process. The teacher leads and structures the project based on the children’s ideas and contributions. “The project approach provides a context in which all aspects of children’s minds can be engaged, challenged, and enriched” (Katz & Chard, 2000).



## References

- Bergen, D. & Oden, S. (1988). *Designing play environments for elementary age children*. nc:np.
- Hall, J. (1991). *Primary program resource document*. British Columbia, Canada: Ministry of Education.
- Hohmann, M. & Weikart, D. (1995). *Educating young children*. Ypsilanti, MI: High Scope Press.
- Jones, E. & Reynolds, G. (1992). *The play's the thing: Teachers' roles in children's play*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Kamii, C. & DeVries, R. (1980). *Group games in early education*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Katz, L. & Chard, S. (2000). *Engaging children's minds: The project approach*. Stamford, CT: Ablex Publishing.
- McClaren, M. (1989). *Preparing navigators for the ships of the future*. British Columbia Trustees Conference, Youth of Tomorrow and the World of Work.
- Schwartz, S. & Pollishuke, M. (1991). *Creating the child centered classroom*. Katonah, NY: R. C. Owen.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1980). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wasserman, S. (2000). *Serious players in the primary classroom: Empowering children through active learning experiences (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Watson, D., Burke, C. & Harste, J. (1993). *Whole language: Inquiring voices*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

## Resources

- Alexander, N. (1998). If I can't find it, I can't use it: Organizing your center's resources. *Child Care Information Exchange*, 120, 78-81.
- Bredenkamp, S. & Rosegrant, T. (Eds.). (1992). *Reaching potentials: Appropriate curriculum and assessment for young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Bredenkamp, S. & Rosegrant, T. (Eds.). (1995). *Reaching potentials: Transforming early childhood curriculum and assessment, volume 2*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Buckleitner, W. & Terdan, S. (1991). Day one, what we did when the children arrived. *In Supporting Young Learners*. Ypsilanti, MI: High Scope Press.
- Dodge, D. T., Jablon, J. R., & Bickart, T. (1994). *Constructing curriculum for the primary grades*. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, Inc.

- Dodge, D., Goldhammer, M. & Colker, L. (1988). *The creative curriculum for early childhood*. Washington, DC: Creative Associates International.
- Eliason, D. & Jenkins, L. (1986). *A practical guide to early childhood curriculum (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*. Columbus, OH: Merrill Publishing Company.
- Fisher, B. (1995). *Thinking and learning together*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc.
- Fisher, B. (1998). *Joyful learning in kindergarten*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc.
- Haugland, S. (1989). The best developmental software for young children. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 25(4), 247-254.
- Hendrick, J. (1990). *Total learning for the whole child*. St. Louis, MO: Mosby.
- Newman, S. Copple, C. & Bredekamp, S. (2000). *Learning to read and write: Developmentally appropriate practices for young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Patillo, J. & Vaughn, E. (1992). What makes a good learning center...to a child...to a teacher? *Day Care and Early Education*, 20.
- Rogers, A. (1991). *Settings for active learning*. Ypsilanti, MI: High Scope Extensions.
- Shores, E. (1992). *Explorer classroom: Good practice for kindergarten and the primary grades*. Little Rock, AK: Southern Association of Children Under Six.
- Stephens, K. (1999). Criteria for selecting and pursuing a classroom project. *Young Children*, 54(2).
- Tegano, D. et al. (1991). *Creativity in early childhood classrooms*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- Wilson, J. & Jan, L. W. (1993). *Thinking for themselves: Developing strategies for reflective learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc.
- Zigler, E. (1987). Formal schooling for four-year-olds? *North American Psychologist*, 42.

