

OPEN INQUIRY

Postal Service, Princesses, and Castles

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Sadie H., age four, attends a New Hampshire preschool where children's questions drive the daily curriculum. Sadie's mother, Kate Montgomery, is a wonderful colleague and friend. Here is her mom's-eye view.

At Sadie's school, many of the children's families travel extensively. Whenever a family goes on a trip, the teacher, Pam Battin-Sacks, quite smartly asks the child to send a postcard back to the school. Then, when mail arrives, she reads the card aloud to the class and they talk about the interesting destinations in the world and what their far-flung classmates might be doing.

Early in the year, a postcard with a lovely drawing arrived from England *after* its author, Emily, was back in the class. The kids were in an uproar about that. It was supposed to be a message from an absent person, but there was Emily, sitting right at her desk! "She said she missed us, but we were right there," Sadie reported. It was funny to the children. So Pam leapt on the moment, and they got out maps and traced the way the postcard would have come. But then Randy raised the point that they'd gotten a postcard from Germany before Foche got back, and that was even farther away. So they got out the calendar, did some subtraction, and sure enough, it *had* taken longer. This launched a whole postal system study.

All the kids got a letter to take home asking parents to help them mail a letter from their town to school—envelope, stamp, the whole works. The kids were marking down dates and using calendars, and they had to write a letter, which was great. (After we mailed Sadie's letter, she wanted me to drive fast to the school to make sure we beat it there.) They talked about what would happen to the letters once they were in the mailbox, at the post office, on the truck, and so on. A graphing chart was used to track whose letter came faster; then, looking at their local delivery and pickup times, kids made guesses as to why.

Teachers set up a post office in the dramatic play area—Sadie said it was the best center but it was always too full, because everybody wanted to use all the envelopes and stamps ("which were really stickers because it was only pretend"). The kids mailed the letters to each other's cubbies. They tried addressing the letters too. At home Sadie sent letters to everyone she knew, and delivered the ones in our neighborhood herself.

Now, somewhere along the way, one girl in the class mailed a classmate a drawing of a princess. Another girl in the class told the artist that the picture she'd drawn couldn't be a princess, because she had glasses. Pam, great teacher that she is, jumped on that question. They had a class discussion about it (which included some very strong differences of opinion from the more Disney-fied members of the class). Pam suggested they do some research. The kids started making piles of books about princesses, and they studied them. Pam made sure *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (by John Steptoe) and *The Paper Bag Princess* (by Robert Munsch) were in there. Parents sent in books about Queen Elizabeth (at her grandest and her most plain), and there were pictures of real princesses from different countries around the world.

Apparently, once the children conceived that princesses were actual people, everyone agreed they could have glasses and freckles. They ended up deciding that there were different kinds of princesses—the real kind and “the kind you mostly see,” and one group might have freckles and glasses and the kind you mostly see wouldn't. As this study went on, some of the kids quite naturally became interested in studying castles, so another center spun off and gathered inquirers. Kids were looking at David Macaulay's amazing cross-section book *Castles* (1982), building their own castles and so forth. As a culminating project, the kids decided to create a fairy tale about a princess in a castle. So they each wrote one line and illustrated one page of a picture book they called “The Lucky Princess.”

This investigation evolved into a study of mythical beasts—not a far jump from the princess, knights, and castles. Kids studied the phoenix (they loved the idea of being born from a fire), unicorns, and dragons and ended up writing and performing (for the other classes and for the parents) their own action play involving the knights and princesses “attacking the bad dragons with safety scissors.” This study involved a lot of drawing of the different kinds of legendary creatures. Sadie told me her favorite part was when she taught her friend April to draw a mermaid: “You just draw half a princess and then stop. That's the hard part—April kept forgetting and drawing all of it! And then you put on a tail—but not like a lion tail, fatter.”

The same process Sadie is experiencing as a four-year-old works for all learners. With Pam's skillful facilitation, Sadie and her classmates are using the same intellectual processes that proficient, grown-up thinkers use to find stuff out:

- Identify a topic or question or interest
- Seek information from a variety of sources

- View, read, think about, and react to the information
- Evaluate the validity, reliability, and usefulness of the information
- Work with others to leverage your thinking
- Build concepts and knowledge by synthesizing meaning
- Get help from the more experienced researchers around you
- Apply the knowledge to your own life
- Share your new learning with others.

Sound familiar? It should. It doesn't take much to see the Common Core standards shining through in these bullet points. In addition, these thinking moves closely overlap the processes we have described all through this book, as small groups of kids conduct quick mini-inquiries, extend their thinking in literature circles, or pursue topics within the curriculum.

Sadie's story also offers a clear picture of the roles that teachers play in these open inquiries. Pam doesn't just stand back and hope that kids stumble onto research-worthy topics or pose rich questions—she is facilitating actively, every step of the way. First of all, she is listening, always on the alert for an emerging hot topic among the kids. When the spark is struck (Can princesses have glasses?) Pam “leaps on the moment” and “jumps on the question.” She starts clearing a path for the kids' curiosity to follow. She gathers materials (maps, calendars, chart paper, books, art supplies) and designs activities (graphing, the postal center, coauthoring a book) that allow kids to vigorously pursue their topics. Pam steers the activities and moderates discussions, poses clarifying questions, and helps children move to the next level of thinking. In sum, while the kids enjoy the choice, the ownership, and the energy of pursuing their own interests, there is a very present and steady teacher hand guiding it all—a beautiful example of that rarely glimpsed phenomenon called “leading from behind.”