Hilltop Children's Center
Building on the wonders of childhood

In-Depth Studies and Long-term Investigations

Each moment with children holds the opportunity to dive deep—to invite children to examine the theories and understandings (and misunderstandings) underlying their play, or to explore the emotional and relational elements it holds, or to represent, re-engage, and revise their initial work. This depth of thinking, feeling, communicating, and collaborating, practiced daily in ordinary moments of play, creates the climate for long-term, in-depth investigations.

Long-term, in-depth studies offer children, teachers, and families the opportunity to carry the exploration of a question, a big idea or an emotion forward over a stretch of weeks or months. They allow for repeated reflection and increasingly complex thinking, for movement beyond familiar play scripts and habitual ways of thinking and communicating, and for collaboration with a small group of peers over time.

At Hilltop, the practice of long-term, in-depth investigations is a companion practice to the curriculum that unfolds organically day to day through children's play. In-depth studies typically involve a group of four, five, or six children, their families, and one teacher. They are formalized investigations of a question, a big idea, or an emotion; these investigations have a unique rhythm and culture.

In-depth studies are launched in response to the on-going pursuits of children or as expressions of teachers' values and goals for children's learning. Sometimes, an in-depth study is well underway before teachers have identified it as such. A small group of children comes together again and again to explore an idea or emotion; their exploration generates momentum and energy that catch the attention of teachers, who then begin to plan ways to extend or challenge children's thinking with the formal work of an in-depth study. Other times, teachers initiate an in-depth study with a small group of children to call their attention to particular developmental themes, to social justice issues, or to questions that hold the potential for rich collaboration.

For in-depth studies, teachers group children into work teams. We aim to include children who bring differing perspectives and complementary skills to insure for lively and challenging dialogue and exploration. Work team investigations are typically facilitated by one teacher, though they are planned collaboratively through the practice of pedagogical documentation during teaching team meetings and collaborative conferences with families.

In-depth studies unfold step by step. Teachers don't plan the investigation start to finish, or set out with a predetermined destination. We use the cycle of observation, reflection, and planning to move an investigation forward one step at a time. Teachers create a record of an in–depth study as it unfolds with written documentation. We put copies of this into the journals of the children on the work team and into a binder dedicated to the long-term investigation.

In-depth studies have particular rhythms and rituals. Early in the study, we offer the children on a work team opportunities to clarify their individual thinking. From there, we invite them to share their thinking with other children on the work team, and to offer and receive feedback. A final stage in the investigation is collective thinking and creating by the members of a work team. Another aspect of the rhythm of a long-term investigation is the movement from one art medium to another, as the children take up drawing, painting, building, sculpting, making music, dancing, story, and poetry as languages for inquiry and expression. A third element in the rhythm of an in-depth study invites families to participate; early in a study, teachers and families come together for a collaborative conference to reflect on and plan for the children's investigation. Often, we meet a second or third time during a study to continue our collaboration on behalf of the children's learning.

In planning for in-depth studies, teachers:

- aim to generate rather than answer questions;
- seek to increase the complexity of the study;
- utilize multiple languages for inquiry: building, drawing, painting, sculpting, music, dance, and writing;
- foster collaboration among the children and with families;
- emphasize dispositions such as critical thinking, perspective-taking, intellectual and emotional risk-taking, persistence, and bold imagining;
- watch for opportunities to integrate learning domains such as literacy, math, and scientific processes.

While an in-depth study is unfolding, the regular life of the classroom continues. Teachers attend carefully to children's play and conversations—to their block play and drama games, their sensory explorations, to meals and naps, to physical undertakings outside and inside. We bring our observations of this play to the meetings of our teaching teams for reflection, study, and planning, and we create written documentation about the curriculum that grows from everyday moments in their classrooms.

Examples of long-term, in-depth studies in recent years at Hilltop include:

- Explorations of mechanics and physics: How do airplanes stay in the air? How do engines work? How can we move water from one room to another with tubes and pumps?
- Explorations of physical play and knowledge: What are the rules of wrestling? How do cartwheels happen? What's the trickiest obstacle course we can design?
- Explorations of identity, perspective-taking, transformation, and relationship through the design and production of dramatic plays and through re-writing familiar stories;
- Explorations of rule-making and rule-following: What rules are fair for Four Square? What rules should govern how we use the Legos?
- Explorations of the natural world: Why do leaves change color? How does water move in a river?

The following article, "Try It Out and Test It: Children as Researchers," tells the story of a long-term, in-depth investigation that unfolded over the course of eight months. It was published in *Child Care Information Exchange*, September/October 2009.