NATURE'S THEATER

CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN

ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY NEW ENGLAND

Nature-based Early Childhood Fellowship Case Study
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Chicago Botanic Garden: Nature Preschool Seeds Three-year-olds Class, Tu/Th

I melodically call to the children, "It's time to act our stories, our stories,… so join us at the theater, at the theater!" The children eagerly come running, ready to assume the role of story actors and audience members. There will be no "me, me, me," called out, because every child understands they will have a turn in both roles.

I assume my role of stage director, "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, welcome to Nature's Theater." The children still their bodies and quiet their voices; their disposition tells me that they are indeed ready to begin!

Perhaps you are wondering, "Where might this theater be?" Nature's Theater can transpire anywhere in the Botanic Garden based on the location of our daily adventure. At the Pond the children may choose to construct a stage out of old willow branches; in the Growing Garden, our take-along tarp does the trick.

When dictating the children's stories during morning play, I always begin the same way, "Your story can be about anything, and as long as you'd like, but it can't go past the period." I then place at the end of the page as a stopping point. The children have figured out that the longer their story is and the more characters they include, the more friends that will be invited on stage. The students are actively practicing kindness and inclusion in their storytelling and acting.

Connections to the Illinois Early Learning Standards

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Language Arts

1.A.EC.a Follow simple one-, two-and three-step directions.

Physical/Health

19.B.ECa Coordinate movements to perform complex tasks. Demonstrate body awareness when moving in different spaces.

21.A.ECa Demonstrate ability to cooperate with others during group physical activity.

The Arts

25.A.ECb Drama: Begin to appreciate and participate in dramatic activities.

Social/Emotional

30.C.ECb,d Demonstrate persistence and creativity in seeking solutions to problems, demonstrate engagement and sustained attention in activities.

Examples: Following along with and paying attention to directions of the story, coordinating movements in a shared space, cooperating with others on stage, participating in group story acting, working individually to act collaboratively with other actors on stage.

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Jasper's story that was dictated and acted out at the Pond: "Once upon a time there was Sunny-Go! He is a sun. He shines on us. Then it is his birthday! He has a party. He gets a lot of presents. Then all his friends give presents to him. Mom and Dad gave him presents, too. Then they eat cake. Then a tree knocked over Sunny-Go. Then some workers pushed it back up. The tree, that tree, a pine tree (pointing to the large pine right behind us). The end."
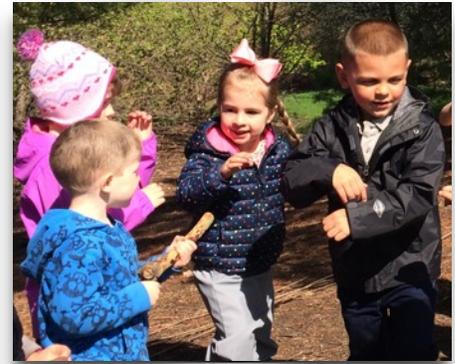
At Nature's Theater, the children came onto the stage, one-by-one, giving Sunny-Go presents. Jack, pictured above, brought wth him a real stick as a gift. But when we came to the end of the story, there were no more friends to become the workers. I asked Jasper, "What could we do,?" Jasper replied, "Our friends could become the workers!" Everyone agreed and shifted roles so that they could help push Sunny-Go back up.

Storytelling and story acting simultaneously strengthen both academics and social growth. The three-year-old Seeds must think critically, pulling various pieces of information together, to make a whole scene. Furthermore, the stories told often reflect the collective location, bringing another element to the storytelling framework.

On stage, acting becomes a communal effort. The children must follow directions, work cooperatively with one another, and transform the abstract into the concrete. Individual actors must move abstract ideas into concrete representations. Interpersonal growth becomes visible as the actors must work collaboratively to put on a production in real time. Story acting has created a learning environment full of caring and inclusive members both on and off stage.