After the rain

by Genan T. Anderson

The rain that fell during the night washed out the pit the children had been digging in the sandbox. Suddenly, their conduit to Australia was filled with murky water. The air warmed in the afternoon and beckoned us outside to play.

Matthew was the first one ready to test its depth by splashing through, but the vigilant student teacher turned him away, questioning a drenching that would have soaked him to his knees. Still, the crowd had gathered. The unspoken questions reverberated in their bodies as first one and then another began pressing a foot against the edge of the lake. Seeing the sand crumble and tumble, they began kicking sand airborne and dodging its splash into the water, raining hands full of sand with giggles.

As a child I never had enough water in my sandbox when my mother took away the hose, and here was water begging to be explored. At first, we brought out the shovels. My idea was to let the children fill in the hole with the surrounding sand. The splash started to make quite a mess, but no one seemed to mind unless their faces and tongues were completely covered and then they just wanted them wiped clean so they could go back to digging.

Boyd dug a channel that quickly filled with water, and they all began digging rivers. Cole dug a parallel hole that Matthew connected with a canal.

Waterfall! Then they connected the smaller holes. Islands! All the children wanted their own river, waterfall, and island. James just wanted to stomp through the water. (We persuaded him to choose a puddle farther removed from the rest of the children.)

The afternoon was filled with solving problems, cooperating, building large and small muscles, using tools, and developing language skills as they talked over their project together. They were such a
happy group, 15 in a puddle. Of course, they were all splattered with mud when their parents came for the culminating activity for our farm project—and the cow still didn’t have a head because we hadn’t stopped to make one. But the parents seemed to catch the enthusiasm as the children showed off their labyrinth of channels and holes.

Not once during the entire excavation did I hear a child ask a question. Were there no questions that preceded the discoveries? The first water entered Boyd’s channel as his shovel removed sand at the very edge of the lake. As the water flowed toward him, away from the lake, his shovel moved ahead of it, cutting the furrow that held the water. The cry of excitement came from Michael who was digging nearby.

Did Boyd plan to make a river, or did a river just appear as a natural consequence of his actions? One thing I could observe was the detail in his directions as he engineered the ensuing channels dug by his classmates. He knew how he had created the river and used language as well as demonstration to duplicate it over and over again.

Were Cole and Matthew working together to create a waterfall, or were they simply engaged in parallel play that became cooperative when the two ideas resulted in a novel discovery? Cole said nothing as he dug hole after hole, but Matthew chattered instructions to any who might be listening on how to make the waterfall.

The children worked individually, in pairs, in groups of three, intent on specific goals, experimenting, now questioning “How?” and observing the construction of the other children. The product was a collection of smaller projects created in tandem around the same muddy lake. Was the product the goal or merely a byproduct of the process?

Was there value in sharing their discoveries and product with their parents? When the parents began arriving, the children had already returned to the classroom, were eating snack, and had begun browsing the displays of the farm project work. Then only the muddiest children, reminded by questions regarding their filth, spontaneously pulled their parents onto the playground to view their work. Trying to justify the muddy clothes and bodies, I directed all the children to show their parents the product of their construction.
my job is to teach the student teachers how to do projects with children. At the same
time, I have two sets of 4-year-olds, 20 in
each group. I provide the only continuity to their
preschool program. In teaching the students to teach
the children, I listen carefully to hear the questions
from children that should initiate and direct their
project work. More often, I see their questions
emerge in the process of their investigating:
- J. Thomas thumps the turtle brought to the class-
room by the natural history museum when his
“Boo!” fails to send it hiding in its shell.
- Jordan drops the hermit crab into an aquarium
filled with water after the pet store manager
returns a water crab to its aquarium.
- Scott puts the silverfish he finds crawling in the
   carpet into the lizard’s cage.
- Matthew holds a goldfish in his hands, observes
   the pulsating of its gills, and comments, “See, it
   can breathe out of water.”
- James removes the tonsils of every stuffed animal
   in the “veterinary clinic” the week he returns from
   having his own tonsils out.
- Terin builds a block structure and then asks to put
   the ferret inside “to see if she will like it.”
- Rachel holds the praying mantis in her hand and
   watches the front pinchers as they open and close.
- Cole writes “TRL” next to his observational
drawing of a turtle.

Russell places the Styrofoam from the vase on the
end of his green pipe cleaner and declares, “I have
a flower.”

Bethany announces that the tree her family recently
planted is growing. When asked, “How can
you tell?” she counters with, “Miss Genan, don’t
you know?”

Do 4-year-olds ask questions? My observation is
that they are always questioning. When a teacher
tells me, “We have to teach children to ask questons,” my response is: “We have to learn the lan-
guage of their questioning.”

As adults, we often want curriculum slotted
into neat plans. We measure the quality of
an early childhood program by the quantity
of its content. We are in a hurry to see progress from
Point A to Point B, to be finished, to reach closure
and move on. My 4-year-olds do not subscribe to
such a structured regime. One day Jordan’s name is
upside-down and backward. The next day it may be
only backward or upside-down. One day it may
appear in standard order and have only the J
reversed. But she wrote it correctly once. Does that
mean I can drop that from my list of goals for her?
Sometimes a discovery center activity appears to
have little appeal or learning value for two full
days, and then a group of children finds a complete-
ly new way of using the materials, and learning no
one anticipated bursts into the center.
How can you study pets for a full semester and still maintain high interest with the children? Young children’s discoveries originate in the familiar. The greatest benefit projects have brought to our preschool program is opening the eyes of the preservice teachers to the endless possibilities for learning in the ordinary, routine environment of the children. It has given teachers confidence to strengthen the children’s skills by exploring topics relevant to the children over time and in depth.

The results appear in the children’s portfolios neatly documenting progress in a variety of skills. More important, I see the results in the faces and bodies of the children as they bounce into the classroom to make learning choices. I hear the calm buzz of children learning that permeates each school day. I see the square confidence of each child’s shoulders as they approach new tasks. I observe the delight of two children as they read familiar books at the end of the day, giggling, smiling, sharing a magical world of fantasy, creating it as they go along. The fruits are manifest as the children cooperate in dramatic role play, shifting roles, mediating differences, exploring insights, constructing a community.

About the author
Genan T. Anderson has worked as an early childhood educator for more than 25 years. She is a mother as well as a former community college instructor and an elementary school teacher. She is currently head teacher at the Brigham Young University preschool laboratory and a doctoral student.