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A Report from the Arctic Circle



Gorgeous Brown!

CENTER FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
SMITH COLLEGE
NORTHAMPTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Cathy Weisman Topal, Studio Art Teacher
Shauneen Kroll, Teacher of Three-Year-Olds
Rita Harris, Teacher of Four-Year-Olds

As a studio art teacher at the Center for Early Childhood Education at Smith College, I work closely with all the teachers. We share a strong belief that playing and exploring outside is the healthiest and most effective way for children to develop physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually. Here are some of our favorite explorations with natural materials.

Finding Many Browns

Many years ago, when our city's population was a lot less diverse, Shauneen Kroll noticed one of the three-year-olds washing his hands a lot. "I don't want to get dirty like him," he said, referring to the only child with brown skin in the class. Shauneen shared this story with the other teachers, and we thought a lot about what we could do to help the children be more appreciative of differences.

The children had just been on a "green walk" around our center, looking for and collecting green leaves, twigs, and other materials. A brown walk seemed a natural extension. Collecting browns gave them a different lens for looking. When we laid out their collection of bark, dried leaves, grasses, and seedpods, they could see how many beautiful varieties of brown there were.



Take a spoonful of red, yellow, and blue paint. Mix, mix, mix! What color have you made?

A Color-Mixing Experiment

I prepared jars of red, yellow, and blue paint for color-mixing. I asked, "Why do you think these are called primary colors? What do you think will happen if you mix all the colors together?" To find the answers, I invited them to try an experiment:

1. Take one spoonful of each of the primary colors in a little container.
2. Mix until there are no streaks and you can see what color you have made.
3. Look at the brown materials we collected. Does your paint match any of them? If not, how could you make your mixture match one of the items?

Jiyan: Ooh, this is turning black! Look, Adam.
Oh, mine almost matches that, but mine is a little more blue.

Emma: Look, it's dark, dark. It's purple actually.

Kristi to Braeden: Your brown is reddish.

Braeden to Kristi: I know because I used a lot of red.

Kristi: This is gorgeous brown!

Kevin: It's turning green! Ali, look at mine.

Ali: Mine is purple, and his is more brown. Brown is for boys, and purple is for girls.

Reiko: My brown is different because I used a little more blue. You did the same thing as me! Did you put two globs of blue in? Now put some yellow in.

Alexander: Mine is greenish-brownish.

See if your mixture matches something in our brown collection.



We offer white paint along with the three primary colors and challenge the children to mix a brown that matches their skin.

More Mixing

I invited the children to bring their paint cup back to the mixing table and this time add an additional spoonful of **only one** primary color. Before they mixed it in, I prompted them to make a prediction: “Think, “How will my spoonful of _____ change my mixture?” For instance, what do you think will happen if you add more yellow?”

Toula: It is going to get lighter.

Anais: It's going to get so lighter. It will be a goldy-brown.

Toula: Definitely a goldy-brown.

It was a happy accident when one child didn't add any red to his mixture, which prompted an exploration of green. The children tried other mixing experiments, including taking away one primary color and looking for more matches of secondary colors. Teachers, parents, and children brought in vegetables and fruit for more color mixing and matching fun.

Centerpieces

As winter approached, classes of all ages took another brown walk to collect dried plant stems and seedpods. Since the stems are fragile, cutting and gathering must be done carefully. Cutting stems is a great way to practice scissor skills. With all these new materials coming into the classroom, we decided to begin a new collection.



Exploring outdoors in the fall, the children find many variations of brown.



The older children cut dried grasses and flower stems with garden shears. By narrowing the focus to collecting dried plants, subtle differences between stems stand out.

Some branches were simply too large to bring into the school and needed to be broken down. The children helped cut, sort, and display the stems. Organizing the stems helped us identify plants and see each structure more clearly. A few children working with clay playfully stuck stems into their sculptures. Suddenly we realized that we could create centerpieces for our class Thanksgiving celebration.

I told the children to choose just three stems to begin. This encouraged them to slow down, look closely at the qualities of each stem, and make deliberate choices. Slowly turning arrangements allowed them to see where more could be added. Some stems were still too long and had to be clipped to fit.



An organized display of stems is calming and feels approachable. It's easy to see what you have to choose from.



A ball of soft clay in a muffin cup makes a sturdy base for the stems.



Drawing helps children appreciate their creations and notice differences in linear structure, shape, color, and texture.



Clara uses colored pencils in autumnal colors to add highlights to her drawing.

Observational Drawing

As a way to really look at and appreciate the unusual centerpieces, I proposed drawing them. Studying the arrangements by turning them slowly opened up new points of view. I encouraged the children to start by observing the differences in the stems. Drawing each stem from the bottom up gave the young artists a place to begin.

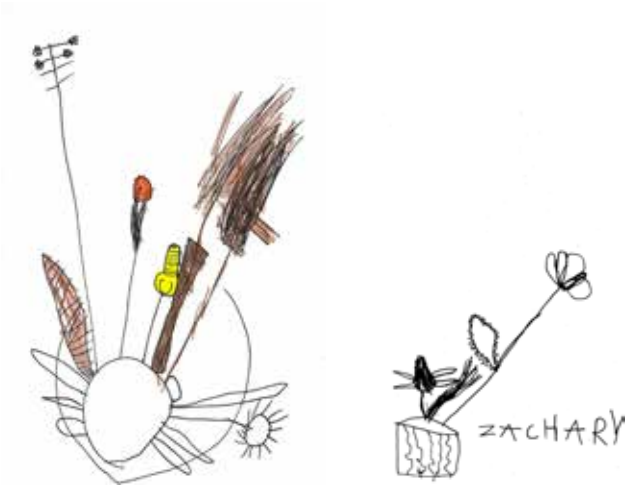
Clara’s mother captured her running commentary as she worked. Her words give us insight into her thinking. She is problem-solving, quantifying, making observations, associations, predictions, and similes.

That round thing looks like a sunflower.

I’m going to make some branches.

I think the pine branches are going to be the hardest.

I’m making it curved like a cup.



By Clara, age 4, and Zachary, age 6.
Creating centerpieces works well for all ages and is a great way to introduce and practice observational drawing.

I’m doing a pine cone—stripe, stripe, stripe.

Another pea, another pea—there’s three on each side.

That’s too many flowers. I’ll just do two.



While playing with interesting materials, faces often appear. A piece of cardboard is helpful to define a work area.



Masks from the Forest Floor

Gorgeous brown materials were taking over the preschool. I had been trying to figure out a mask lesson for first-graders involved in a social studies/science unit on the forest. In many cultures, masks are created from materials found in the environment. I noticed a few children playing around, making faces from the

natural materials we had collected. Creating masks from materials found on the floor of the forest would be a perfect extension. I gathered more natural materials as well as mask examples from different cultures and regions for my first-graders to discuss and study for ideas.



Natural materials leads to the creation of unusual faces of both animals and humans. Painting them adds another dimension.



Displays of materials change as the need arises. Materials organized into containers are easy to set up, use, and move when necessary.

Shelters and Feeling Safe

Rita Harris, teacher of the four-year-olds, was watching her students try to construct with the collection of natural materials in her classroom. She proposed the idea of constructing shelters. Each child chose a little animal figurine from the class collection, and the children began discussing what kind of shelter their creature would need for protection from predators and the elements. As they chose materials, the children thought about what it might mean for that animal to feel safe. Creating shelters offered the children an opportunity to project their feelings and concerns onto their animal and imagine its needs. Most children have an affinity and empathy for animals, as long as the animal doesn't seem threatening. Understanding that expressing feelings is an important part of a child's



The children exchange ideas and spontaneously engage in dramatic play as they work.

sense of well-being, Rita asked, “What is a safe place?” The children shared their ideas:

My room. I can hide under my bed, and I have a fairy place where no one can come in except fairies.

A school. There’s nice teachers.

Your home, because your parents are there to watch over you.

A museum, because it has a lot of fun stuff, so you don’t have to worry about bad stuff. It’s like a safe toy.



Working with fragile materials requires concentration and skill. Zachary’s roof features the rolled rhododendron leaves that he collected.



All the gorgeous browns the children mixed inspires the teacher to create a brown color wheel.

We noticed that many children selected the materials they had personally collected. Before building the shelters, the children needed time to experiment with the materials. They shared strategies, problem-solved, and thought about ways to attach the materials. To help with initial construction, Rita offered small pieces of corrugated cardboard. A slab of clay on a cardboard base helped anchor materials and became the ground for some of the shelters.

Parents became very involved in this construction experience, contributing materials, stories, and examples. One parent, who is an artist, did a beautiful oil painting of her daughter’s shelter. That inspired many children to draw and paint their own shelters.

Collecting the brown natural materials abundant in our environment has opened up many new and powerful explorations, projects, and ways of working. Our study of colors helps us appreciate the gorgeous brown in ourselves and each other. ∞