

Tea and Stories



There is an aspect of this center that commands attention, and that is the previously mentioned culture of creativity. Liz explains that at Stepping Stones the teachers are supported and encouraged in their creativity and can function according to their interests. They have the freedom to bring their whole selves into the school rather than the expectations to "behave like a teacher." When teachers have the freedom to explore items of interest they can be responsive, pay attention and listen, and act accordingly. For example, in Liz's case, she was able to develop a treasured event called "Tea and Stories."

Tea and Stories is a time developed due to Liz's own interest in bringing relationships to the forefront of curriculum. Liz recognized that when people, whether adults or children, sit around in a relaxed and respectful environment they are able to tell their stories. These stories could be about anything at all--their families, experiences, made-up tales, responses to events, ideas, and so on. Often, when adults sit around and talk, they drink tea or some other beverage or they eat together.

Wanting to recreate this atmosphere of listening for the children, Liz invented Tea and Stories, a time when any child or children could sit with a teacher in a cozy and safe atmosphere and tell stories. The children clearly love this tradition, and it has been a part of the school for some years. When a child commented "we haven't had Tea and Stories for a while," Liz was quick to respond, and several children joined her at a table in the library that morning.

Charlie, however, did not join in. Sitting on a futon nearby, he could hear the stories being told but chose not to join the group. He was experimenting with his fingers, making a kind of mask over his eyes, and yet Liz sensed he was listening to what was going on. Eventually, when there was a break in the conversation, Charlie stood up on the couch and showed the other children what he had been doing. They listened with interest and then continued with their stories. Charlie

remained standing at the table of storytellers listening in on the chat, and Liz responded to Charlie's presence by saying, "You know, you told us a kind of story by describing how to make a mask with your hands." Charlie smiled and said, "I know how to do other tricks with my hands too. Do you want to see?" Like a contagious round of knock-knock jokes, children practiced and shared a variety of finger tricks and even some yoga moves.

When Tea and Stories was finished, Liz approached Charlie and asked if he would like to write down the directions for how he created masks with his fingers, and he liked this idea very much. Liz helped him to write this first small book which was later shared with others and then placed on the classroom bookshelf. Liz said "A significant affirmation of Charlie's efforts occurred when Lucy, a four-year-old, took interest in his writing and asked if she could read it aloud. Charlie was not quite reading yet, but Lucy was unusually skilled and thirsty for a try. Imagine the impact of this exchange on each of these children. The author heard his book read aloud by his peer. Charlie went on to write many 'how to' books, all of which are enjoyed by other children and have inspired them to write their own 'how to' books as well. As a result of this work, my co-teachers and I are constantly seeking ways to enable children to be resources for one another."

This brief example illustrates how listening, paying attention, and responding--in this case to an individual child--has a huge effect on what happens next and on how the child benefits. In this case, since Liz was in conversation with a larger group of children, it would have been easy to overlook the actions of Charlie when he chose not to tell stories to the group. Liz's recognition that he did in fact share something of himself, in the form of demonstrating what he'd been doing, allowed her to follow up on his actions. It also allowed Charlie to develop his writing skills by making a book about his idea. The many books Charlie made provided him with a more comfortable outlet than verbally sharing his stories.

In a setting such as Stepping Stones, there is freedom to pay attention to these seemingly small events. If, for example, Liz worked in a classroom with time frames that demanded she immediately move into another activity after Tea and Stories, she would

not have been free to pursue this work with Charlie. In some cases, once the moment is past, it is lost in terms of the interest of the child.

Another emergent curriculum aspect of this school is the time provided for meetings and discussion. Each week, teachers have an hour and a half to write in the journals they keep for each child. In addition, each teacher has an hour to themselves for reflection and planning. Another hour a week is reserved for "dialogue time," in which two teachers at a time are able to leave the floor to discuss and develop shared projects. Once the month, the center closes early and the whole staff comes together for a meeting with an agenda, which includes sharing and discussion.

But aside from these formal arrangements, there are also informal discussions all the time. These take place over coffee or during the workday. The teachers chat together about questions that have arisen for them or a response, or they compare notes or ask "what if?" These informal dialogues might then be taken to a dialogue meeting where ideas can be "brainstormed out" a little. This is quite unstructured but provides food for thought and reflection afterward. Depending on what happens during the brainstorming and reflection, there may be a plan for the next day--something to try--or perhaps a plan will be made with the child. When teachers have freedom in terms of what they are able to bring to the classroom, the curriculum itself becomes a wonderful collaboration, a mix of both children's and teachers' interests and needs. The relationships become authentic, and the curriculum becomes relationship-based.

Tea and Stories is not a typical part of an early childhood daily routine nor is the role of transition teacher. You probably won't find these approaches described in Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum books or college courses. They were developed from a place of creativity in response to children and the creative, responsive teachers who collaborate with them, and so they work for all the protagonists.

Rogers, Liz. "The Flexibility of Routines, Responses, and Teacher Roles." *The Unscripted Classroom: Emergent Curriculum in Action*. St. Paul: Redleaf, 2011. 69-85. Print.