February 14, 2017

Early childhood educators turn a problem with princesses into endless possibilities

Edmonton – If you spend time with preschool children, you’ll understand that the characters from the hit Disney film, Frozen, are forces to be reckoned with. That was the case when the movie’s princesses, Anna and Elsa, made their way into play at the MacEwan University Child Care Lab School’s Dolphin Room for two, three and four year-olds.

While the characters captured the children’s imagination, there was a problem: Frozen has only one Anna and one Elsa. This meant only two children could play at one time, and educators were solving Frozen-related problems all day, every day. Banishing Anna and Elsa might seem like a logical adult response. However, that’s not what happened.

“Valuing children means taking their issues seriously,” said Brittany Aamot, one of four early childhood educators who worked with children in the Dolphin Room. “Frozen was part of their lives, and finding a solution with them was very important.”

The educators asked themselves what the children were trying to show through their Frozen play.

“We knew that it was the magic, the songs, costumes and sparkle that hooked them,” said Kayla Ursuliak, an educator in the centre. But they also saw that the children were playing out stories about going places and seeing unusual things.

Knowing that, the educators came up with a plan to bring adventure into the environment. They started with a chest of glittery, rich fabrics, which were an instant hit. And over the next few months, things snowballed. The educators began reading chapter books to the children, stories filled with magic and adventure – like The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe. There was more creative play that involved more characters and the children playing together in larger groups. Moreover, there were no more Elsa and Anna problems to solve.

“So much of what goes on in children’s play escapes us,” said Jane Hewes, associate professor in the Early Learning and Child Care program, and co-author of Play, Participation and Possibilities, an Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Alberta. “Children often explore big themes and powerful emotions during spontaneous play. Seeking a deeper understanding of children’s perspectives, the way these educators did when working through their issues with Frozen, is a central idea in Play, Participation and Possibilities.”

Hughes says the approach is neither simple nor easy. It’s deeply reflective and highly skilled work, she stresses, and acknowledging this changes how we’ve traditionally looked at the fundamentals of early childhood learning.

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